Exodus 13: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0:00] Exodus chapter 13. The Lord said to Moses, Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both a man and a beast, is mine.

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. Today in the month of Abib you are going out. 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. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a feast to the Lord. 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. You shall tell your son on that day, It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt. 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. You shall therefore keep this statute at its appointed time from year to year.
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, 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. 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. 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. 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. 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.
[2:26] When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near. For God said, Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt. But God led the people around by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea.

And the people of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt equipped for battle. Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for Joseph had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear, saying, God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones with you from here. And they moved on from Succoth, and camped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. The pillar of cloud by day, and the pillar of fire by night, did not depart from before the people. Exodus chapter 13 continues to be concerned with the establishment of some ritual perpetuation of the memory of the Exodus and the Passover. The sacrifice of the son is a theme throughout the story of Genesis and into Exodus. God will claim the firstborn son one way or another.
The Passover was the time when Israel became God's firstborn son in a special way, in a manner similar to the event of the binding of Isaac. God, in that event, claimed Isaac as his own, and Abraham was blessed for his faithfulness. But Isaac was also brought into a new status as a result of that event. The Passover creates a new situation, a situation in which Israel was taken as God's own. It's important to recognize how this is fulfilling so many of the themes of the story of Genesis, within which the question of firstbornness and the sacrifice of the son to God, the lostness of the son, but then God claiming that son for himself, that theme is prominent throughout.

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Israel was supposed to be the people that was the firstborn of the nations, to lead the rest of the nations, providing the bridge between God and the other peoples. As they were the firstborn, they provided the example that others would follow. And all of this helps us to understand why chapter 13 begins with the law concerning the consecration of the firstborn. The individual firstborn symbolize and manifest the identity of the nation as a whole. The Levites took the place of the firstborn of Israel later on, standing for the priestly vocation of the people as a whole. It's important that we appreciate the logic of representation here. The nation as a whole was the firstborn son. But this doesn't mean that every individual in the nation was a firstborn son, so much as that the firstborn sons of Israel manifested, symbolized, and represented something that was true of the nation as a whole, as a unity. And as a particular subset of the nation, they stood for something that was true of the whole. We can think about this in terms of the body. There are certain aspects of the body that can stand for the whole. The strength of the body can be particularly focused upon the hand.
[5:45] The sense of the self of the body can be focused upon the face. The face is the soul of the body, as some have called it. We can think about other aspects of the way, for instance, the mouth and the tongue start to represent the expression of the self from within, what comes forth. In all of these respects, we can see an analogy to the way that human societies work, where individual groups or subsets of the larger whole can stand for some aspect of that which is true for the entire body.

The nation then was the firstborn son, and that firstborn son character was represented, first of all by the literal firstborn, males of Israel, but also, later on, by the priests.
Likewise, the nation was a priestly nation, but most of the people were not priests. Rather, it was just a subset of the tribe of Levi, and the priestly character of the nation was represented by those figures within it. The consecration of the firstborn implies sacrifice. No humans are being sacrificed. They are substituted for, but they are subject to the logic of sacrifice. Either the firstborn are killed, or they are claimed, and if they are claimed, they have to be substituted for, and symbolically offered in that substitute. All of this is connected with the time of the Passover, and the Passover occurs in the spring, when livestock would typically bear their young.
It's connected also with the historic event of the Passover. There are themes of firstfruits and firstborn here that relate both to the agricultural feast and also to the redemptive historical feast. The festal pattern of Israel connected specific times of the year and agricultural patterns with redemptive events in history. This continues into the new covenant, where Easter, for instance, is connected with the feast of firstfruits, and that connection is seen in Christ as the firstborn from the dead and the firstfruits of the grave. The grain harvest was associated with Passover, as were the animals bearing of their young. Once again, Moses emphasizes the ongoing rituals that are instituted in association with the historical events, and the ways that those have resonances with other aspects of the life of the people. They will be starting an agricultural life when they enter into the land. They're not yet engaging in agriculture. They're on the move, but there will come a time when the agricultural calendar is something that shapes their self-understanding, and when that occurs, they will understand the events of the Exodus in terms of that. The ongoing rituals that are instituted are arguably eclipsing the actual recounting of what happened at many points. The point is not so much the focus upon what happened as a historical event. That's important in its place, but what is really important is that the force of this event, Israel being taken as God's firstborn, claimed as God's firstborn, continue throughout the life of the nation. The feast of unleavened bread is the cutting off of what came previously. The consecration of the firstborn, however, is about the new, about the opening of the womb, about some new order being instituted and established. The changed calendar and the yearly festival serves to keep that historical event of the Exodus in people's attention and memory. It has continuing significance for Israel's life and identity as God's firstborn son. And there's a concern for future life in the land here. On three occasions within these chapters, Moses talks about what will happen when they come into the land. It would be easy when Israel were brought into the land to forget the lessons of the Exodus and what that meant for their self-understanding. The Exodus wasn't merely to deliver Israel from slavery, to achieve the purpose of removing them from the bondage of Pharaoh. It was also to reveal who God was and to bring them into a new relationship of sonship with him. And the continuing ritual is very much concerned with passing these things on with such things as the instruction of children, an element that is highlighted on several occasions in chapters 12 and 13.

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The firstborn males of the animals would belong to the Lord and be sacrificed to him. They would also be used for the provision of the priests and could be eaten before the Lord by the worshipper on occasions.
[10:29] See that in Deuteronomy chapter 15 verse 19. Donkeys, as they were an unclean animal that Israelites might own, couldn't be sacrificed but must have their neck broken or preferably be redeemed by a lamb.

The firstborn males were to be redeemed. How exactly this was to take place isn't fully explained here, but presumably it was with five shekels. You can see that in Numbers chapter 18 verse 16 compared with Leviticus chapter 27 verse 6. The distinction between the sexes here is also noteworthy.
The firstborn seems to refer to males in particular. And I think in places like Numbers chapter 3 verses 40 to 49, the firstborn seem to be far more clearly specified as the firstborn males. Throughout the Old Testament in particular, there is a lot of attention given to the difference between the sexes.
The firstborn sons who must be circumcised stand for the identity of the whole people in a particular way. They stand for the strength of the people. They're the first fruits of the people. They're preeminent among the passing on of the life of the people to the next generation. They are the preeminent ones of that next generation. They're also the ones that are most particularly the image of the father of the previous generation. They carry on that image and represent that image, particularly among the sons. The firstborn male would bear the mantle of the father as the father passed on and would, for that reason, receive a double portion of the inheritance. As we live in a highly individualistic society, it's difficult for us to understand how these things operate.
But this is the way the church is supposed to be understood too. Israel had differentiated roles and identities within it. The mother was not the same as the father. The father was set over against, but in a very clear relationship with the firstborn son that differed from his relationship with the younger son or with his daughter. All of these different places within the life of Israel served to stand for the larger identity of Israel. Same with things like the Levites. The Levites stood for the priestly identity of the whole nation, but they were just one particular tribe. In Genesis chapter 49 verse 3, we have a sort of definition of the firstborn. Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, and the first fruits of my strength, preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power. It is essential that we understand the way that the firstborn represented aspects of other people's characters.
[13:07] The firstborn was the firstborn was the one who opened the womb and so represented something very powerful for the mothers of Israel. The firstborn was the one who's the first fruits of his father's strength and also preeminent in dignity and might among his brothers. And the one who provided the bridge between the generations, the one who set the pattern for the younger generation being the particular image of the father. In all of these ways, we need to see that the firstborn was not just a detached individual. The firstborn stood for the whole reality of Israel itself conceived from a particular vantage point. It stood for something for the wife and the mother. It stood for something for the brothers and the sisters. It stood for something for the father. For God to claim the firstborn was to claim something about Israel as a whole and also for each individual in Israel. It was saying to women, you must give up that child that represents your transition into motherhood, becoming a new sort of person, and you must give up the fruit of that to recognize God's claim upon that. Saying to the fathers, that firstborn son that you have that represents your legacy, your strength being passed on to the next generation, that one belongs to God. He has claimed that for himself. He was saying to the brothers and the sisters, that one that you look to as your model, that one is claimed by God. And as a result, you must follow a model that has been set by God. Now we can see that this was not the only figure within the life of Israel that was important. Fathers were the heads of their household. The oldest son was a sort of miniature head, one that was, as it were, the image of the father's headship among his brothers. And then we can think about the character of the wife and the mother as the heart of the household, the beating heart that gave the unity and the sense of cohesion to its life. Each of these figures represented something essential about the existence of the nation as a whole and represented part of each person's identity to them. A person's mother is not just an individual that they relate to. A person's mother is part of them. It's an aspect of their identity held by someone else in the same way as someone's father represents a part of themselves outside of themselves. This is the way the Bible operates and it's very difficult for our individualistic society to understand. But once we do, the power of

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God's claiming of the firstborn will begin to make a bit more sense. God sent them out of Egypt and took them the longer way around, sparing them from immediate warfare. Had they taken the way of the Philistines, they would have been invading Canaan very quickly, something for which they really were not ready. They travelled around in military formation. They went out in ranks, in groups of 50 or fives maybe. They moved in an orderly manner. And this isn't just a ragtag bunch of people in the wilderness. They're prepared to some degree for what lies ahead. And they go up with Joseph's bones.

They're delivering that lost son from Egypt. The one who had been sent down into Egypt is now being brought back up. What went wrong in Genesis chapter 37 is being set right now. And that is a core theme of the Exodus. God is going to redeem that son that was lost in Egypt. He's going to bring him back to the land and he's going to be buried in Shechem, the place where it all went wrong. They are setting right something that had gone wrong at the beginning of the story. It's also a reminder of the story of Hagar and Ishmael.

The Egyptian maidservant afflicted in the house of the Hebrews now has been replaced with the Hebrews afflicted in the house of the Egyptians as their servants. And they have experienced the world from Hagar and Ishmael's perspective. Hagar and Ishmael had a sort of exodus experience. Hagar was afflicted and she fled from the presence of Sarah. And then later on they wandered in the wilderness and then had a similar experience to that of Israel. God is replaying this history but in a different way. And so Israel is entering into the experience that they inflicted upon others. And until they can recognize themselves in the experience of Hagar and Ishmael as they have come to, they cannot truly be the people that will represent the whole. They cannot truly be the firstborn unless they feel that affinity with their brothers in humanity. Unless they can recognize that they too are connected with the Egyptian Hagar.

This is one of the reasons why it matters that they go up from Egypt with a mixed multitude, with many people who aren't descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but people who have joined the nation from outside and are going to be assimilated into its life. They are going to be adopted into its life. The outsiders, the outcasts, the foreigners, the people who don't belong, the strangers, are now going to become part of the family. That is an event that is reversing the pattern that we see in the story of Ishmael and Hagar or the story of Joseph where the one who belongs to the family is being cast out. Now it is going the other way. They are led up by a pillar of fire and cloud. The divine chariot is a manifestation of God's glorious presence and I think that's what's taking place here. You can maybe contrast this with the ways that God generally revealed himself in Genesis where God would come in the form of the angel of the Lord and he would be present in a more human form and relate to people in that way. This is a step up in glory and perhaps the pillar of fire should also throw our minds back to the burning bush.

The pillar of cloud and fire is a manifestation of God's own constant presence with them. The Lord is going up before them and he's never going to leave them. He's not going to forsake them. He's going to be with them every step of the way. A question to consider. How might the interplay of narrative and ritual instruction in such a passage as this help us to understand the purpose of law in scripture more generally?

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