

Parashah Fifty-Four

Ex 12:29–51; Is 21:11–22:4; 1Thess 4:13-18

notes by Tim Hegg

The *parashah* before us details the events of the first Pesach, and particularly the application of the blood upon the doorposts (מְזוּזוֹת, *mezuzot*) of the Israelite homes. A number of questions confront us from this text, and we should discuss them in the order in which they appear.

The first question is way the striking of the firstborn needed to be so comprehensive. The text before us is clear: “From the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on the throne to the firstborn of the prisoner in the dungeon” (literally בּוֹר, *bor*, “pit”). But the killing extends even to the animals. Why? Why must the killing be so extensive? Would it not have sufficed to deal with the firstborn of Pharaoh alone?

We may presume that the primary reason was to show that God and God alone was the One who brought about this plague. Each of the other plagues may have been considered (at least by the Egyptians) as a mere consequence of nature (though this would have taken a vivid imagination). However, to have the firstborn of every household slain, as well as the firstborn of all the animals, all in the same night, could be construed as nothing less than the consequence of Divine action. This is doubly true by the fact that Moses had already indicated it would happen at night (12:12), and thus both the extent of the killing as well as the timing left no explanation except that HaShem had done it.

But we should not lose sight of the fact that the extensive killing of the firstborn is also an indication both of God’s power and anger. “It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (cf. Hebrews 10:31). Often in life God seems distant, or even nonexistent. The unbeliever says “Adonai does not see, nor does the God of Jacob pay heed” (Ps. 94:7). The Egyptians (represented by Pharaoh) up to this point had acted as though the God of Israel was not to be taken seriously. If He existed, He was simply a nuisance, but not a terrible threat. But God’s hand is not weak—His power is not limited. Only those without true faith disregard His voice. “God is always in concert. But the audience is not always listening.” Like the first Pesach, the wicked will be destroyed in a moment they least expect. Deep in the sleep of self-reliance, they will come face to face with the Almighty. All of their mockings will turn to woe, and their assurance that God is only the “make-believe” crutch of the weak will be turned to utter despair.

If ever there is a picture of the wrath of God upon His enemies, the Pesach night is it. Death in every house—mourning and wailing over the devastation—but all for naught. The hour is past, the opportunities gone. The mercy of God has been used up and only His wrath remains. The Egyptians have no hope and stand no chance of recovery. They have spit in the eye of the Sovereign Lord, and there is no taking back their insults. The judgement of God against His enemies is awesome and terrible.

The second question that confronts us is an ethical one. Were the Israelites justified in asking for silver and gold from the Egyptians, knowing full well they would never return it (v. 36)? But we should understand the word שָׁאַל, *sha’al* to mean “ask,” not in the sense of a “loan” (though the word can have this meaning in some contexts), but in the sense of “ask for compensation or wages.” The request of the Israelites to their Egyptian neighbors would have been absurd apart from the intervention of God. But the verse tells us explicitly that God did intervene: “And the Lord gave the people favor in the eyes of the Egyptians” Thus, against all odds, the Israelites (under direction from Moses) sought compensation from the Egyptian for their unjust enslavement, and received it.

We may therefore consider an alternative translation to the conclusion of v. 36. It is commonly translated “so they plundered the Egyptians.” The word translated “plundered” is the piel of נָצַל, *natzal*, which usually has the meaning “save” or “deliver.” Granted, in a situation where spoils of war are for the taking, it can be used in the sense of “pick up the articles left behind” — “to save them,” and thus “to plunder” the enemy. But is it possible that we should understand it here to mean that by the Egyptians showing favor to Israel and giving her items of silver and gold, they actually were “delivered” from total annihilation? Is it possible that God would have entirely wiped Egypt off the face of the earth had they not compensated Israel in at least some small measure for their years of servitude? We may say that at least this is a possible understanding of the text.

A third question that this text raises is the thorny one of chronology. So emphatic is our text! “Now the time that the sons of Israel lived in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years. And at the end of four hundred and thirty years, to the very day, all the hosts of Adonai went out from the land of Egypt” (12:40-41). We all know that it is difficult to reckon 430 years for Israel’s stay in Egypt. According to Gen 47:9 Jacob arrived in Egypt when he was 130 years old; he not only brought his son Levi with him, but also his grandson Kohath (Gen 46:11), and Moses was his grandson, the son of Amram. Thus, between Jacob, Levi and Moses we had only two generations. The lifespans of Kohath and Amram were 133 and 137 respectively, and if we add 80 years of Moses till the Exodus (Ex 6:18, 20; 7:7), even the sum of these reaches only 350 years.

That this was a problem to ancient commentators is seen by the fact that both the Lxx and the Samaritan Pentateuch add a phrase to our verse to make sense of it: (Lxx) “which they spent in the Land of Egypt and in the Land of Canaan...”; the Sam. Pent. reads “And the sojourn of the sons of Israel and their fathers in the Land of Canaan and the Land of Egypt ...” Josephus (*Antiq.* II, 15.2) taught: “They left Egypt 430 years after our patriarch, Abraham, had come to Canaan, while Jacob’s settlement there took place 215 years later.” He thus divided the number 430 into two equal parts. Most modern commentators have either considered the notice in our text to be erroneous, or have opted to understand it in line with the Lxx, taking the 430 years to include all of the sojourning of Abraham and his descendents, both in the Land of Canaan and in the Land of Egypt. The explanation is given that the Masoretic text only included “Egypt” at this point because it is the end and final location of Israel’s sojourning. Here is a problem of chronology that, like many similar problems, has no simple solution. We must continue to seek to understand the text more clearly, for surely the answer lies therein.

A fourth question that comes to us regards the stipulations for who can and cannot eat of the Pesach sacrifice (vv. 43-49). The following are stated categorically: **1**) a נֹכְרִי, *neichar*, cannot eat of the Pesach sacrifice. This word means “foreign” or “foreigner” and is often connected with foreign gods (cf. Gen 35:2; Deut 32:12) and foreign altars (2Chron 14:2). We may presume that its use here denotes a foreigner who is still an idolator and has not come to confess the God of Israel as the only and true God. **2**) a purchased slave, עֶבֶד, *‘eved*, once he has been circumcised (indicating he had attached himself to the God of Israel and was thus a member of Israel’s covenant) is permitted to eat the Pesach sacrifice. **3**) the תּוֹשָׁב, *toshav* and the שָׂכִיר, *sachir* may not eat of the Pesach sacrifice. While תּוֹשָׁב (“one who dwells”) can be equated with the גֵּר, *ger* (“sojourner”), the two words are sometimes also distinct (cf. Num 35:15). It seems that in contexts where תּוֹשָׁב is distinct from גֵּר, then תּוֹשָׁב is someone just passing through the region, and may have stopped for lodging or for a short stay. That this word is paralleled by שָׂכִיר, “laborer, hired worker” also shows that these words can designate non-permanent residents—those passing through who had not joined themselves to Israel via a belief in Israel’s God.

Here we have proof that from the Torah’s perspective circumcision does not change a person’s

ethnic status. The circumcised servant is singled out necessarily as qualified to eat the Pesach. If his circumcision had granted him the ethnic status of a Jew, there would have been no need for this statement. Yet it should equally be emphasized that the circumcised slave has the same rights and privileges as the native born Jew in all matters relating to life and worship. “The same law shall apply to the native as to the stranger who sojourns among you” (v. 49). Thus from the very formation of the nation (via the Exodus through which HaShem redeemed Israel for Himself) the non-Jewish resident is viewed as the first fruits of the promise given to Abraham, “in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.” The issue was not one of a change of ethnicity but a common bond in the life of faith—faith in the God of Israel and in His promises, all of which ultimately center upon the Messiah.