

## Introduction to Tractate Pesahim

In connection with Tractate *Pesahim*, concerning the Passover festival, Scripture deals with these topics in order:

- (1) setting aside and killing a lamb for the Passover (Exo. 12: 1-13);
- (2) unleavened bread and the taboo against leaven and what is leavened, with the festival of unleavened bread (Exo. 12:14–20); and
- (3) the lamb again (Exo. 12:21–28). Deu. 16: 1–8 is explicit that the sacrifice of the Passover lamb is to take place only in Jerusalem.

The tractate deals with these topics:

- I. Preparation for Passover
  - A. Removal of leaven
  - B. Removal and avoidance of that which is fermented
  - C. Other requirements for the fourteenth of Nisan
- II. The Passover offering: Slaying and eating it
  - A. General rules on slaughtering the lamb designated as the Passover offering
  - B. The special problems of the Sabbath
  - C. Roasting and eating the Passover offering
  - D. Uncleaness and the Passover offering
  - E. Not breaking the bone of the Passover offering
  - F. Eating the offering in a group other than the natural family
  - G. Dealing with unclean and other persons in whose behalf the Passover is not to be slaughtered
  - H. The second Passover
    - I. The animal designated for a Passover that is lost, or for which a substitute is designated
- III. The Passover seder: General rules on slaughtering the lamb designated as the Passover offering

Tractate *Pesahim* presents the topics in logical order. The first deals with the prohibition of leaven and other preparations for the festival, and the second deals with offering the Passover sacrifice, then roasting and eating it. The law thus focuses upon the cult, even though it does so in connection with a rite that is carried out in the home. A third rather perfunctory section takes up the rite of the seder, the Passover meal itself. The law in *Pesahim* takes for granted knowledge of the existence of a Passover ritual such as is contained in the haggadah. The tractate provides no rules for conduct on the festival days, for these occur at tractates *Mo'ed Qatan* and *Besah* and cover all festival days equally. The topical program of the law addresses only two subjects, leaven and its removal, and the Passover offering. It moves, therefore, from household to Temple, with the brief appendix of the third section reverting to activities in the household. Removing leaven

from the household aligns it with the Temple, where baked products served to God do not contain leaven (or sweetening). Requiring the consumption of the Passover offering's meat at home introduces considerations of cultic cleanness. The result is that on Passover the Israelite household, insofar as possible, is treated as analogous to the Temple. Scripture has supplied the facts. *Pesahim* has expanded upon them and drawn out what is implicit in them.

The law in *Pesahim* for the seder presupposes not much more than is spelled out: a festive meal with much wine, a rite of eating not only the sacrificial meat but appropriate herbs, as Scripture requires, and a narrative or haggadah focused upon the rites of eating the bitter herbs and roasted meat. The meal further encompasses a recitation of the Hallel Psalms, but at this stage the law in *Pesahim* does not attend to the narrative of the Exodus such as occupies the Passover haggadah as it is practiced today. If we were to reconstruct the Passover haggadah from the law before us, we should find ourselves missing most of what is now at the heart of the rite.