



Easter and Passover

Old Testament Origins

Passover and Easter are deeply interwoven holidays, both biblically and in practice since. Passover, which originated first, is different today than it was when the festival began. For example, there are references to potentially two separate festivals that come together in the Passover meal. Biblically speaking, Passover originated in the Exodus story (chapter 12:1-13), in which Jews avoided the plague of the firstborn by marking their doorposts with the blood of a lamb, whose body was then eaten according to specific parameters with unleavened bread. The prohibition against leavened bread is explained, beginning in verse 14 and continuing through verse 20. Dr. Joel Baden sees the festival of unleavened bread as agriculturally-based and separate from the Passover meal. Though they are next to each other in the chapter, they read as historically distinct (yet overlapping) issues.

From a literary standpoint, the Passover has a narrative and a history attached to it. Of course, that history is debatable, but the cultural memory of this narrative history is of the utmost importance. The Hebrew word for Passover, *pesach*, means something akin to “protect.” An annual sacrifice of protection and thanksgiving could be at the root of the Passover tradition, much like the agrarian background of the feast of unleavened bread. Neither the unleavened bread nor the sacrifice outlined in chapter 12 are likely to have come purely out of the Passover narrative or event.

Though Exodus 12 is the first place we encounter Passover in the Bible, Exodus 23 mentions the feast of unleavened bread among other festivals, and Deuteronomy is the first book to connect the two traditions. Unleavened bread becomes a necessity in the tradition of the Exodus story, as the fleeing people would need food to eat quickly—and unleavened bread is quicker to make and less energy-intensive than leavened bread (Abraham and Sarah likewise make unleavened bread for unanticipated guests). Yet the connection between the sacrificial lamb and the leavening of bread bridges the gap between the cultic ritual at the temple and the domestic daily life of the kitchen, making the Passover festival we think of today both a community festival occurring in the public sphere and a family holiday with implications in the private sphere.

In the next session, we will be discussing how the Passover fits into the New Testament.

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