

Pentecost 2005
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Overview

Read Lev 23:9-22.

Today is the beginning of the last Jewish feast of the civil calendar. Israel was a nation of farmers, and like many of their holy days, this one focuses on the annual rhythm of agricultural life. To understand the feast, we must first view it in its agricultural context. But in addition, it forms an important part of the background for the NT, so we will consider its spiritual significance as well.

Agricultural Significance

We begin with the meaning of the feast in its agricultural context. We need to consider the significance of the firstfruits in an agricultural setting, how the names of the feast reflect this importance, and the overall relation of the two parts of the firstfruit offering.

The Importance of the Firstfruits

Agricultural life teaches several important lessons about life.

- Taking risk: When you plant a seed, you give up the right to eat it, and if the crop does not do well, you may starve. Psa 126:5,6, “They that sow in tears shall reap in joy. He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.”
- Diligence: Food crops are usually not the most natural plants in an area. Weeds will choke them out if you don’t work hard to plant and tend them. Psa 104:23, “Man goeth forth unto his work and to his labour until the evening.”
- Patience: You must work hard without immediate reward. Not until harvest do you receive the fruit of your labor. James 5:7, “Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain.”

Thus one of the most joyful times in any agricultural society is the time when the harvest begins. The very first sheaf from the field, the first apple from the tree, the first calf born in the spring, all bring a sense of completion and fulfillment. Your risk, and hard work, and patience have been rewarded, and there will be food for another year.

It was a general principle in Israel that the first yield of every crop and the firstborn of every animal belonged to the Lord. Exod 13:2, 12-15; **22:29**; 23:19; 34:26; Num 18:12 show that firstfruits were in general to be brought to the Lord. **Neh 10:35-37** shows the practice. Neh 12:44; 13:31 shows some of the structural and administrative provisions made for these offerings.

As the various fruits matured, they were brought to the Lord. Most of these offerings were an individual, private responsibility. But two were singled out for recognition in Israel’s corporate worship: the beginning of barley harvest, and of wheat harvest.

- Barley was important because it was the first edible crop to be harvested. The Gezer calendar lists only flax before barley. Thus barley is the beginning of the overall harvest, the harbinger of the Lord's blessing on them, and the celebration in 23:10 recognizes this.
- Wheat was even more important, because it was required for the meal offering that accompanied every burnt offering (Lev 2:1). It matured 50 days later, and this part of the harvest ensured that they would be able to offer the sacrifices as required. Note Num 28:26, "when ye bring a new meal offering unto the Lord."
- The Qumran sectarians (11QT 19-23) had subsequent firstfruits, 50 days apart, not only for barley and wheat (the biblical holy days), but then for wine and olive oil.

Names of the Feast

These facts explain some of the names given to this feast in the Bible.

- Exod 23:16 and Num 28:26 call it the Feast of Firstfruits *bikkur*, because it marks the beginning of wheat harvest (cf. *rit* in Lev 23:10)
- Exod 23:16 and 34:22 call it more generically the Feast of Harvest. (Another feast, Booths or Tabernacles, marks the end of harvest.)
- Exod 34:22; Deut 16:10, 16, 2 Chr 8:13 call it the Feast of Weeks (Shavuot), because it has two parts, which are separated by seven weeks. This is how modern Jews refer to it.
- Greek writers (NT, Josephus) call it Pentecost = "50", because it falls on the 50th day of the interval of 7 weeks.
- [It is called (*aceret* "solemn assembly" in Mishna and Talmud, but this term is used in the Bible only for the last day of Booths and Passover.]

Integrity of Lev 23:9-22

The main text describing this feast is Lev 23:9-22. It is usual to associate vv. 9-14 with passover, since it happens during the week following Passover, the feast of unleavened bread. However, the structure of the text argues against this.

- The parallel list in Numbers has separate discussions of all the other feasts, but not of the waving of the sheaf.
- The heading "the Lord spake unto Moses" separates v.9 from what goes before, like all the subsequent feasts (and unlike unleavened bread.)
- There is no such separator between 14 and 15.
- 9-14 and 15-22 are further united by the fact that both of these paragraphs (and only these in Lev 23) describe animal sacrifices. Otherwise, Num 28-29 discusses the sacrifices, offering a priestly perspective, while Lev focuses on the people's view.

Thus the feast is not about just the wheat harvest. It is about the whole cycle of crops, and the overall principle that they are given by the Lord. The real point of the feast is to instruct the people's attitude toward the fruit of their labors. They must not selfishly hoard what they raise, but they must bring the first of it to the Lord. Several offerings really are in view.

1. v.10, an initial sheaf of barley. Before you can reap the field, you must bring a sheaf to the Lord.
2. v.17, the first loaves of bread. Note that these are leavened, and come “out of your habitations.” This is not the bread of the meal offering, which was unleavened, but ordinary civilian bread, except for their size, which was the same as the showbread and about 5-10 pounds per loaf. Before you can eat your bread, you must offer it to the Lord.
3. vv. 12, 18, animals. For all the other feasts discussed in this chapter, there is no mention of animal sacrifices; those are specified in the parallel text in Num 28-29. This is the only feast for which Leviticus specifies animal offerings, and they are different from those in Numbers. I think that these are representatives of the firstborn animals that were brought to the Lord.
4. v.22, gleanings. We often overlook that this law is given in the context of this particular feast. The Lord receives not only the first of the harvest, but also the last of it: Prov 19:17, “He that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the LORD; and that which he hath given will he pay him again.”

The Temporal Lesson

Why must they give the beginning and end of their harvest to the Lord? They must recognize that in spite of their courage, and hard work, and patience, he is the one who feeds them.

- v.10, he has given them the land.
- Deut 8:18, he gives them the strength to work.
- Psa 104:14, he causes the food to grow.

Throughout, he seeks to instill in them the understanding that David expressed when he said, “all things come of thee, and of thine own have we given thee” (1 Chr 29:14).

So we must remember, in our labors, that we can prosper only under God’s blessing, and that we owe him the first and best of what we produce

Spiritual Significance

The Feast of Firstfruits had two major events: the initial offering of the first sheaf of barley, and then, seven weeks later, the offering of the first loaves of wheaten bread. The NT assigns these events clear symbolic meaning. The first points to the resurrection of Christ, while the second anticipates the coming of the Holy Spirit on God’s people.

Christ the Firstfruits

In 1 Cor 15:20, 23, Paul describes the Lord Jesus as the “firstfruits” in his resurrection. This is a reference to Lev 23:10. Recall the chronology:

- This verse is talking about the first sheaf of barley, that was reaped during the week of unleavened bread, after Passover.
- It was to be presented “the morning after the Sabbath” (23:11), that is, the Sabbath during that week.

- As we will see in our study of John, the Lord Jesus was crucified at the time of the passover.
- He rose from the dead on Sunday morning. Sunday is the day after the Sabbath, in this case, the Sabbath after passover. Thus he rose on the same day that the priests in the temple were waving the barley sheaf.

His resurrection is like the barley sheaf not only in its timing, but also in its meaning. The barley sheaf was the promise of the full barley harvest to follow. The Lord's resurrection is the promise that we too will rise from the dead.

- He described his death as the planting of a grain of seed, John 12:24.
- His resurrection is the firstfruits of which our resurrection is the continuing harvest, 1 Cor 15:20-23.

The Coming of the Holy Spirit

Seven weeks after the waving of the sheaf, Israel celebrated the beginning of wheat harvest with the wave loaves (Lev 23:15-16), the feast of Pentecost. This was the time that God chose to send down the Holy Spirit on the disciples and empower them to proclaim the good news: Acts 2:1.

Here again, the correspondence goes deeper than just a chronological alignment. Rom 8:23 describes the Holy Spirit as a firstfruits that points to the fuller redemption that we will experience, the changing of our bodies. This is an agricultural example of what Paul elsewhere illustrates with a commercial example, when he calls the Spirit the "earnest" or "down payment" of our redemption in 2 Cor 1:22; 5:5; Eph 1:14.

The Spiritual Lessons

There are two spiritual lessons we can draw from the NT references to firstfruits.

First, we look forward to a great future. God has promised to raise us from the dead and give us new, redeemed bodies that are no longer subject to sin, or sickness, or pain. Christ's resurrection is the firstfruits of our own resurrection. The gift of the Holy Spirit is the firstfruit of the full redemption of our bodies.

Second, in both cases (the resurrection of Christ and the coming of the Spirit), there is a subtle but important shift from the OT. In the OT, it was the responsibility of the believer to bring the firstfruits of his labor to the Lord, so that he might be accepted (23:11). Our works have nothing at all to do either with the resurrection of Christ or with the gift of the Spirit. Both of these are the sovereign work of God. We no longer offer him the firstfruits of what we will produce; he gives us the firstfruits of what he has produced for us. This is exactly the contrast presented in Gal 3:10-14.

- The law promised, "the man that doeth them shall live in them," Lev 18:5, cf. Gal 3:12.
- No one could satisfy this standard, Gal 3:10, quoting Deut 27:26.
- Christ has satisfied God's claims in our place, Gal 3:13-14, quoting Deut 21:23.

Technical Note

The words translated “firstfruit” in Lev 23:10, 17, 20 differ. The word in 10 is *re)šiyt* “beginning,” and its Greek reflex is *aparxh*, which is the term throughout the NT translated “firstfruit.” The word in 17 and 20 is *bikkurim*, whose reflex is *prwtogenhma*, a word that does not occur in the NT or Josephus. *Aparxh* appears to refer to both of these in the NT, as discussed above.