

Exodus, Part 7

We now come to the final chapter in this section of the contest between Pharaoh and God. From the three cycles of three plagues, the land lay in ruins. God had demonstrated His mighty power by showing the impotence of the gods of Egypt. And by devastating that powerful nation economically, He struck fear into the hearts of her populace.

I believe Pharaoh was under the impression that he was dealing with just some tribal deity of this racial group called the Hebrews. He has been accustomed to defying these “gods” and has gotten away with it. I don’t think he has any idea he is going toe-to-toe with the Creator of all things, the One True God. He doesn’t understand that he cannot possibly win this fight. He is stubborn and proud and not accustomed to being defied. He is about to learn that entering into conflict with Yahweh is futile. God is about to deliver a devastating blow to Pharaoh and to all of Egypt.

A Final Plague Threatened

Exodus 11:1The Lord said to Moses, “Yet one plague more I will bring upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt. Afterward he will let you go from here. When he lets you go, he will drive you away completely. ² Speak now in the hearing of the people, that they ask, every man of his neighbor and every woman of her neighbor, for silver and gold jewelry.” ³ And the Lord gave the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians. Moreover, the man Moses was very great in the land of Egypt, in the sight of Pharaoh’s servants and in the sight of the people.

Prior to his last appearance before Pharaoh, God indicated to Moses that there would be one last plague. After that plague, the Israelites would be free! In fact, Pharaoh would drive them out of his land!

God had promised Abraham that his descendants would come out of Egypt with great possessions (Gen 15:14). God had told Moses at the bush how the promise of great possessions would be fulfilled. That provision of the deliverance was now about to be implemented. The Israelites were to ask their neighbors for valuable objects of gold and silver. As if to justify this incredible directive, the narrator points out that by this time the attitude of

the Egyptians toward the Israelites was quite different from that of the government. Moses was highly regarded throughout the land, even by the officials, and the Egyptians were favorably disposed toward the Israelites.

Considering the effects of the previous plagues on the population, “favorably disposed toward the Israelites” and references to favor and the greatness of Moses might better be understood as the Egyptians feared Moses and the Israelites. Verse 33 tells us, “The Egyptians were urgent with the people to send them out of the land in haste. For they said, ‘We shall all be dead.’” This would tend to support the idea of fear of the Israelites and their God rather than high regard or respect.

Exodus 11:4 So Moses said, “Thus says the Lord: ‘About midnight I will go out in the midst of Egypt, ⁵ and every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne, even to the firstborn of the slave girl who is behind the handmill, and all the firstborn of the cattle. ⁶ There shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt, such as there has never been, nor ever will be again. ⁷ But not a dog shall growl against any of the people of Israel, either man or beast, that you may know that the Lord makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel.’ ⁸ And all these your servants shall come down to me and bow down to me, saying, ‘Get out, you and all the people who follow you.’ And after that, I will go out.” And he went out from Pharaoh in hot anger.

Like plagues three, six, and nine this 10th one came with no warning to Pharaoh and no opportunity for him to repent beforehand. The judgment was specific: in every Egyptian family, the firstborn son would die in the middle of the night—from the poorest of the poor (the firstborn son of the slave girl) to the royal household (the firstborn son of Pharaoh). A firstborn son received special honor and a Pharaoh’s son, heir to the throne, was even considered a god. The wailing over the loss of sons would be unprecedented.

Why would God bring such a calamity on the Egyptians? It must be remembered that God is sovereign over all human affairs. People’s prosperity or judgment is not because of God’s favoritism or lack of it but because He desires to accomplish His will on earth. Since He alone is holy,

He has the right to use and dispose of mankind as He wills. Anything God does is right because He is God! Psalm 115:3 says, “ Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.” One must remember that the Egyptians were polytheists, worshiping many idols and false gods. Refusing to worship the true God, they became objects of His judgment.

Romans 1:18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. ²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

The goddess Isis, the wife and sister of Osiris, supposedly protected children. But this plague showed her to be incapable of doing what the Egyptians trusted her for!

In this great plague, the Israelites would lose no one. In fact, at midnight not a dog would growl (lit., “not a dog will sharpen its tongue”). That is, no dog would growl or bite because no harm would come to God’s people. By this special treatment of the Hebrews, Egypt would know that God favored Israel, and Pharaoh’s officials would urge their king to release the Israelites and would directly urge Moses to take his people away.

In several of the other confrontations, Moses gave Pharaoh the opportunity to release the people as a means of warding off the announced plague. Not so this time. The plague would come; *then* Pharaoh would let the people go. Moses’ angry pronouncement was final. Never again would he confront Pharaoh with the option to repent. In the previous plagues, Moses and Aaron had a part, but not in the final judgment; this was to be the work of God alone.

Exodus 11:9 Then the Lord said to Moses, “Pharaoh will not listen to you, that my wonders may be multiplied in the land of Egypt.”

¹⁰ Moses and Aaron did all these wonders before Pharaoh, and the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he did not let the people of Israel go out of his land.

Before the execution of the last terrible plague, the narrator reminds his readers of the prediction that God had made at the outset of the struggle. Pharaoh would refuse to comply with the demand to release the people. This refusal would necessitate the performance of mighty wonders in the land. With each new wonder, Pharaoh became more stubborn in his determination to resist the demands of Moses. In this sense, God hardened Pharaoh’s heart. By sending the plagues in gradually increasing intensity, God provided the occasion in which Pharaoh hardened his heart to his own destruction.

The Celebration of the First Passover

In chapter 12, the narrative shifts to Moses and the people of Israel. This passage has two parts: the Lord’s instructions to Moses concerning the feast (vv. 1–20) and the observance of the festival (vv. 21–28).

Exodus 12:1 The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt,
² “This month shall be for you the beginning of months. It shall be the first month of the year for you.

First God told Moses and Aaron about the time of the Passover. This feast was to mark a new age in the history of Israel. Israel’s lunar-based civil calendar begins in the fall of the year in September–October. God is here establishing a new religious calendar, and the seventh month of the civil calendar becomes the first month of the new religious calendar. The month was originally called “Abib” which means “fresh young ears” and refers to the ripening of the barley to be harvested (March–April). After the later Babylonian captivity, Babylonian names were adopted for four of the twelve months, and Abib became Nisan which means “early” or “start”. With a new calendar, the Israelites were to receive a new identity as the favored people of the true God.

Exodus 12:3 Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month every man shall take a lamb according to their fathers' houses, a lamb for a household. ⁴ And if the household is too small for a lamb, then he and his nearest neighbor shall take according to the number of persons; according to what each can eat you shall make your count for the lamb. ⁵ Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male a year old. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats, ⁶ and you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs at twilight. ⁷ "Then they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it.

The phrase "all the congregation of Israel" is used here for the first time in the Old Testament to refer to the nation. The word suggests a new beginning. The celebration of Passover was centered in homes. On the 10th day of the month of Abib (Nisan – March–April) each Israelite family was to select a lamb or a goat (*śeh*, the word translates as "lamb," can mean either a young sheep or goat). If a family was small and not able to eat an entire animal, arrangements could be made to share the meal with another family. The animal was to be a one-year-old male without blemish.

Four days later (on the 14th) each animal was to be killed at twilight. Some translations have this as "between the evenings". The first "evening" was immediately after noon; the second was after sunset. "Between the evenings" refers to mid-afternoon. This meant either between sunset and dark or between 3 and 5 p.m. The latter period is probably correct because it would allow more time for slaughtering and preparing the animal, which would be needed later when many sacrifices would be offered at the sanctuary.

Pertaining to the selection of the Passover lamb, the following regulations applied:

1. Each household was to have its own lamb. Smaller households, however, could join together for the observance.
2. The animal could come from either the sheep or goats. A lamb, however, was most common.
3. The lamb was selected on the tenth day of the first month.

4. The animal selected had to be a one-year-old male without spot or blemish.
5. The lamb was to be kept apart and observed for four days to reveal any defects.

The blood of the lamb was to be smeared on the top and sides of the doorframes of the house where the Passover meal was to be eaten. The blood was applied with a bunch of hyssop. The “destroyer” would not enter the house where the blood had been applied. No one, however, was to leave his home that night.

Exodus 12:8 They shall eat the flesh that night, roasted on the fire; with unleavened bread and bitter herbs they shall eat it. ⁹ Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted, its head with its legs and its inner parts. ¹⁰ And you shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. ¹¹ In this manner you shall eat it: with your belt fastened, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. And you shall eat it in haste. It is the Lord’s Passover. ¹² For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. ¹³ The blood shall be a sign for you, on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

In these verses, instructions are given on how to observe the Passover. Though the feast was observed in each Israelite home, their united and simultaneous worship would help weld them together as a single community. The blood of the animals was to be placed on the doorframes of the houses, the animal meat roasted, and the people were to eat it with bitter herbs and bread ... without yeast. The slaying of the animals and the sprinkling of blood prefigured the substitutionary death of Christ. He is “our Passover Lamb” (1 Cor. 5:7), “a Lamb without blemish or defect” (1 Peter 1:19; cf. John 1:29). His own sacrifice is the means whereby individual believers escape the horrors of spiritual death.

Bitter herbs (probably endive, chicory, dandelions) symbolized sorrow or grief for past sin, or the Israelites’ bitter experience of oppression in Egypt.

The bread without yeast symbolized their leaving in haste (Ex. 12:11, 39; Deut. 16:3). The meat was to be roasted, not eaten raw as some pagans did. Roasting with fire symbolized the judgment of sin. The people were to eat the entire meal quickly while dressed and ready for travel.

Thus under the protection of shed blood, the congregation was to be reminded of cleansing from sin and that they were sojourners in a strange land.

Heb. 9:22 Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.

“It is the Lord’s Passover” (v. 8) means the Passover lamb was for the Lord (“a festival to the Lord,” Ex. 12:14).

The regulations regarding the eating of the Passover lamb are as follows:

1. The lamb was to be roasted whole over an open fire, thus giving it the appearance of a sacrificial animal.
2. It was to be eaten with bitter herbs, to remind them of the bitterness of their bondage.
3. It was to be eaten with unleavened bread, a reminder of the haste with which they left Egypt.
4. It was to be eaten in one sitting. Passover relates only to one night. This regulation also prevented spoilage and the treating of the meat as common.
5. It was to be eaten in haste. They were to be dressed for abrupt departure. Their sandals should be on their feet, their staff in their hand, and their robe tucked into their belt, which was customary when a person had to engage in strenuous activity. This rule seems to apply only to the original Passover, not later observances (12:8–11).

Exodus 12:14 “This day shall be for you a memorial day, and you shall keep it as a feast to the Lord; throughout your generations, as a statute forever, you shall keep it as a feast.

God said that at midnight, after the Israelites had eaten the Passover lambs with herbs and bread, He would kill the firstborn son and animal in every

Egyptian family. The purpose of this final plague was like the others: to bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt, thus showing that God is the Lord. Min, the Egyptian god of reproduction, and Isis, the goddess of love who attended women at childbirth, were judged as impotent by this climactic plague and catastrophe.

Pharaoh's eldest son and successor supposedly had divine properties and would normally be the son who would assume the throne of his father. Amenhotep II was the Pharaoh of the Exodus, and his son Thutmose IV succeeded him on the throne, but according to Egyptian history, Thutmose IV was not Amenhotep II's eldest son. The eldest son was killed on the night of the first Passover.

The sprinkled blood on the Israelites' houses provided protection from death when God destroyed the Egyptian firstborn. From the verb, pass over (*pāsah*) comes the noun that designates the feast, the Passover (*pesah*). As the blood of an animal was the means of deliverance and of escaping death, so Christ's blood is the means of redemption for believers.

Rom. 5:9 Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.

Eph. 1:7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace.

The Passover was to be observed annually (for the generations to come) as a lasting ordinance.

Feast of Unleavened Bread

Exodus 12:15 Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall remove leaven out of your houses, for if anyone eats what is leavened, from the first day until the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel. ¹⁶ On the first day you shall hold a holy assembly, and on the seventh day a holy assembly. No work shall be done on those days. But what everyone needs to eat, that alone may be prepared by you. ¹⁷ And you shall observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread, for on this very day I brought your hosts out of the land of Egypt. Therefore you

shall observe this day, throughout your generations, as a statute forever. ¹⁸ In the first month, from the fourteenth day of the month at evening, you shall eat unleavened bread until the twenty-first day of the month at evening. ¹⁹ For seven days no leaven is to be found in your houses. If anyone eats what is leavened, that person will be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether he is a sojourner or a native of the land. ²⁰ You shall eat nothing leavened; in all your dwelling places you shall eat unleavened bread.”

Closely associated with the Passover was the Feast of Unleavened Bread. God then gave instructions for the Feast of Unleavened Bread as a national celebration of Israel’s redemption from Egypt. The Passover and the Unleavened Bread feasts were so closely connected that the two were often considered as one feast.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread was to be for seven days, from the 15th to the 21st of the month. Of course, no bread with yeast (leaven) was to be eaten on the Passover either (Ex. 12:8). Homes were to be cleansed of yeast, a symbol of sin. The absence of yeast suggested that those who were under the safety of shed blood were free from the corruption of sin before a holy God. If anyone ate anything with yeast on those feast days he would be cut off from Israel, that is, excluded from the camp and separated from covenant rights and privileges, possibly resulting in death. Also on the first and seventh days of the feast, the people were to gather together for special services. And no work other than food preparation was to be done all week. Like the Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread was to be a lasting ordinance to benefit forthcoming generations. Together the Passover and Unleavened Bread feasts were an “ordinance” to be obeyed and a “ceremony” to be observed. (Verses 19–20 repeat the instructions in verses 15–16, perhaps for emphasis.)

The regulations governing the future observance of this feast were as follows:

1. The feast was to last seven days. No leavened bread was to be eaten during this time.
2. Leaven was to be removed from the house on the first day of the feast.

3. The first and seventh days are designated as days of *miqra' qodesh*, "holy assembly". No work was permitted on these days except food preparation.
4. The celebration began on the fourteenth day of the first month, the same day when the Passover lamb was slain.
5. Anyone who ate leavened bread during the seven days was to be cut off from the congregation of Israel.

Exodus 12:21 Then Moses called all the elders of Israel and said to them, "Go and select lambs for yourselves according to your clans, and kill the Passover lamb. ²² Take a bunch of hyssop and dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood that is in the basin. None of you shall go out of the door of his house until the morning. ²³ For the Lord will pass through to strike the Egyptians, and when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the Lord will pass over the door and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you. ²⁴ You shall observe this rite as a statute for you and for your sons forever. ²⁵ And when you come to the land that the Lord will give you, as he has promised, you shall keep this service. ²⁶ And when your children say to you, 'What do you mean by this service?' ²⁷ you shall say, 'It is the sacrifice of the Lord's Passover, for he passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt, when he struck the Egyptians but spared our houses.'" And the people bowed their heads and worshiped. ²⁸ Then the people of Israel went and did so; as the Lord had commanded Moses and Aaron, so they did.

Moses gave the elders instructions for the Passover similar to those the Lord gave Moses. The blood to be placed on the doorframes was to be applied with a bunch of hyssop, a common bushy plant that grows on rocky surfaces. It was widely used in Israel's rites of purification. The destroyer who killed the firstborn is described as "the Lord" in verses 23 and 29 was the Angel of the Lord (the pre-incarnate Christ).

Then God's people were told to be sure to observe the Passover in the land that God had promised to give them. Also, they were to teach its meaning to their children. The people, grateful for their soon-to-come

deliverance from centuries of slavery, worshiped the Lord. Then they carried out His commands.

The Tenth Plague: Death of the Firstborn

Exodus 12:29 At midnight the Lord struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock. ³⁰ And Pharaoh rose up in the night, he and all his servants and all the Egyptians. And there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was not a house where someone was not dead.

The Lord of the 10th plague struck at midnight. Every firstborn of the Egyptians from Pharaoh on down was struck, including those of the animals. The result was a “great cry in Egypt”. Except for the homes of the Israelites with the blood smeared on their doorposts, there was not a house where someone was not dead. Great sorrow gripped the nation as God destroyed the favored sons of families in every stratum of society, from royalty to political prisoners. This presents a vivid reminder of the fury of God against sinners and the awful price that sin exacts. “A mighty hand”—God’s—had compelled Pharaoh to let His people go!

Exodus 12:31 Then he summoned Moses and Aaron by night and said, “Up, go out from among my people, both you and the people of Israel; and go, serve the Lord, as you have said. ³² Take your flocks and your herds, as you have said, and be gone, and bless me also!”

In response to the tragedy, Pharaoh released the Israelites that same night without any restrictions. He even *demand*ed that they leave. God had predicted, “He will let you go” (3:20; 6:1).

Pharaoh, who was considered a god, was now humbled to the point of asking that Moses and Aaron bless him. He wanted to be under Yahweh’s blessing, not the curse of His plagues. Even the Egyptian people urged the Israelites to leave quickly for fear they too would all die.

The Exodus

Exodus 12:33 The Egyptians were urgent with the people to send them out of the land in haste. For they said, “We shall all be dead.”³⁴ So the people took their dough before it was leavened, their kneading bowls being bound up in their cloaks on their shoulders.³⁵ The people of Israel had also done as Moses told them, for they had asked the Egyptians for silver and gold jewelry and for clothing.³⁶ And the Lord had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked. Thus they plundered the Egyptians.

The Exodus happened so quickly that the people took unleavened bread dough; they had no time to make bread (v. 39). The plagues, evidencing God’s power, so favorably disposed the Egyptians toward the Israelites that they were willing to do anything to hasten their departure, even giving away valuable jewelry and clothing. This fulfilled God’s promise to Abraham about his descendants’ captivity.

Gen. 15:13 Then the Lord said to Abram, “Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years.¹⁴ But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions.

This was a small payment of “wages” for their 400 years of servitude.

Exodus 12:37 And the people of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children.³⁸ A mixed multitude also went up with them, and very much livestock, both flocks and herds.³⁹ And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had brought out of Egypt, for it was not leavened, because they were thrust out of Egypt and could not wait, nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves.

⁴⁰ The time that the people of Israel lived in Egypt was 430 years.⁴¹ At the end of 430 years, on that very day, all the hosts of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt.⁴² It was a night of watching by the Lord, to bring them out of the land of Egypt; so this same night is a night of watching kept to the Lord by all the people of Israel throughout their generations.

Institution of the Passover

From Rameses, where apparently the people were concentrated, they journeyed to Succoth, present-day Tell el-Maskhutah near Lake Timsah. The number of Israelite men was about 600,000 (in 38:26 and Num. 1:46 the exact figure is 603,550). With women and children, the number of Israelites was about 2 million.

A “mixed multitude” of an unknown number accompanied the Israelites. These were non-Israelites, apparently a variegated group that probably included non-Israelite members of mixed marriages and others friendly to the Israelites. They are described as a “rabble” in Numbers 11:4. This bunch will probably be the main source of complaints against Moses during the wilderness journey.

Moses concluded this section about the beginning of the Exodus with a historical notation, a reminder of God’s faithfulness, and a call to remembrance. The length of Israel’s time in Egypt is here said to be 430 years, while other passages state that it was 400 years (Gen. 15:13, 16; Acts 7:6) and “about 450 years” (Acts 13:20). Apparently, the total time in Egypt was 430 years from 1876 b.c. to 1446 b.c.

“It was a night of watching by the Lord, to bring them out of the land of Egypt” (v. 42). God’s care of His people on the night of the Exodus should be remembered. Since He kept vigil over them, they should keep vigil to honor Him.

Exodus 12:43 And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, “This is the statute of the Passover: no foreigner shall eat of it, ⁴⁴ but every slave that is bought for money may eat of it after you have circumcised him. ⁴⁵ No foreigner or hired worker may eat of it. ⁴⁶ It shall be eaten in one house; you shall not take any of the flesh outside the house, and you shall not break any of its bones. ⁴⁷ All the congregation of Israel shall keep it. ⁴⁸ If a stranger shall sojourn with you and would keep the Passover to the Lord, let all his males be circumcised. Then he may come near and keep it; he shall be as a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person shall eat of it. ⁴⁹ There shall be one law for the native and for the stranger who sojourns among you.”

⁵⁰ All the people of Israel did just as the Lord commanded Moses and Aaron. ⁵¹ And on that very day the Lord brought the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt by their hosts.

At Succoth, Moses and Aaron were given regulations about celebrating the Passover (vv. 43–51) and instructions for the dedication of the firstborn (13:1–16).

The several regulations for the Passover were apparently necessitated by the non-Israelites who joined the Exodus and had identified with the religion of the Hebrews. If a man did not identify with the covenant promises by the rite of circumcision he could not celebrate the Passover (12:44, 48–49). The feast was to be centered in the home and observed by the entire community.

Exodus 13:1 The Lord said to Moses, ² “Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine.”

The Feast of Unleavened Bread

Exodus 13:3 Then Moses said to the people, “Remember this day in which you came out from Egypt, out of the house of slavery, for by a strong hand the Lord brought you out from this place. No leavened bread shall be eaten. ⁴ Today, in the month of Abib, you are going out. ⁵ And when the Lord brings you into the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, which he swore to your fathers to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey, you shall keep this service in this month. ⁶ Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a feast to the Lord. ⁷ Unleavened bread shall be eaten for seven days; no leavened bread shall be seen with you, and no leaven shall be seen with you in all your territory. ⁸ You shall tell your son on that day, ‘It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.’ ⁹ And it shall be to you as a sign on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, that the law of the Lord may be in your mouth. For with a strong hand the Lord has brought you out of Egypt. ¹⁰ You shall therefore keep this statute at its appointed time from year to year.

Consecration of the Firstborn

Exodus 13:11 “When the Lord brings you into the land of the Canaanites, as he swore to you and your fathers, and shall give it to you, ¹² you shall set apart to the Lord all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn of your animals that are males shall be the Lord’s. ¹³ Every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. Every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem. ¹⁴ And when in time to come your son asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ you shall say to him, ‘By a strong hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. ¹⁵ For when Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the Lord killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to the Lord all the males that first open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.’ ¹⁶ It shall be as a mark on your hand or frontlets between your eyes, for by a strong hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt.”

After an introductory statement about the Israelites’ firstborn (vv. 1–2), who were to be dedicated for the service of the Lord (since they were spared in the 10th plague), Moses addressed the people again about the Passover and the Unleavened Bread feasts (vv. 3–10), and then returned to the subject of the firstborn (vv. 11–16).

Again Moses reminded the people of the importance of the day of their deliverance from the land of slavery (lit., “slave house”) by God’s mighty hand into the land of promise. This victorious event was to be remembered annually in the ceremony of the seven-day festival of Unleavened Bread.

Like the Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread had great educational value in the home. The feast was like a sign on their hand or forehead, a continual reminder of God’s mighty deliverance from Egypt. Some orthodox Jews today interpret that passage (and Deut. 6:8; 11:18) literally and bind passages of the Law (viz., Ex. 13:2–10; Deut. 6:4–9; 11:13–21) on their arms and foreheads in small pouches, so-called phylacteries, though this was probably not God’s intention.

Once in the land of promise, the firstborn sons and male animals were to be dedicated to the Lord. Animals were included because they also benefited from the redemption provided by God in the 10th plague. Since donkeys were considered ceremonially unclean animals, they could not be sacrificed, but they could be redeemed by lambs sacrificed in their place (*pādâh*, “to buy back for a price”).

Of course, since human sacrifice was unacceptable the Hebrews’ sons were also to be “redeemed.” This too would have teaching value in the home. The Egyptian firstborn were slain, in judgment, and the Israelite “firstborn” were either slain (the animals) in substitutionary sacrifice or redeemed (the sons). Like the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the consecration of the firstborn was a sign and symbol, a reminder of God’s powerful deliverance, reminders of God’s gracious deliverance from the land of bondage.