

Leviticus 23: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Leviticus chapter 23 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, These are the appointed feasts of the Lord that you shall proclaim as holy convocations.

They are my appointed feasts. Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation. You shall do no work.

It is a Sabbath to the Lord in all your dwelling places. These are the appointed feasts of the Lord, the holy convocations, which you shall proclaim at the time appointed for them.

In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month at twilight, is the Lord's Passover, and on the fifteenth day of the same month is the feast of unleavened bread to the Lord.

For seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall have a holy convocation. You shall not do any ordinary work. But you shall present a food offering to the Lord for seven days.

[1 : 0 0] On the seventh day is a holy convocation. You shall not do any ordinary work. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you come into the land that I give you and reap its harvest, you shall bring the sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest to the priest.

And he shall wave the sheaf before the Lord, so that you may be accepted. On the day after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it. And on the day when you waved the sheaf, you shall offer a male lamb a year old without blemish as a burnt offering to the Lord.

And the grain offering with it shall be two-tenths of an ephor of fine flour mixed with oil, a food offering to the Lord with a pleasing aroma. And the drink offering with it shall be of wine, a fourth of a hin.

And you shall eat neither bread nor grain parched or fresh until this same day, until you have brought the offering of your God. It is a statute forever throughout your generations in all your dwellings.

You shall count seven full weeks from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering. You shall count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath.

[2 : 0 8] Then you shall present a grain offering of new grain to the Lord. You shall bring from your dwelling places two loaves of bread to be waved, made of two-tenths of an ephor. They shall be of fine flour, and they shall be baked with leaven as firstfruits to the Lord.

And you shall present with the bread seven lambs a year old without blemish, and one bull from the herd and two rams. They shall be a burnt offering to the Lord, with their grain offering and their drink offerings, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the Lord.

And you shall offer one male goat for a sin offering, and two male lambs a year old as a sacrifice of peace offerings. And the priest shall wave them with the bread of the firstfruits, as a wave offering before the Lord, with the two lambs.

They shall be holy to the Lord for the priest. And you shall make a proclamation on the same day. You shall hold a holy convocation. You shall not do any ordinary work. It is a statute forever in all your dwelling places throughout your generations.

And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, nor shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner.

[3 : 21] I am the Lord your God. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to the people of Israel, saying, In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a day of solemn rest, a memorial proclaimed with blast of trumpets, a holy convocation.

You shall not do any ordinary work, and you shall present a food offering to the Lord. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Now on the tenth day of this seventh month is the day of atonement.

It shall be for you a time of holy convocation, and you shall afflict yourselves and present a food offering to the Lord. And you shall not do any work on that very day, for it is a day of atonement, to make atonement for you before the Lord your God.

For whoever is not afflicted on that very day shall be cut off from his people. And whoever does any work on that very day, that person I will destroy from among his people. You shall not do any work.

It is a statute forever throughout your generations in all your dwelling places. It shall be to you a Sabbath of solemn rest, and you shall afflict yourselves. On the ninth day of the month, beginning at evening, from evening to evening shall you keep your Sabbath.

[4 : 30] And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to the people of Israel, saying, On the fifteenth day of this seventh month, and for seven days, is the feast of booths to the Lord.

On the first day shall be a holy convocation. You shall not do any ordinary work. For seven days you shall present food offerings to the Lord. On the eighth day you shall hold a holy convocation, and present a food offering to the Lord.

It is a solemn assembly. You shall not do any ordinary work. These are the appointed feasts of the Lord, which you shall proclaim as times of holy convocation, for presenting to the Lord food offerings, burnt offerings, and grain offerings, sacrifices and drink offerings, each on its proper day, besides the Lord's Sabbaths, and besides your gifts, and besides all your vow offerings, and besides all your freewill offerings, which you give to the Lord.

On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the produce of the land, you shall celebrate the feast of the Lord seven days. On the first day shall be a solemn rest, and on the eighth day shall be a solemn rest.

And you shall take on the first day the fruit of splendid trees, branches of palm trees, and boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days.

[5 : 49] You shall celebrate it as a feast to the Lord for seven days in the year. It is a statute forever throughout your generations. You shall celebrate it in the seventh month. You shall dwell in booths for seven days.

All native Israelites shall dwell in booths, that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.

Thus Moses declared to the people of Israel the appointed feasts of the Lord. Leviticus chapter 23 is the list of the feasts of Israel. There's a connection between the feasts and the agricultural calendar.

The natural rhythm of life in the land is connected with the celebrations of the feasts of the Lord. And there's also a connection between the agricultural calendar and redemptive history.

Not only is the agricultural calendar associated with specific divine feasts, those divine feasts themselves are connected with events that God performed for his people in their history.

[6 : 51] God appoints times and the Israelites must proclaim them as sacred occasions. Israel seemed to follow a broadly lunar calendar. However, it's quite possible that this calendar had exactly 52 weeks, with extra days or an extra month being added every few years, perhaps even 49 extra days every jubilee year.

If it is the case that every typical year had exactly 52 weeks, then the feasts would always be on the same day of the week. Gordon Wenham suggests that this claim would be strengthened by the dates in the flood narrative.

Leviticus 23 begins with the Sabbath, which seems strange because the Sabbath is a weekly thing, not an annual celebration. Yet the Sabbath is the key sign of the Mosaic Covenant in Exodus chapter 31 verses 12 to 17.

In many ways it's the fundamental feast. It's that from which all of the others are derived. This is particularly noticeable in the case of feasts such as the Feast of Weeks. Sabbath is a time of remembrance and consecration.

That principle of remembrance and consecration is expanded to include other events that are connected with times of harvest and ingathering, but also which remember events of God in history, the way he has delivered his people.

[8 : 07] There are seven festivals in the year, again continuing the Sabbath theme. Passover, Unleavened Bread, Weeks, Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, the Feast of Booths, and the day after the Feast of Booths.

There are seven days of rest. The first and the last day of the Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks, the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, the first day of the Feast of Booths, and the day after that feast.

Most of the feasts occur in the seventh month. Again, a Sabbath theme. The Feast of Unleavened Bread and the Feast of Booths are both seven days long. The sign of the Sabbath then is refracted into a calendar of annual feasts.

To these we can also add the sabbatical year and the year of Jubilee, which extend the Sabbath principle even further. The whole calendar is shaped by the principle of Sabbath, the seventh.

The seventh day, the seventh year, the seventh month. We will see it everywhere we look. The Sabbath is a time of complete cessation of regular work. A Sabbath of solemn rest is an intensified expression, as the term Sabbath itself meant rest, and the term translated solemn rest is extremely closely related to it.

[9 : 19] The first of the feasts is the Passover. The Passover begins on the fourteenth day of the month at evening. The first month was designated as such on account of the Exodus in Exodus chapter 12 verse 2.

The Passover began with the sacrifice of the Passover lamb at twilight. The Passover was immediately followed by the pilgrimage feast of unleavened bread, which lasted for seven days.

On the pilgrimage feast, people had to travel to a divinely appointed location to celebrate them. The Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Booths were other pilgrimage feasts. Leavened bread had to be avoided, in part as a symbol of cutting off of the tradition of the past.

This feast commemorated the deliverance from slavery in Egypt, so they were cutting off the leaven of Egypt. For each day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, appointed sacrifices would be offered to the Lord.

The sacrifices for the different feasts are laid out in Numbers chapter 28 and 29. The Feast of Firstfruits was appointed for Israel to celebrate after they entered into the land.

[10 : 21] They would have to wave a sheaf of their harvest before the Lord, along with a male lamb without blemish, a grain offering of two-tenths of an ephah, and a fourth of a hin of a drink offering. This feast was celebrated on the day after the Sabbath.

This was likely the Sunday of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, although Joshua 5 might suggest the possibility that it was on the day after the Passover, so the first day of Unleavened Bread. It was at the beginning of the barley harvest.

So if Jesus' death was connected with the Passover sacrifice, his resurrection is associated with the Sunday of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, with the Feast of Firstfruits. This connection was recognised by the Apostle Paul, who spoke of Jesus as the firstfruits of the dead, the first offering of the awaited harvest of the general resurrection.

The firstfruits offering is a sheaf, or an omer, of the firstfruits of the harvest. Now why an omer? This isn't a word that we encounter often.

The great majority of the biblical uses of this term are found in this chapter, or in Exodus chapter 16, where it refers to the omer that was the daily portion of the manna, and this connection is very suggestive.

[11 : 31] Perhaps the purpose of the feast, in part, was to recall the provision of the food for the people in the wilderness, in the manna, and to connect it with the food in the land. Joshua chapter 5, verses 10 to 12 reads, While the people of Israel were encamped at Gilgal, they kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the month, in the evening on the plains of Jericho.

And the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate of the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. And the manna ceased that day after they ate of the produce of the land.

And there was no longer manna for the people of Israel, but they ate of the fruit of the land of Canaan that year. So what happens is a transition from the manna to the fruit of the land, and recognising that the principle of divine provision that we see in the manna continues in the provision of food from the land.

That's something that's secured by this practice of the offering of the omer. It recalls the provision of the manna, and then it connects that with the provision of grain. At the beginning of the barley harvest every year then, Israel would be reminded of God's provision of their bread in the wilderness, and be taught to recognise that, even when settled in the land, that same principle of gracious divine provision applied.

The accompanying grain offering is double the regular grain offering of the burnt offering of a lamb. It's two efforts rather than one. The normal regulations are seen in Numbers chapter 15 verses 2 to 5, although the drink offering is the same.

[13 : 01] Leviticus chapter 2 verses 14 to 16 gives us a sense of how the grain offering would have been offered. The next feast is the Feast of Weeks, and the importance of a system of sacrifices or festivals is that the meaning of things is to be sought not merely in underlying root meanings, but in the relationship that things have to each other.

The Feast of Weeks is a feast numbered from the Feast of Firstfruits, with the counting of seven weeks. It illustrates the Sabbath principle once more.

The Feast of Weeks comes at the end of the grain harvest, which began with the barley harvest, and ends with the gathering of the wheat. It also involves a grain offering. The fact that this, like the Feast of Firstfruits, was on the first day of the week suggests themes of a new creation.

At this feast, there was a wave offering of two leavened loaves of bread, made with two tenths of an ephra of flour. Now that recalls the grain offering of verse 13, in the Feast of Firstfruits.

The grain offering of the Feast of Firstfruits seems to have become two leavened loaves. And the addition of leaven is surprising, considering the strict prohibition of leaven in grain offerings in Leviticus chapter 2 verse 11.

[14 : 14] Perhaps what we're seeing here is an exceptional case with the reintroduction of a principle of leaven at this feast. It's the only occasion when leaven is included in an offering, which suggests that the leaven is an important part of the meaning.

The Feast of Weeks also multiplies the sacrifice of the Feast of Firstfruits, with seven lambs a year old as burnt offerings instead of just one, a bull from the herd, and two rams as burnt offerings, along with a male goat of a sin offering, and two lambs as peace offerings.

The Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost as we tend to call it, came to be associated with the time of the giving of the law, due to its timing. Again, it's an agricultural feast that is connected with events in redemptive history.

The seven sevens that are used to count should also remind us of the way that Sinai was a sort of great Sabbath. A couple of chapters later, we have the Jubilee, and we should observe the similarities.

The Feast of Weeks involves the counting of seven weeks, and the Year of Jubilee involves the counting of seven weeks of years, in chapter 25 verse 8, following the institution of the Sabbath year.

[15 : 21] The Feast of Weeks is a sort of annual version of the Year of Jubilee in miniature. The Feast of Firstfruits comes after the counting of seven days, on the day after the Sabbath. It is part of a seven-day feast, of the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

And the Feast of Weeks comes after the counting of seven weeks. The Year of Jubilee celebrated God's deliverance of his people, and his gift of the land to them. The Feast of Weeks celebrates God's declaration of the liberation of his people at Sinai.

It also focuses on the duty of those harvesting to leave the edges of their fields and the gleanings for the poor and the sojourner. Like the Year of Jubilee, it protects the stake of the poor and the dispossessed in the land.

Now Christians obviously associate the Feast of Weeks as Pentecost. On this day, the risen Christ, the one who is the Passover lamb sacrificed for us, who has risen as the firstfruits of those fallen asleep, gives his sevenfold sabbatical spirit to his bride, the Church, a new principle by which they will grow with the leaven of the Spirit's work.

As the law was given at Sinai, so Christ gives the Spirit to write the law upon our hearts at Pentecost, a new tradition as it were. Leaven is a handing down of a tradition.

[16 : 36] It's continued from loaf to loaf. And here we have this new leaven given to us. As Israel's liberation was declared at Sinai, so our liberation is declared as the realisation of Christ's exodus at Pentecost.

As in Leviticus and other Old Testament teaching concerning Pentecost, the account of Pentecost in Acts 2 gives a lot of attention to the celebration of meals of joy and thanksgiving, and to the fact that all are to be provided for.

The Feast of Trumpets comes next. It's the day of solemn rest on which certain sacrifices, mostly ascension offerings dedicating the nation to God, would be made. The day was a memorial, a day proclaimed with the blowing of trumpets, which would muster the people and summon them to attention.

As a memorial, it would recall people to the covenant and also call upon the Lord to remember his covenant commitment to his people. This is one of the rare occasions in the law where we have sounds as part of the worship of God, apart from speech.

We don't have music as part of the worship of God within the law, for the most part. We have bells upon the garments of the high priest, and we also have blowing of trumpets at key points.

[17 : 49] So maybe we should see in this an anticipation of a movement towards music. We may also think about the way that this sound, on the one hand, reminded the people of their covenant commitment and recalled them to faithfulness, but also called for God to act in remembrance of his covenant.

Maybe our music should be considered the same way. This day later became the Jewish New Year. However, we can see further significance in the fact that it is the beginning of the second half of the year.

The first month recalled the first departure from Egypt, and halfway through the year, Israel is recalled to the work that God began in the Exodus. It is also, perhaps more significantly, the first day of the seventh month.

It's the beginning of the sabbatical month, as it were. So we should recognise Sabbath themes here also. And as the seventh month has most of the feasts, we should also appreciate that this is preparing the people for a period of feasting.

The Feast of Trumpets is once again an expansion of the Sabbath principle. The Day of Atonement is the feast that comes next. It was the great purification event that occurred every year, rebooting the sacrificial system.

[19 : 02] It was the day when the high priest went into the very presence of God. The seventh month was a month of a number of key feasts, and the Day of Atonement's association with the Day of the Lord, with its cleansing and admission to the very presence of God, and its utter expulsion of those bearing sins from God's presence, is an event that anticipates the final great Sabbath at the end of all things.

The final feast of the year is a strange one. Once again, it's a feast of the seventh month. It's the Feast of Booths. After Israel had gathered in the produce of the land, Israel had to gather fruit of splendid trees, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook, and rejoice before the Lord.

This was seemingly another celebration of the fruitfulness of the land, now celebrating not the grain harvest, but other produce of the land. As an ingathering festival, the Feast of Booths seems to be associated with the gift of rain in Zechariah chapter 14 verse 9 and 16 to 19, and also seems to have a significance for all of the nations.

In Numbers chapter 29 verses 12 to 34, where the list of sacrifices are given for this festival, we see that 70 bulls are sacrificed over the course of it, one for each of the nations.

Now in Zechariah chapter 14, we see the Feast of Tabernacles in an eschatological context. And the Lord will be king over all the earth. On that day the Lord will be one and his name one.

[20 : 31] Then everyone who survives of all the nations that have come up against Jerusalem shall go up year after year to worship the king, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Booths.

And if any of the families of the earth do not go up to Jerusalem to worship the king, the Lord of hosts, there will be no rain on them. And if the family of Egypt does not go up and present themselves, then on them there shall be no rain.

There shall be the plague with which the Lord afflicts the nations that do not go up to keep the Feast of Booths. This shall be the punishment to Egypt and the punishment to all the nations that do not go up to keep the Feast of Booths.

But the Feast of Booths, or Sockoth, also looks back to Israel's experience in the wilderness. They had to dwell in temporary booths for seven days in commemoration of that.

We should remember that Sockoth was the site of Israel's first camp after leaving Egypt at the Passover. Exodus chapter 12 verse 37 reads, And the people of Israel journeyed from Ramses to Sockoth, about 600,000 men on foot, besides women and children.

[21 : 36] It is where they stayed on the night of the 15th day of the first month. But this is on the 15th day of the seventh month. Why is that? Later on in the following chapter, in Exodus chapter 13 verses 20 to 22, we read, And they moved on from Sockoth, and encamped at Ethim, on the edge of the wilderness.

And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. The pillar of cloud by day, and the pillar of fire by night, did not depart from before the people.

Sockoth then is the first place where we read about the pillar of cloud and fire that accompanied them. Sockoth is also the place where, surprisingly, Israel first celebrated the feast of unleavened bread.

In Exodus chapter 12 verse 39, And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had brought out of Egypt, for it was not leavened, because they were thrust out of Egypt and could not wait, nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves.

Again, this is strange, because the feast of unleavened bread is in the first month of the year. So what's going on? The feast of unleavened bread focuses on the food of that first day of the Exodus journey.

[22 : 51] The feast of booths focuses on the dwellings that they lived in. If unleavened bread involved the cutting off of the leaven of Egypt, booths was the first break that Israel had with the settled life beneath roofs that they had in Egypt.

And God journeyed with them in the cloud. Every year, Israel was to replay this, to recall the trust that they had shown that first night of leaving their Egyptian dwellings and following God into the wilderness.

Why was it celebrated when it was then? Why not in the first month? The clue is found in recognising that the feast of unleavened bread, connected with the exact same time in Israel's history, begins on the 15th day of the first month and runs for seven days.

The feast of booths begins on the 15th day of the seventh month and runs for seven days. They are divided by six months, by exactly half of a year.

They mirror each other. If the feast of unleavened bread begins the months of gathering the grain and produce of the land, the feast of ingathering comes at its conclusion. And they can also be seen to be bookends at either end.

[24 : 02] The feast of unleavened bread begins with this feast at the very beginning, the feast of Passover, for one day. And the feast of booths has one day just after it, the eighth day, where there's another holy convocation and food offering.

So at the very conclusion of the year, at the point where they might be most tempted to think themselves self-sufficient, the Lord returns his people to the very beginning. He returns them to that point that they remember when they first came out of Egypt.

He reminds them of the trust and complete dependence that first led them to follow him into the wilderness, of his glory cloud that accompanied and sheltered them, and of the clouds to which they still look to for rain.

A question to consider, how does the mapping of redemptive history onto the seasons and the year shape Israel's conception of God and their sense of their relationship to their history?

How can we learn from this in our approach to the church calendar?