

Views from the Pews - The initiation of the Passover

The Book of Exodus describes how the Hebrews left Egypt some time in the 13th century BC, although the written version dates from between 9th and 5th centuries BC. According to Bernhard Anderson, in *The Living World of the Old Testament*, we can assume that the oral traditions of Israel have preserved vivid recollections of historic events of that time. All the same, careful biblical study can also identify the differences that have arisen during the long processes of transmission, in literary style, editing and integration of at least two separate sources (known to scholars as J and P). The main value of such studies is that they teach us to appreciate far more deeply how the story in its present form is the end result of a long history, reaching back to when the oral traditions were told and retold around the campfires.

Even before Moses, says Anderson, nomadic shepherds would observe a festival in springtime, just before setting out to take their flocks to summer pastures. During this nocturnal celebration it was customary for families to sacrifice a young animal and eat the meat in their tents, along with unleavened bread and desert herbs. Their original purpose was to secure the welfare and fertility of the flocks, and to drive away evil spirits. The blood of the animal was smeared on the tents to ward off the Destroyer (specifically mentioned in 12:23, sometimes translated as 'the angel of death') who attacked people and animals.

Over time, this custom of shepherds leaving for summer pastures was reinterpreted to refer to the Hebrews departing for a new land. Yahweh himself became 'the Destroyer' who spared the blood-marked Hebrew houses by 'passing over' them on the way to smiting the Egyptian first-born. When the Israelites settled in Canaan, the nomadic Passover rite became associated with the Feast of Unleavened Bread, an agricultural festival celebrating the barley harvest. That Feast itself remembers the time when the Hebrews left Egypt in a hurry, carrying their dough 'before it was leavened, in their kneading bowls bound up in their mantles on their shoulders' (Ex. 12:34). The tradition of a hasty departure is explained to children of every generation of faithful Jews for centuries ever since. Truly, Israel's ancient faith is based on the experience of real events, plus long, long meditation on the work of God.

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