

The Passover Sacrifice

Introduction

Why does the New Testament associate Jesus Christ with Passover?

Observations on the book of Exodus

Exodus introduces concepts that are barely mentioned in Genesis, if at all.

Concepts that are important in Genesis largely disappear in Exodus.

Yet, despite significant differences, there is a strong sense of continuity between Genesis and Exodus.

Using language that echoes the opening chapter of Genesis, the author of Exodus states: “the Israelites were exceedingly fruitful; they multiplied greatly, increased in numbers and became so numerous that the land was filled with them. (Exodus 1:7 NIV).

This brief statement recalls God’s instructions in Genesis 1: “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it” (Genesis 1:28 NIV).

We encounter in Exodus 1 opposition to God’s purposes in the form of an Egyptian king who is determined to prevent the Israelites from growing numerically and filling the land.

The book of Exodus proceeds to describe how God rescues the Israelites from slavery, establishes a covenant relationship with them, and comes to dwell in their midst on earth.

Exodus provides a notable paradigm for understanding how the divine-human relationship is restored following the rupture that occurs in the Garden of Eden.

The motif of knowing God permeates the Exodus narrative in numerous ways.

The signs and wonders episodes are rich in statements about God making himself known to both Israelites and Egyptians (Exod. 6:3–7; 7:5, 17; 8:10[6], 22[18]; 9:14, 16, 29; 10:1–2; 11:7).

The motif of knowing God lies at the heart of the covenant or friendship treaty made at Mount Sinai.

From beginning to end God takes the initiative in making himself known through both word and action.

Exodus provides a paradigm of salvation

God’s rescue of the Israelites from bondage in Egypt is viewed as ‘the foundational salvific event of the Old Testament.’¹

¹B. D. Estelle, *Echoes of Exodus: Tracing a Biblical Motif* (Downer's Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2018), 184.

Chris Wright describes the exodus as the 'primary model of redemption in the Old Testament (primary both chronologically and theologically).'²

At the heart of this paradigm of salvation stands the Passover.

Passover as a sanctification ritual

As a result of Passover, the firstborn males are endowed with a level of holiness that distinguishes them from other Israelites, and, importantly, God states that they now belong to him.

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Behold, I have taken the Levites from among the people of Israel instead of every firstborn who opens the womb among the people of Israel. The Levites shall be mine, for all the firstborn are mine. On the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I consecrated for my own all the firstborn in Israel, both of man and of beast. They shall be mine: I am the LORD." (Num. 3:11-13 ESV)

On the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt I consecrated them (the Israelite firstborn males) for myself, and I have taken the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the people of Israel. (Num. 8:17b-18a ESV)

In substituting the Levites for the firstborn males, God claims that the firstborn belonged to him because they were made holy when he struck down the Egyptian firstborn.

A reference to sanctification comes in Exodus 13:1:

¹ The Lord said to Moses, ² "Consecrate to me (קִדְּשׁוּ-לִי) [or "treat as holy to me"] every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to me, whether human or animal." (Exodus 13:1-2 NIV)

God's instruction to Moses supports the idea that at the heart of Passover is the sanctification of the firstborn males.

Noteworthy parallels exist between the Passover ritual in Exodus 12 and the process by which the Aaronic priests are sanctified (see Exod. 29:1-37 and Lev. 8:1-36).

How are the firstborn males made holy?

An unusual feature of the Passover account in Exodus 12 is the death threat that is issued against the firstborn Israelite males.

In the light of humanity's alienation from God, deliverance from death is an essential element in the process of reconciliation.

Although Exodus 12 does not specifically mention the concept of a ransom, the idea of a substitute death appears in Exodus 13:13-15.

² C. J. H. Wright, "Reading the Old Testament Missionally," in *Reading the Bible Missionally*, ed. M. W. Goheen, *The Gospel and Our Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 116.

Verse 13 uses the Hebrew verb *pādāh* to denote the process of paying a ransom (cf. Exod. 34:20).

In addition to dying in the place of the firstborn Israelite males, the sacrificial animals contribute in two other ways to Passover as a sanctification ritual.

Firstly, the blood of the animals is sprinkled on the door frames of the Israelite houses (Exod. 12:7, 22).

Viewed as part of a sanctification ritual, it seems likely that the blood's function is to ritually cleanse those within the house.

Secondly, God gives detailed instructions regarding the cooking of the sacrificial meat and its subsequent consumption by the Israelites (Exodus 12:8-10).

The combination of sacrificial meat and unleavened bread reappears in the instructions for the consecration of the Aaronic priests in Exodus 29.

The holy meat sanctifies those who eat it.

While all of the Israelites shared in the meal, possibly only the firstborn males were considered to be fully sanctified because they alone were ransomed from death.

The Exodus story reveals a process of salvation that involves being ransomed from death through a substitute sacrifice, being purified using sacrificial blood to remove the defilement of sin, and being consecrated from a common to holy status by imbibing holy food.

In his monograph, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, Jay Sklar argues that the Hebrew verb "to atone" *kipper* denotes "ransom-purification."

Such atonement "rescues the sinful and impure from the wrath of the Lord (ransom), and cleanses their sin and impurity (purification)."³

The Passover ritual involves both "ransom" and "purification," suggesting that it was designed to atone for sin.

Redemption and covenant

The story of God's rescue of the Israelites extends beyond Passover.

"I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment." (Exodus 6:6 NIV)

³ J. Sklar, *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries 3; Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2013), 53. Cf. J. Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement: The Priestly Conceptions* (Hebrew Bible Monographs 2; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005), 44-79; See also, T. D. Alexander, "Pentateuch," in *T&T Clark Companion to Atonement*, ed. A. Johnston (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 677-84.

Recalling God's earlier promise that he would redeem the people with an outstretched arm, the people sing: 'You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed; you have guided them by your strength to your holy abode' (Exod. 15:13 ESV).

In both Exodus 6:6 and 15:13 the Hebrew verb used to denote redemption is *לָאָה* *gā'al*, a term associated with the concept of a kinsman redeemer.

In reading Exodus, it is helpful to distinguish between the use of the verbs *לָאָה* *gā'al* "to redeem" and *פָּדָה* *pādâ* "to ransom."

Redemption from evil powers is an important element of the Exodus story.

Exodus includes one further important step in restoring harmony with God; this concerns the making of a covenant or friendship treaty between God and the Israelites at Mount Sinai.

Passover reassessed

Passover as a sanctification ritual involves the concepts of ransom from death, cleansing from the defilement of sin and being made holy.

In 1925 George Buchanan Gray wrote, "The Paschal victim was not a sin-offering or regarded as a means of expiating or removing sin."⁴

Gray's analysis of Passover has gained considerable traction, but his proposal fails to do justice to how Passover is portrayed in the book of Exodus.

Since Passover makes holy the firstborn Israelite males, it should be understood as addressing the removal of sin.

This calls for a fresh appraisal of how the New Testament views Jesus Christ as the foremost Passover sacrifice.

Jesus as the Passover sacrifice

The New Testament writers associate the death of Jesus Christ with Passover.

'For Christ, our Passover, has been sacrificed' (1 Cor. 5:7; ESV).

Elsewhere, the apostle Peter describes Jesus Christ as 'a lamb without blemish or defect' (1 Pet. 1:19 NIV).

Passover is especially prevalent in John's Gospel.

"The actual expression 'the Passover' (τὸ πάσχα) is found on ten occasions (2.13, 23, 6.4, 11.55 (twice), 12.1, 13.1, 18.28, 39, 19.14), while the vaguer expression 'feast' (ἑορτή) used with reference to the Passover is found on another nine occasions (2.23, 4.45 (twice), 6.4, 11.46, 12.12, 20, 13.1, 29)."⁵

⁴ G. B. Gray, *Sacrifice in the Old Testament: Its Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), 397.

⁵ J. K. Howard, "Passover and Eucharist in the Fourth Gospel," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 20 (1967) 331.

Compared to the Synoptic Gospels, John's Gospel references three annual Passover celebrations (John 2:13; 6:4; 11:55).

Affirming Jesus Christ as the source of eternal life, John's Gospel places the crucifixion of Jesus at the time of the Passover sacrifice.

John observes that Jesus' bones, like those of the Passover sacrifice, were not broken (John 19:31–37; cf. Exod. 12:46; Num. 9:12).

Despite the reservations of many New Testament scholars, there is no solid reason to reject the idea that John the Baptist refers to a Passover lamb when he speaks of Jesus Christ being the 'Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29; cf. 1:36).

Passover may also be in view when Jesus speaks about eating his flesh and drinking his blood (John 6:53–58).

In a gospel that emphasises how the death of Jesus Christ as a substitute for others brings eternal life, Passover offers a fitting paradigm to explain what Christ does in order to bring people into a harmonious relationship with God.

The concept of ransom is frequently associated with Jesus Christ (Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45; Luke 1:68; 2:38; 21:28; 24:18; Rom. 3:24; 8:23; 1 Cor. 1:30; Eph. 1:7, 14; Col. 1:14; 1 Tim. 2:6, 14; Heb. 9:12, 15).

The idea that Jesus's followers have been sanctified by his sacrificial death may be rooted in Passover (e.g., Heb. 2:11; 10:10; 13:12).

The apostle Paul regularly speaks of Jesus's followers being 'holy ones' or 'saints' (e.g., Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:2).⁶

⁶See the fuller discussion in D. Peterson, *Possessed by God: A New Testament Theology of Sanctification and Holiness* (Leicester: Apollos, 1995).