

# UNIT 24

## THE LAW OF THE FIRSTBORN (Exodus 13:1-16)

### INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

#### Text and Textual Notes

**13:1** Yahweh spoke<sup>2</sup> to Moses, saying, **13:2** “Sanctify<sup>3</sup> to me every firstborn male, whatever opens<sup>4</sup> every womb among the Israelites, whether man or animal, is mine.”<sup>5</sup>

**13:3** And Moses said to the people, “Remember<sup>6</sup> this day in which you came out

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<sup>1</sup> This section seems a little confusing at first glance: verses 1 and 2 call for the dedication of the first born, and then verses 3-10 instruct the ritual of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and then verses 11-16 returns to the firstborn. Jacob explains that this chapter is a sermon; Moses summarizes the point, and then explains the rulings that go along with it (p. 360). So the first two verses form the basis of the chapter, calling for the redeemed (firstborn) to be sanctified to Him. The second portion stresses that God requires the redeemed to remember their redemption by purifying themselves (3-10). The third section (11-16) introduces the theme of dedication to Yahweh. The point the chapter seems to be making is that in view of God’s mighty redemption, the redeemed (represented by the firstborn) must be set apart to Yahweh’s service.

<sup>2</sup> Literally, “and Yahweh spoke”

<sup>3</sup> The verb “sanctify” is the *piel* imperative of *qadash*. In the *qal* it means “be holy, be set apart, be distinct,” and in this stem “sanctify, set apart.” Here is the general principle of the chapter--the firstborn were sacred to God, and must be set apart for His use.

<sup>4</sup> The word *peter* means “that which opens”; in this construction it literally says “that which opens every womb,” which means “the first offspring of every womb.”

<sup>5</sup> The preposition here expresses possession; the construction is simply “it [is] to me.”

<sup>6</sup> The form is the infinitive absolute of *zakar*, “remember.” The use of this form in place of the imperative (also found in the Decalogue with the Sabbath Day instruction) stresses the basic meaning of the root word, everything involved with remembering (emphatic imperative, according to GKC, par 113 bb). The verb usually implies that there will be proper action based on what was remembered.

There is a pattern in the arrangement of this section. There is first the command to keep the feast based on the mighty deliverance, and then the reminder of the deliverance and the command to keep the

from Egypt, from the house of bondage,<sup>7</sup> for with a mighty hand Yahweh brought you out of there<sup>8</sup>--and no leavened bread may be eaten.<sup>9</sup> **13:4** On this day,<sup>10</sup> in the month of Abib,<sup>11</sup> you are coming out.<sup>12</sup>

**13:5** When<sup>13</sup> Yahweh brings you to the land of the Canaanite, and the Hittite, and the Amorite, and the Hivite, and the Jebusite, which He swore to your fathers to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey,<sup>14</sup> then you shall keep<sup>15</sup> this service<sup>16</sup> in this month. **13:6** For seven days<sup>17</sup> you shall eat<sup>18</sup> unleavened bread; and on the

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feast (9,10). “With a mighty hand” occurs in verses 3, 9, 14, 16. Also, the explanation to the son is found in verses 8 and 14. The emphasis “between your eyes” ends both halves, verses 9, 10 and 16.

<sup>7</sup> The expression is literally “from a house of slaves.” “House” is obviously not meant to be literal; it indicates the location of the slavery, a land of slaves, as if they were in a slave house. Egypt is also called an “iron smelting furnace” (Deut. 4:20, et al).

<sup>8</sup> Literally, “from this” [place]

<sup>9</sup> The verb is the *niphal* imperfect; it could be rendered “shall not be eaten” in the nuance of the instruction or injunction category, but permission fits this sermonic presentation very well--nothing with leaven may be eaten.

<sup>10</sup> *hayyom* is literally “the day, today, this day.” In this sentence it functions as an adverbial accusative explaining when the event took place.

<sup>11</sup> This appears to be an old name for the month, meaning something like “[month of ] fresh young ears” (Lv. 2:14 [Heb]) (Driver, p. 106). Jacob explains that these names were not precise designations, but general seasons based on the lunar year in the agricultural setting (p. 364).

<sup>12</sup> The form is the active participle, functioning verbally.

<sup>13</sup> Literally, “and it shall be when”

<sup>14</sup> See on 3:8.

<sup>15</sup> The verb is *w<sup>e</sup>abadta*, the *qal* perfect with a *waw* consecutive. It is the equivalent of the imperfect tense of instruction or injunction; it forms the main point after the temporal clause--“when Yahweh brings you out . . . then you shall serve . . . .”

<sup>16</sup> The object is the cognate accusative for emphasis on the meaning of the service--“you shall serve this service.” Kaiser notes how this noun was translated “slavery” and “work” in the book, but service or ceremony for Yahweh. Israel was saved from slavery into service for God as remembered by this ceremony (p. 383).

<sup>17</sup> Literally, “seven days”

<sup>18</sup> The imperfect tense functions with the nuance of instruction or injunction. It could also be given an obligatory nuance: “you must eat” or “you are to eat.” Some versions have simply made it an imperative.

seventh day there is to be<sup>19</sup> a festival to Yahweh. **13:7** Unleavened bread shall be eaten<sup>20</sup> for seven days;<sup>21</sup> no leavened bread shall be seen<sup>22</sup> by you, neither shall leaven be seen by you within any of your borders.

**13:8** And you shall tell your son<sup>23</sup> on that day,<sup>24</sup> ‘It is<sup>25</sup> because of what<sup>26</sup> Yahweh did for me when I came out of Egypt.’ **13:9**<sup>27</sup> And it<sup>28</sup> will be for a sign for you upon your hand, and for a memorial between your eyes,<sup>29</sup> that the law of Yahweh

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<sup>19</sup> “there is to be” added

<sup>20</sup> The imperfect is with the nuance of instruction or injunction again; but it could also be given an obligatory nuance.

<sup>21</sup> The construction again is the adverbial accusative of time, answering how long the routine should be followed (see GKC, par. 118k).

<sup>22</sup> Or, “visible to you” (Jacob, p. 366)

<sup>23</sup> The form is the *hiphil* perfect with the *waw* consecutive, carrying the sequence forward: “and you shall declare to your son.”

A very important part of the teaching here is the manner in which the memory of the deliverance will be retained in Israel--they were to teach their children the reasons for the Feast, as a binding law forever. This will remind the nation of its duties to Yahweh in gratitude for the great deliverance.

<sup>24</sup> The text has “saying”

<sup>25</sup> “it is” supplied

<sup>26</sup> The text uses *zeh*, which Gesenius classifies as the use of the pronoun to introduce a relative clause after the preposition (138h)--but he thinks the form is corrupt. Childs, however, sees no reason to posit a corruption with this form (p. 184).

<sup>27</sup> This passage has, of course, been taken literally by many devout Jews, and portions of the text have been encased in *t'philin* and bound on the arm and forehead. Jacob, weighing the pros and cons of the literal or the figurative meaning, makes an interesting turn in the application. He says that those who took it literally should not be looked down upon for their symbolic work. In many cases, he continues, it is that the spirit kills and the letter makes alive--because people who argue against a literal usage do so to excuse lack of action. This is a rather interesting twist in the discussion (p. 368). The point of the teaching was obviously meant to keep the Law of Yahweh in the mind of the people, to remind them of their duties.

<sup>28</sup> i.e., this ceremony

<sup>29</sup> That these festivals and consecrations were to be signs and memorials is akin to the expressions used in the Book of Proverbs (3:3, “bind them around your neck . . . write them on your heart”). The people were to use the festivals as outward and visible tokens to remind them to obey what the Law required.

may be<sup>30</sup> in your mouth,<sup>31</sup> for<sup>32</sup> with a mighty hand Yahweh brought you out of Egypt. **13:10** So you shall keep<sup>33</sup> this ordinance at its appointed time from year to year.<sup>34</sup>

**13:11** When Yahweh brings you<sup>35</sup> into the land of the Canaanites,<sup>36</sup> as He swore to you and to your fathers, and shall give it<sup>37</sup> to you, **13:12** then you shall give over<sup>38</sup> to Yahweh all that opens the womb,<sup>39</sup> and every firstling<sup>40</sup> of beasts that you

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<sup>30</sup> The purpose of using this ceremony as a sign and a memorial is that the Law might be in their mouth. The imperfect tense, then, receives the classification of final imperfect in the purpose clause.

<sup>31</sup> “Mouth” is a metonymy of cause; the point is that they might be ever talking about the Law as their guide as they go about their duties (see Deut. 6:7; 11:19; Josh. 1:8).

<sup>32</sup> This causal clause gives the reason for what has just been instructed. Because Yahweh delivered them from bondage, He has the strongest claims on their life.

<sup>33</sup> The form is the perfect tense with the *waw* consecutive, functioning as the equivalent of an imperfect of instruction or injunction.

<sup>34</sup> Or, “every year,” or “year after year”

<sup>35</sup> Literally, “and it shall be when Yahweh brings (shall bring) you”

<sup>36</sup> The name “the Canaanite” (and so collective for Canaanites) is occasionally used to summarize all the cliché-list of Canaanitish tribes that lived in the land.

<sup>37</sup> The verb *u-n<sup>e</sup>tanah* is the *qal* perfect with the *waw* consecutive; this is in sequence to the preceding verb, and forms part of the protosis, the temporal clause. The main clause is the instruction in the next verse.

<sup>38</sup> The unusual choice of words in this passage reflects the connection with the deliverance of the first born in the exodus when the angel passed over the Israelites. Here the Law said, “you shall cause to pass over (*w<sup>e</sup>ha’abarta*) to Yahweh . . .” The *hiphil* perfect with the *waw* provides the main clause after the temporal clauses. Yahweh here claimed the firstborn as His own. The remarkable thing about this is that Yahweh did not keep the firstborn that was dedicated to Him, but allowed the child to be redeemed by his father. It was an acknowledgment that the life of the child belonged to God as the one redeemed from death, and that the child represented the family. Thus, it all referred to the dedication of the redeemed to Him.

The old line liberal theologians assumed that child sacrifice lay behind this text in the earlier days, but that the priests and prophets removed those themes. Apart from the fact that there is absolutely no evidence for anything like that, the Law forbade child sacrifice, and always used child sacrifice as the sample of what not to do in conformity with the pagans (Deut. 12:31). Besides, how absurd would it be for Yahweh to redeem the first born from death and then ask Israel to kill them. See further Jacobs, p. 371.

<sup>39</sup> i.e., the firstborn from every womb

<sup>40</sup> The noun *sheger* is related to the verb “drop, cast”; it refers to a newly born animal that is

have<sup>41</sup>--the males shall be Yahweh's.<sup>42</sup> **13:13** And everything that opens (the womb)<sup>43</sup> of the ass you shall redeem<sup>44</sup> with a lamb,<sup>45</sup> and if you do not redeem it, then you must break its neck;<sup>46</sup> and every firstborn of<sup>47</sup> your sons you shall redeem. **13:14**<sup>48</sup> And when your son asks you<sup>49</sup> in time to come,<sup>50</sup> saying, 'What is this?'<sup>51</sup> then you shall say to him, 'With a mighty hand<sup>52</sup> Yahweh brought us out from Egypt, from the land of bondage.'<sup>53</sup> **13:15** And when Pharaoh stubbornly

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dropped or cast from the womb. The expression then reads, "and all that first opens [the womb], the casting of beasts."

<sup>41</sup> The preposition expresses possession: "which is to you" means "which you have."

<sup>42</sup> The text simply has "the males to Yahweh." It indicates that Yahweh must have them, or they belong to Yahweh.

<sup>43</sup> Meaning, the firstling"

<sup>44</sup> *tiphdeh*, the instructional imperfect, refers to the idea of redemption by paying a cost. This word is used regularly of redeeming a person, or an animal, from death or servitude (Driver, p. 109).

<sup>45</sup> See 13:3.

<sup>46</sup> The conditional clause uses an imperfect tense; this is followed by a perfect tense with the *waw* consecutive providing the obligation or instruction. The owner might not redeem the ass, but if he did not, he could not keep it, he had to kill it (so either a lamb for it, or the ass itself). But the ass could not be killed by shedding blood because that would make it a sacrifice, and that was not possible with this kind of animal. See G. Brin, "The Firstling of Unclean Animals," *JQR* 68 (1977):1-15.

<sup>47</sup> The text has "every firstborn of man among your sons." The addition of "man" is clearly meant to distinguish this instruction from animals. One was to sacrifice the firstborn animals to Yahweh; but the children were to be redeemed by their fathers. The redemption price varied from time to time, but seemed to have been standardized to five shekels (Num. 18:15).

<sup>48</sup> As with verse 8, the Law now requires that the children be instructed on the meaning of this observance. It is a memorial of the deliverance from bondage and the killing of the firstborn.

<sup>49</sup> Literally, "and it shall be when your son shall ask you"

<sup>50</sup> Literally, "tomorrow"

<sup>51</sup> The question is cryptic; it simply says "what is this?" but certainly refers to the custom just mentioned. It means, "What does this mean?" or "Why do we do this?"

<sup>52</sup> The expression is "with strength of hand," making "hand" the genitive of specification. In translation "strength" becomes the modifier, because "hand" specifies where the strength was. But of course the whole expression is anthropomorphic for the power of God.

<sup>53</sup> Literally, "house of slaves"

refused<sup>54</sup> to release us, then Yahweh slew all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of people even to the firstborn of animals.<sup>55</sup> That is why I am sacrificing<sup>56</sup> to Yahweh every male that opens the womb, but all the firstborn of my children I redeem.’ **13:16** And it will be for a sign upon your hand, and for frontlets<sup>57</sup> between your eyes, for with a mighty hand Yahweh brought us out of Egypt.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> The Hebrew text has “dealt hardly in letting us go” or made it hard to let us go” (see Driver, p. 110). The verb is the simple *hiphil* perfect *hiqshah*, “he made hard”; the infinitive construct “to release us” (*l’shall’ khenu*) could be taken expegetically, meaning “he made releasing us hard.” But the infinitive more likely gives the purpose or the result after the verb “hardened himself.” The verb is figurative for “be stubborn” or “stubbornly refuse.”

<sup>55</sup> The text uses “man” and “beast”

<sup>56</sup> The form is the active participle.

<sup>57</sup> The word is *totaphot*, “frontlets.” The etymology is uncertain, but the word denotes a sign or a mark placed on the forehead, like the frontlets which women wear (see Tractate *Shabbath* 6:1). The Gemara interprets it as a band that goes from ear to ear. In 2 Samuel 1:10 Targum it is an armlet worn by Saul (see Driver, p. 110). These bands about the head may have resembled the Egyptian practice of wearing as amulets “forms of words written on folds of papyrus tightly rolled up and sewn in linen” (Kaiser, p.384).

<sup>58</sup> The pattern of the passage now emerges more clearly; it concerns the grateful debt of the redeemed. In the first part eating the unleavened bread recalls the night of deliverance in Egypt, and calls for purity. In the second part the dedication of the firstborn was an acknowledgment of the deliverance of the firstborn from bondage. They were to remember the deliverance and choose purity; they were to remember the deliverance and choose dedication. The New Testament will also say, “You are not your own, for you were bought with a price, therefore, glorify God . . . .” Here too the truths of God’s great redemption must be learned well and retained well from generation to generation..

## EXPOSITORY DEVELOPMENT

This section is rather baffling because it at first appears to be jumbled. Verses 1 and 2 call for sanctifying the firstborn, verses 3-10 instructs the yearly ritual of the unleavened bread, but then verses 11-16 returns to the discussion of the firstborn. Probably verses 1 and 2 form the heading, and verses 3-16 the explanation. The passage stresses how God redeemed, for this is explained in verses 3 and 4, then in verses 8-10 to the son, and then again in verses 14-16 to the son. So we would have to word the idea with this as the basis:

*In view of God's mighty redemption,  
the redeemed must be separated from evil and set apart to the LORD's service.*

The development of the exposition would then break down this way:

### *I. God demands that the redeemed be sanctified (1, 2).*

First, God demands that the redeemed be sanctified to him (13:1, 2). Whether this is the heading or not, the grand theme is clear. *Qaddesh*, of course, must be studied closely, especially when man and animals are the objects. Every firstborn (the redeemed in the last plague) were to be God's. The same holds true of the NT--those specially redeemed God may claim for his special purposes.

### *II. God requires the redeemed to purify themselves (3-10).*

The second portion stresses that God requires his redeemed to remember their redemption by purifying themselves. This is the instruction of the Feast of Unleavened bread (see terminology above). What is interesting is that an inclusio brackets this section: command to keep the feast based on the mighty deliverance (v. 3), and then the reminder of the mighty deliverance and the command to keep the feast (vv. 9, 10). In fact, "with a mighty hand" occurs in verses 3, 9, 14, and 16. Also, the explanation to the son is repeated in verses 8 and 14. The time framework of the conquest is found in both verses 5 and 11. The pattern of the passage begins to emerge:

Call for sanctification (2)

Remember this day: no unleavened bread (3, 4)  
When you enter the land of promise (5)  
Eat unleavened bread as a feast (6, 7)  
Tell your sons--because of deliverance (8)  
Sign and memorial between your eyes (9, 10)  
When you enter the promised land (11)  
Set apart or redeem the firstborn (12, 13)  
Tell your sons--because of deliverance (14, 15)  
Token and frontlets between your eyes (16).

For a study of “the mighty hand,” you will have to return to the first part of the book and the use of the word. I would take time with it here, for the powerful deliverance gives God the right to demand compliance.

A very important part of this teaching is the manner of retaining the great deliverance in the memory of the nation (vv. 8, 9). They shall teach their children the reasons for the Feast, as a binding law to be a memorial of the deliverance.

### *III. God requires the dedication of the firstborn (11-16).*

The third section introduces a second major requirement of the redeemed, dedication to the LORD of the firstborn (vv. 11-16). What is interesting here is the verb is not the same as in verse 2; here it is *'abar* in the *Hiphil*, almost “give over.” The LORD claimed the firstborn, and the Israelite was to cause his firstborn to cross over to Him. The other notable thing is that the child was not retained by the LORD, but redeemed by the Father (*padah* is used for redeeming from death or servitude). So the requirement was for a costing dedication.

This is followed then by the instructions for passing on the explanation from generation to generation. Here a distinction is made: one sacrifices the firstborn animals to the LORD, but the children he redeems.

## **CONCLUSION**

I think that the main point of the passage must be the grateful debt of the redeemed. Eating the Feast of Unleavened Bread not only recalls the night of deliverance but instructs for purity. It is the general part of sanctification instructed in verse 2. Dedicating the firstborn was an acknowledgment of the redemption from bondage (Israel was God's firstborn [Ex. 4:22], so the selection was representative of the whole nation). The NT also will say, You are not your own, for you were

bought with a price, therefore glorify God . . . . Likewise, the truths of God's great redemption must be learned well and retained as the basis of all dedication and devotion.