

**Exegetical Notes, Exodus 13:1-16**  
**“The Firstborn of Israel”**

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**Exodus 13:1-16**

**Verse 1**

*YHWH said to Moses, “Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to me, whether man or animal.”*

- Through Moses, God commanded that the people of Israel set aside every firstborn male, human and animal, as belonging to him.
- The word “consecrate” means to be set aside for some special use. In this case, that use will be determined by God. They are to be set aside for God’s usage.

**Verse 2-4**

*Then Moses said to the people, “Commemorate this day, the day you came out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery, because YHWH brought you out of it with a mighty hand. Eat nothing containing yeast. Today, in the month of Abib, you are leaving.”*

- These events occur on the day after the Passover. It is now the day that the Israelites depart Egypt. They are to commemorate this day by feasting but they are to eat nothing that contains yeast.

**Verse 5-6**

*“When YHWH brings you into the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Hivites, and Jebusites – the land he swore to your forefathers to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey -- you are to observe this ceremony in this month: For seven days eat bread made without yeast and on the seventh day hold a festival to YHWH”.*

- YHWH is the creator of all the earth. As the creator of it, all of it belongs to him by right of creation. He made it, so it is his.
- Before it belonged to Israel, the land that God promised to Abraham and to his descendants was occupied by the nations listed above.

These nation groups were not picked by God to enjoy special status. Israel was. Therefore, God chose to give them the land that was his to give even though it was occupied by other nations.

- When Israel receives the gift of God, the land, she is to keep the Passover for seven days in accordance with all of the instructions of Moses.

#### **Verse 7**

***“Eat unleavened bread during those seven days; nothing with yeast in it is to be seen among you, nor shall any yeast be seen anywhere within your borders.”***

- Sometimes Passover is known as The Feast of Unleavened Bread because of the strict prohibition against eating anything containing yeast/leaven during this celebration. In later times yeast became associated with sin because of the way it permeated and affected the dough, much as sin does an indulgent life. However, as relates to the Passover it is a remembrance of the way God moved at the end, in haste, to bring Israel out of Egypt. God moved so quickly that there was not time for the bread dough to rise. The not using of yeast in the dough was designed to be extraordinary. Commonly, yeast was used, but not during Passover. It would cause people to ask “why,” and thus become a way of remembering what YHWH had done. .
- Even today, good Jews observe this prohibition during Passover and will cleanse their houses of all yeast and yeast containing products before the Passover begins.

#### **Verse 8**

***“On that day tell your son, ‘I do this because of what YHWH did for me when I came out of Egypt.’”***

- Clearly the unleavened bread is designed to break the normal household routine so as to cause people to question. It offers the opportunity to explain the story of God’s intervention into history to save Israel. Therefore, the unleavened bread becomes a teaching point.

#### **Verse 9-10**

***“This observance will be for you like a sign on your hand and a reminder on your forehead that the law of YHWH is to be on your lips. For YHWH brought you out of Egypt with his mighty hand. You must keep this ordinance at the appointed time year after year.”***

- A sign on your hand is a mark that would be clearly visible to you as you went about your daily routine. A sign on your forehead is a mark that would clearly be seen by others as you went about your daily routine. It is to be clear to everyone who observes the Jews keeping the Passover that they do so in obedience to God's command. They do so "because his law is on their lips."
- In later times Jews began to wear tiny leather boxes called phylacteries on their foreheads and their left arms. In these boxes were tiny scrolls that contained portions of God's law. Certain very conservative Jews still wear these boxes today and many rabbis still wear them during worship. This custom grew out of this passage. It became a literal expression of this figurative instruction.
- The reason that all Jews will observe the Passover is because "God delivered them with a mighty hand." Obedience in this is an expression of gratitude to YHWH for his action on their behalf.

### **Verse 11-13**

***"After YHWH brings you into the land of the Canaanites and gives it to you, as he promised on oath to you and your forefathers, you are to give over to YHWH the first offspring of every womb. All the firstborn males of your livestock belong to YHWH. Redeem with a lamb every firstborn donkey, but if you do not redeem it, break its neck. Redeem every firstborn among your sons."***

- In delivering Israel from Egypt, God had claimed the firstborn of all Egypt. In this way he had shown that all the firstborn in Egypt were held in his hand and belonged to him. Now, he required the same acknowledgement from Israel. They were to honor YHWH's sovereign rule over them by surrendering every firstborn male to him. This included their sons as well as all of their livestock. The firstborn from every womb was to be given to God.
- This practice was to begin when Israel entered the land God had promised to give to them.
- Donkeys were important animals as they were the backbone of the ancient transportation system. But they are listed among the "unclean" animals in the Law of Moses. Therefore, they cannot be offered to God, yet are important in the general scheme of things. God allowed a choice in this case. The Jews could kill the firstborn donkey or redeem it, literally buy it back from God, by giving YHWH a lamb instead of the donkey. Male children can also be redeemed in this way.

- To redeem something means to buy it back at a price. This act of buying back their sons becomes a picture of what God did for us on Calvary. He bought us back from sin and death by paying a high price, the life of his only begotten son, Jesus Christ. He gave his firstborn son to redeem us!

#### **Verse 14-16**

***“In days to come, when your son asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ say to him, ‘With a mighty hand YHWH brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, YHWH killed every firstborn in Egypt, both man and animal. This is why I sacrifice to YHWH the first male offspring of every womb and redeem each of my firstborn sons.’ And it will be like a sign on your hand and a symbol on your forehead that YHWH brought us out of Egypt with his mighty hand.”***

- Again the dedication/redemption of the firstborn is to be a teaching moment. When someone, specifically a child in the family, asks why such a thing is done, the parent is to explain how God moved in a mighty way to redeem Israel. Thus, God’s act on behalf of Israel will be remembered in each new generation and commemorated by the same ritual or sign.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *The Firstborn of Israel*. They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by Dr. Jensen and *Cornerstone Fellowship*.)