

Leviticus 23

Aaron Eime, Christ Church Jerusalem, 2022

In the Hebraic mind, both time and space are considered sacred. In Genesis, the first thing God created that He called holy was the Sabbath and hence time itself became the first consecrated holy object. Following the principle of the weekly Sabbath cycle, the entire Jewish year was made sacred with a calendar of seven sacred festivals. Leviticus 23 is a systematic presentation of the divine calendar in Israel. Interestingly these are called the Feasts of the Lord and not the Festivals of Israel. Yet they are given to the people of Israel. It is based around three pilgrimage feasts with the foundation of these feasts being the Sabbath. The Hebrew word that describes these times is מועד which literally calls them the 'appointed times'. These special times, which are also known as חגים for feasts or festivals, are rich in symbolic and prophetic significance all the while following the agricultural seasonal cycle. In antiquity, ancient festivals often commemorated events related to the activities of the local gods. While the Lord is quite specific regarding the activities of the tabernacle during these sacred times, most of the feasts are not actually given reasons for their observance, those reasons come later. The obvious exception to this is Passover, which does have a historical event intertwined in its meaning and observance. For the rest of the Jewish calendar, the seasons and festivals gained religious meanings over time through exegetical interpretation and national experience. Many of the festivals in this chapter also included the presentation of food offerings before the Lord, without details of the food groups themselves. Today the modern Jewish calendar links specific foods, readings from Scripture, and prayers to each appointed time. These are all traditions not found in the text. For example, at Shavuot, the tradition is to read the Megillah (Scroll) of Ruth and at Sukkot the reading is Ecclesiastes, yet at the time of Moses, those texts had obviously not been written.

On these appointed feasts the people of Israel are to meet with the Lord at what are called holy convocations. They revolve around the Sabbath, the first feast described in the chapter, and so no work was to be done. For many people, our identity is wrapped up in what we do. This is one of the many reasons that makes the Sabbath so special, for on that day you don't do any work and thus you have the opportunity to discover your real identity. On the Sabbath you are no longer Aaron the doctor or Aaron the dentist, you simply and truly are Aaron, one who is made in the image of God. Spending true time with the Lord reaffirms our real identity. The challenge then for all of us is to make holy time with the Lord. In a culture that has become 24/7, this is no small task. Centuries after Leviticus, when the Jewish people were scattered from the Land into exile, they began to meet and worship together in synagogues on the Sabbath, continuing the tradition of the holy convocation, that is in spending time with the Lord.

Spending time with God at His appointed times is also a demonstration of loyalty on the part of the worshipper. It is noted that many of the festivals can also be performed outside of the holy sanctuary. For example, Sukkot, even though it is a pilgrimage festival to Jerusalem, the individual families construct temporary dwellings in their current locations. The decentralized nature of the sacred calendar continued in the diaspora, preserving faith and community despite the destruction of both Temples. Holy time is made holy by the Lord but it is kept holy through observance and participation of those who follow Him. Like everything we have studied in

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Leviticus, it is a partnership between heaven and earth.

Purim and Hanukkah are the two obvious festivals not included here in Leviticus. Both are nonagrarian feasts with no attachment to a harvest of any type and instead preserve redemptive events in the history of Israel. Their inclusion into the Jewish calendar sets the precedence for the inclusion of other holidays and sacred times that remember the actions and interventions of the Lord, such as the birth and death of the Messiah! New festivals are not inherently evil, rather they are simply new expressions of the continuing redemptive work of God in His creation.

Leviticus 23 describes each feast as an eternal ordinance, that is something that will be performed without a concluding date and with or without a Temple in Jerusalem. During our discussion of the texts, we contemplated the relationship between the Jewish calendar with the Gentile followers of Jesus. We also noted that several feasts are mentioned as continuing into the World to Come, such as Sukkot foretold by the prophet Zechariah and involving Gentile participation. Jesus says He will celebrate the Passover again in the future at the Last Supper. And Paul instructs to 'keep the feast' in his epistle to the Corinthians. Is it wrong for Gentiles to participate in Jewish festivals? Do Jewish people feel positive or negative about Gentiles celebrating Passover or do they consider it a further example of Gentiles appropriating the faith of Israel? The answer is complex and complicated by the poor history between church and synagogue. They are the appointed times of the Lord, delivered to Israel who was and is to be a light to the nations. Moses declares in Deuteronomy that no other nation has the wisdom of the Torah like Israel. Eventually, Gentiles who are attracted to the monotheistic faith of Israel will come into contact with the feasts and festivals. How then should we behave? We should note that in Acts 15 it is not required of the Gentiles to participate in the obligation that Israel has in the Torah. But it is also noted that the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 reminds everyone that Moses (the Torah) continues to be read and taught to the community. Continual study of the Word of God will eventually lead us to the call to holiness found in Leviticus and there we will encounter holy time.

In brief summary, Jesus tells us in Matthew 5 that we should never instruct people to break a commandment, even the least of the commandments. Perhaps the best way to teach others about the spiritual riches and blessings found by being with the Lord at His appointed times is simply to demonstrate the blessing through invitation. We can all invite people to share a Sabbath dinner with us and to witness the blessing this has on our lives and families. This goes for all the appointed times that are holy to the Lord.