

# Exodus 12: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Exodus chapter 12. The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, This month shall be for you the beginning of months. It shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month every man shall take a lamb, according to their father's houses, a lamb for a household. 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. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male a year old. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats, 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. Then they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two door posts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the flesh that night, roasted on the fire, with unleavened bread and bitter herbs they shall eat it. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roast it, its head with its legs and its inner parts. And you shall let none of it remain until the morning. Anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. You shall eat nothing leavened. In all your dwelling places you shall eat unleavened bread. 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. 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. 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 house and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you. You shall observe this rite as a statute for you and for your sons forever. And when you come to the land that the Lord will give you, as he has promised, you shall keep this service. And when your children say to you, What do you mean by this service? 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 worshipped. Then the people of Israel went and did so. As the Lord had commanded Moses and Aaron, so they did. 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. 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. 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. Take your flocks and your herds, as you have said, and be gone, and bless me also. The Egyptians were urgent with the people to send them out of the land in haste, for they said, We shall all be dead. So the people took their dough before it was leavened, their kneading bowls being bound up in their cloaks on their shoulders.

The people of Israel had also done as Moses told them, for they had asked the Egyptians for silver and gold jewellery and for clothing. And the Lord had given the people favour in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked. Thus they plundered the Egyptians. And the people of Israel journeyed from Ramses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children. A mixed multitude also went up with them, and very many livestock, both flocks and herds.

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. The time that the people of Israel lived in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years. At the end of four hundred and thirty years, on that very day, all the hosts of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt. 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. And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, This is the statute of the Passover. No foreigner shall eat of it, but every slave that is bought for money may eat of it after you have circumcised him. No foreigner or hired worker may eat of it. 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. All the congregation of Israel shall keep it. 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. There shall be one law for the native and for the stranger who sojourns among you.

[ 7 : 04 ] All the people of Israel did just as the Lord commanded Moses and Aaron. And on that very day, the Lord brought the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt by their hosts. Exodus chapter 12 begins strangely. It begins with the words, The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt.

This snatches us out of the narrative and positions us at a point from which we are looking back. Why is this? It seems to be the institution of something that should be ongoing within Israel's life. At this key point, liturgy supersedes and interprets narrative as the most important narrative of all in the life of Israel. It takes the form of ongoing ritual. We are expected to understand the story of the Passover through the lens of the continued liturgy of the Passover.

The point of the Passover is not so much the original event as the continued practice. The force of the original events continues. And the point of the ritual is the future practice in the land. And there are a number of references to this within this chapter. It's looking forward, as are a number of the things in chapter 13, to what they will continue to do when they're in the land.

This event of deliverance will be one that they look back on and which has continued force and emphasis within their lives. It looks forward, not just back. It's a sign of hope, not just one of memory. And beyond establishing a new ritual, God also resets the calendar. This will provide the basis for Israel's future experience of time. The interruption of the narrative at this point to institute an ongoing ritual has the effect of heightening suspense. We're waiting for what's going to happen, for the hammer to fall. And at this point, we're held back. We're waiting for this institution of the Passover. And once that has taken place, then we can hear about the judgment.

The symbolism of the Passover is worth carrying with. There's a lot that could be explored here. But here are a few brief thoughts. They leave in haste through a bloody door. In the story of the Exodus, the prominence of themes of birth and stories of birth are not accidental. And in the chapter that follows, we'll see more emphasis upon this. Israel is God's firstborn son, and the story of the Exodus is the story of a coming to birth.

[ 9 : 32 ] We might also think about some other details of the rite. Why a pot without water in it? Why eat the meal in a group? Why do they have to draw out a lamb? Why do they dip the hyssop in blood?

There are many different ways we could explore this. Perhaps there are some connections with the rite for leprosy. But perhaps we are also supposed to see connections with the story of Joseph. The pot without water in it might remind us of Joseph being thrown into a cistern without water.

Why eat the meal in a group? They had thrown Joseph into the cistern and sat down and ate a meal together. Why did they draw out a lamb? Well, the last time that same phrase was used was in the story of Genesis 37, where Joseph was drawn out of the pit to be brought down into Egypt. Now they're going to have to draw their brother out of Egypt and bring him back to the land, to the place where he first got lost.

Why dip the hyssop in blood? Because the brothers dipped Joseph's tunic in blood and presented it to their father. What is the blood that the tunic is dipped in? The blood of a sheep or a goat.

And the goat's blood was that which was used to feign the death of their brother. The story of the exodus is in part the story of the rescue of Joseph, the brother that was lost in Egypt, and the restoration of him back to the land. It's the expectation at the end of the book of Genesis.

[ 11 : 01 ] It's the event that takes place in the next chapter as they go up with the bones of Joseph. And in the book of Joshua at the very end, it's the culmination of the story of the exodus, the burial of Joseph.

God will execute a final judgment upon the gods of Egypt at this point. We see this in verse 12. Throughout this story, God has been judging not just the Egyptians, not just Pharaoh, but also their gods, proving his supremacy in every realm of the universe, that he is above any name that might be named, any god that might be appealed to, that he proves his supremacy and his power in the realm where they would claim power. Once again, the story of the exodus is the manifestation of the uniqueness of God's identity throughout, not just to Israel, but to Egypt and the nations.

God strikes the firstborn son, and Israel is God's firstborn son. We saw the threat of this in chapter 4 verses 22 to 23, and now it's carried out.

If you do not let my firstborn son go, I will kill your firstborn son. Once again, there's a judgment that corresponds to the crime of killing the Hebrew boys, the boys of the firstborn nation. Now the firstborn boys of Egypt are killed.

The firstborn represents, among other things, the strength of the family. The firstborn is the one who pushes forward the family's destiny, and also is the standard bearer for its identity.

[ 12 : 31 ] The firstborn is also the bridge between generations, the bridge between parents and children, representing the mediation of the parents' influence to the younger siblings. As God takes the lives of the firstborn, he's judging Egypt for what it has done to his firstborn. His firstborn, Israel, is supposed to lead the other nations into his worship, and as his firstborn has been taken by another, he will strike that opponent until they let his firstborn free. The Israelites dress themselves with the plunder and the riches of the Egyptians, as they had been promised by God earlier on. They leave with 600,000 men besides women and children. This is military numbering. They are God's hosts, leaving the land to enter into a new land. The numbers here might also recall those connected with the ark and the age of Noah. There are similar factors, and maybe we're supposed to see some sort of connection. The purpose of the ritual only becomes clear in verses 12 and 13, as God explains why he will pass over their houses as the blood is displayed. This pattern has already been anticipated in Sodom's destruction to some degree. They eat a meal of unleavened bread at night. There is a threat at the doorway. They are saved at the doorway from the destroying angels, and the others are struck with blindness, and then they're rescued and brought out of the city. This is a similar pattern to the one that we see in the story of the Exodus. They journey to Succoth. Maybe we can think back to Genesis chapter 33 verse 17, where Jacob first journeys to Succoth after meeting Esau. It's a different Succoth, but it's named again for the booths that are established there. The feast of unleavened bread involves the cutting off of leaven, a principle of life and food that connected them with this ongoing ritual of life within Egypt. That has to be broken with. They have to make a new start, and the cutting off of the old leaven is a sign of that. No longer continuing that pattern, but breaking with that generative pattern of life and food in Egypt, and starting something new. A connection between the cutting off of leaven and the cutting off of the foreskin should probably be recognised here.

In both cases, there's a ritual of division and separation occurring. The continued leaven being cut off represents a breach with the life of Egypt, and then that is connected later on with the importance of circumcision. They must prepare for the Passover by cutting off the leaven. They must also prepare for the Passover by cutting off the foreskin, both of them connected with principles of generation and continued life. Ritual in these sorts of situations can function as a protective hedge against judgment. Note the way that ritual and institution are often established in the context of judgment, shielding people from wrath. So circumcision occurs just before judgment falls upon Sodom and Gomorrah and the land. And the Levites are established for a blessing in the context of the judgment at Sinai. Phineas is set apart for high priestly ministry as he stands up and stops the plague. Passover is established in the context of judgment falling upon Egypt. The temple is established on the site where God's judgment and the sword of the angel of the Lord is stayed. In all of these places, we see ritual and the institutions of Israel's ritual life serving as protective hedges against God's judgment, holding back God's judgment when he comes near in his holiness and protecting the people from the full force.

The blood on the doorposts and the importance of circumcision might remind us of the encounter on the way to Egypt and Zipporah's circumcision of Gershom. That's a proto-Passover event. It's also an event connected with birth. And what we're having here is this playing out for the entire nation.

They are experiencing what Moses experienced on the way back to the land. And all of this is preparing Israel for its ongoing identity into the future. This passage is not just about a historical event, but by a fundamental generative principle of Israel's life and identity as a people.

This is the event to which they will look, not only in memory, but in hope. It's the framework in which they understand God's concern for them as a people and look forward to the future in which God will reveal and fulfill the true promise of this historical deliverance. In ritual, we are recounting God's great works, but we are looking forward to God's greater deliverances. He has made a statement of intent in these historical deliverances, and we look forward to the full revelation and realization of those things in the future. A question to consider, how does the Passover help us to understand the Christian practice of the Lord's Supper?