

Law of the first-born

(Exodus 13:11–16)

This passage provides an explanation of the command of verse 2 that all the first-born in Israel, whether man or beast, are to be consecrated to Yahweh. In addition, it describes the means by which the first-born are redeemed from Yahweh; that is, how they are ransomed from him. Rationale for this peculiar ritual is also given by the author.

13:11–12. ‘And it shall be when Yahweh brings you to the land of the Canaanites which he swore to you and to your fathers, and he gives it to you, then you shall give over every first-born of the womb to Yahweh and every first offspring of animals which belong to you; the males belong to Yahweh.’

Verse 11 is a reiteration of verse 5. These are laws for the future of the people of Israel as they reside in the land of Canaan.

Verse 12 literally begins with: ‘And you shall pass over every first-born of the womb to Yahweh.’ The verb ‘to pass over’ is employed in surrounding chapters regarding the feast and celebration of Passover (12:13, 23). So here we have a verbal word-play: as Yahweh passed over the Hebrews during the tenth plague, the Hebrews are now to pass over their first-born to him.

The verb ‘to pass over’ is also a commentary on pagan child sacrifice. Pagans of the ancient Near East would take a child and pass him over/through the fire as a form of devotion and sacrifice (Deut. 18:10; 2 Kings 16:3). Yahweh does not require such barbarism. He wants the first-born set apart and devoted to his service. Thus the Israelites are not to pass over their first-born in the fire, but pass them over to the Lord.

This law applies to both humans and animals. The terms for ‘first-born’ and ‘males’ are unusual words in Hebrew that include the offspring of both.

13:13. ‘Redeem every first-born donkey with a lamb; but if you do not redeem [it], then you shall break its neck. Redeem every first-born male among your sons.’

Neither donkeys nor human children will be sacrificed to Yahweh; instead they will be redeemed—that is, bought back for a price. In other words, God is permitting a substitutionary payment in place of the first-born of donkeys and humans. The only animal mentioned as being in need of redemption is the ‘donkey’, or male ass. Perhaps the reason for this is that the donkey was the only unclean domestic animal used by the Hebrews in Egypt. The value of that animal for transportation or for packing is obvious, and so God allowed for its redemption by the substitution of a clean animal, namely, a lamb.

If, however, a man does not want to substitute a lamb for his donkey, then he must kill the donkey by breaking its neck. Since man is depriving God of his due, then man is denied use of the animal. Breaking the donkey’s neck instead of killing it with a knife or by some other means is probably in order to divorce it from any sacrificial act or intent.

The first-born of man is also to be redeemed. No mode of redemption or price to be paid is given here.

Later, in Numbers 18:16, the valuation is provided: it is to be five shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary.

A connection is made between this redemptive act and the act of deliverance of the people from Egypt by the use of the verb ‘to redeem’. It is a form used throughout the Bible to refer to God’s saving act in Egypt (see, for example, Deut. 7:8; 13:5).

13:14. ‘And it will come to pass in days to come, when your son asks you, saying, “What is this?” that you shall say to him, “With a strong hand Yahweh brought us out from Egypt, from the house of slaves.” ’

Children will be curious regarding the singular ritual associated with the redemption of the first-born. It must be explained to them (see comment on verse 8). Once again, the importance of the didactic value of the exodus event is underscored.

The beginning of an answer to the question is stated. The law of redemption is tied to the deliverance of the Hebrews out of Egypt by the power of Yahweh. The following two verses will spell out clearly the precise relationship between the two events.

‘In days to come’ is literally ‘tomorrow’. The Hebrew can bear the idea of an indefinite future time period (see, for example, Deut. 6:20).

13:15. ‘And it came to pass when Pharaoh was stubborn about sending us out that Yahweh killed all the first-born in the land of Egypt, from the first-born of man to the first-born of animals. Therefore, I sacrifice to Yahweh every first-born of the womb, the males, but every first-born of my sons I will redeem.’

The answer to the child’s question from verse 14 continues. The principal reason for the redemption of first-born humans and animals is because God had killed the first-born of mankind and animals in Egypt. God had spared the first-born of the Hebrews, so now they belong to him.

The clause, ‘This is why I sacrifice to the Lord’ is actually centred on a participial form which denotes ‘a durative circumstance involving repeated actions’. In other words, because of the events in Egypt, Israel throughout her history is continually to perform the redemption of the first-born.

13:16. ‘And it shall be as a sign upon your hand and as a symbol between your eyes, because by a strong hand Yahweh brought us out from Egypt.’

The devotion and consecration of the first-born constitute a physical sign, or symbol, of God’s redemptive act of rescuing Israel from Egypt. As the celebration of Passover is to serve as a pointer to the exodus (13:9), so too is the rite of redemption of the first-born (see commentary and bibliography relating to 13:9).

A major distinction between verse 9 and the present one is the replacement of the term ‘reminder’ (used in the earlier verse) with the word ‘symbol’. The latter term in Hebrew probably means ‘bands/frontlets’ (see its use also in Deut. 6:8; 11:18). Apparently it is a physical object that is being used figuratively in the sense of perpetual remembrance. Later Jews interpreted it literally, and thus came about the custom of wearing phylacteries.

Application

The redemption of the first-born in Israel by the blood of a lamb is a pointer to the fact that the Christian has been saved by the blood of Christ. The latter’s work is also one of a substitutionary payment as he acts as a sacrificial lamb. In 1 Peter 1:18–19, the apostle, speaking to the church, comments: ‘... knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver and gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ’. The author of the epistle to the Hebrews speaks of the Messiah’s work in a similar fashion: ‘and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through his own blood, he [Jesus Christ] entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption’ (Heb. 9:2).

It should further be observed that the act of redeeming the first-born in Israel was a mere shadow of the work of Christ. The result of the tenth plague was a deliverance of Israel that was physical, earthly and temporal. The redemptive work of Christ in his death is much greater: it is also eternal and spiritual. Thus, the Old Testament act of redemption reaches its apex and its fulfilment in the work of the great Redeemer in the New Testament.