

The Verb Pasach Means “To Protect,” Not “To Skip Over”

A Short Study

notes by Tim Hegg

“Passover”: What Does It Really Mean?

1. Two words for “pass over” in Exodus 12:
 - a. עָבַר – *avar*, “to cross over, pass over” This term is found in vv. 12 and 23. In both instances, יהוה is the subject of the verb: יהוה is the one who “passes through” or “passes over” the land.
 - b. פָּסַח – *pasach*. The scholars, however, do not all agree about the definition of this verb. The verb and corresponding noun are found 73 times in the Tanach, but only 20 times outside of the Torah.

The early Christian interpretation of the Exodus text has influenced the definition of the verb to a great extent. This interpretation considered יהוה to be the One who either destroyed (Egyptians) or *spared* (Israelites). In other words, He destroyed the first born of the Egyptians but *skipped over*, i.e., “passed over” the homes of Israelites marked by the blood of the lamb on the doorposts.

One other text seems to support this definition of “skip over”: 1 Ki 18:21, “How long will you waver between two opinions?” These words, in the mouth of Elijah, confront the people regarding their complete faith in God as they contemplated paying allegiance to Baal. The Lexicons consider the possibility that the verb *pasach* may have a root sense of “limp,” or “be lame.” From this comes the idea of “waver” or “wobble,” and thus the current translation of 1 Ki 18:21. But the word translated “opinions” is from a cluster of Hebrew nouns (all based on the root סָעַף, which most likely means “branches” or even the “Y” of a branch. Note the following: Is 17:6; 27:10, “branch” (סָעִיף); Is 10:33, “trim branches” (מְסַעֵף); Ezek 31:6, 8, “slender branch” (סָעִיף). Add to this the fact that the preposition translated “between” is עַל when we would expect בֵּין, and we have good cause to seek a better translation.

The use of the verb *pasach* in Is. 31:5 gives every indication that the base meaning is “to hover over,” “to protect.” Note the poetic lines:

Like flying birds so Adonai of hosts will protect Jerusalem
He will protect and deliver;
He will *pasach* and rescue

Here, the term obviously means to “hover over,” “to protect.” This is what a mother-bird does for her young, cp. Deut. 32:11.

Now we may retranslate 1 Ki 18:21 like this: “why do you hover over two branches”, that is, “How long will you go on hovering like a bird fluttering over two branches? Land already!”

In fact, the verb *pasach* fits every context in which it is used if the meaning given is “to hover over, to protect.”

2. Back to Ex. 12. Question: Who is the destroyer?

In vv. 12 and 23 Adonai is clearly the One who does the destroying of the Egyptian's first born. But in v. 23 there appears to be two individuals. Adonai both destroys and does not allow the destroyer to come into the houses marked by blood.

Here, as often in the Tanach, Adonai is seen in a plurality of persons. Who is the destroyer? Most certainly the Angel of the Lord, (cp. 2 Sam 24:16-17; 2 Kgs 19:35; Is 37:36; 1 Chr. 21:12ff; 2 Chr 32:21; Ps 35:5-6). Who “hovers” to protect? I would suggest that this One is Yeshua, Who interposes Himself between the sinner and the wrath of the Almighty.

The clear indication of Ex 12:23 is that Adonai “hovers over” the house marked by blood, and protects its occupants from the death sentence of the destroyer.

3. God's Sovereign Choice, the Distinguishing Factor

God's choice of Israel as His people marks the initial difference between those spared and those destroyed. But ultimately the blood is the deciding factor. In the day of judgement, will He be hovering over you?