

Leviticus 23 and the Christian Sabbath

By Benjamin Shaw

INTRODUCTION

In the history of Presbyterian churches, the observation of the Christian liturgical calendar has been avoided, due to there being no positive Scriptural basis for it (either by direct command, by approved example, or by good and necessary consequence). But recently, even some Presbyterians of a theologically conservative stripe have begun to follow a Christian liturgical calendar. Those who argue that the Christian church should follow a liturgical calendar probably point to Leviticus 23 as providing support for such an idea. After all, two particular festivals in Leviticus 23 have their clear counterparts in the New Testament. The Feast of Pentecost is the most obvious, as it retains in the Christian calendar the name given to it by the Septuagint of Leviticus 23:16—in the word *pentecosta*, referring to the fifty-day period under consideration. The events of Acts 2 then cement this as a day of importance for the Christian church. The other feast is, of course, Passover, though that has been transformed for Christian consideration into the events of “Holy Week,” concluding in the annual celebration of the resurrection on Easter Sunday. Other elements of the Christian calendar developed out of considerations distinctive to the Christian church, beginning with the season of Advent and Christmas, then Lent, Holy Week, Easter, and finally Pentecost. There

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1. The statement in Leviticus 23:2 that these are “the feasts of the Lord” (KJV, ESV) is a little bit of a misnomer, as the word is more properly “appointed times.” The word “feast” does appear in the passage, but not as a general description of all of the times.

is a period of approximately six months between Pentecost and the beginning of Advent. This arrangement has a surface similarity to the Old Testament calendar, which had a five-month period between the end of one liturgical year and the beginning of the next.

It is doubtful, however, that the descriptions given in Leviticus 23 were ever intended to serve as a pattern for developing a similar approach to the Christian year. There is no indication in the New Testament that the remembrance of Pentecost ever was observed as a stated part of a Christian “calendar.” Neither was the Lord’s Supper, with its link to Passover, limited in its observance to once a year in connection with the spring season.

Thus, it is worthwhile to take a fresh look at Leviticus 23 and attempt to determine what it may be supposed to teach to the Christian church. This paper seeks to show that a fresh look at Leviticus 23 from a New Testament perspective leads to the suggestion that the Old Testament’s appointed times were intended to point to various aspects of the work of Christ; that these various aspects are brought together in both the creational and redemptive aspects of the Sabbath; that there are in these appointed times aspects that perhaps point to the future shift of the Sabbath from the seventh to the first day of the week; and that these elements of the work of Christ are best celebrated, not by being distributed among several days over the course of the year, but by being combined in one weekly Sabbath day, deepening and strengthening our appreciation for the glorious work of Christ for our redemption.

THE LARGER CONTEXT

There are other places in the Pentateuch where some of the “appointed times” discussed in Leviticus 23 are mentioned.¹ So, for example we have the origin of Passover

dealt with in Exodus 12–13. Required offerings that were to accompany the feasts are appointed in Numbers 28–29. The three “pilgrimage festivals”: Passover, Weeks, and Tabernacles are dealt with in Deuteronomy 16.² However, there is no place else where the feasts are dealt with as fully and in as organized a fashion as in Leviticus 23. It is therefore worthwhile to take our lead in developing a proper Christian view of the feasts from their description in this one chapter.

OVERVIEW

The careful reader will note that, in addition to the (weekly) Sabbath, there are seven appointed times set out here, so that the entire structure of the Israelite liturgical year is built on the Sabbath principle. The Sabbath is one of the covenant signs (see Exod. 31:12–17) and is also connected with the other appointed times in Exodus 23 and 34. This suggests that the seven appointed times were intended to serve as a sort of “exploded view” of the significance of the weekly Sabbath. The reader will also note that the three major appointed times—Passover, Weeks, and Tabernacles—are joined to harvesting activities. We are used to the idea of a fall harvest season, but in ancient Palestine there were two harvest seasons. There was a spring harvest for grains—barley and wheat; and there was a fall harvest season for olives and grapes. The spring appointed times of Passover and Weeks are thus connected with the barley (Passover) and wheat (Weeks) harvests, while the final time of the year (Tabernacles) is associated with the olive and grape harvests. This agricultural connection may seem to be secondary, but each of these harvest times, spring and fall, are in fact celebrations of God’s faithfulness to his covenant promises (see Lev. 26:1–13). The primary significance of each of these appointed times is redemptive. Passover derives from the deliverance from Egypt. In Jewish tradition Weeks is associated with the giving of the Law at Sinai, but there is no clear reference to this in the Old Testament. The first clear reference to this connection comes from the Book of Jubilees. Tabernacles is identified with a remembering of the wilderness wandering (Lev. 23:43), not so much a remembrance of the punishment of the Israelites for their lack of faith as it is a remembrance of God’s faithfulness to provide for them during that period (see Deut. 29:5–6).

DEFINING THE SEVEN ANNUAL APPOINTED TIMES

There are essentially two sets of times defined in Leviticus 23. The first set is in the spring and includes Passover, Unleavened Bread, Firstfruits, and Weeks. This

set extends over a period of some two months, the first three being separated from Weeks by a seven-week period. The fall set consists of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and Tabernacles, all three occurring in quick succession in the seventh month. This listing makes the underlying Sabbath principle quite clear. There are seven times. There are seven weeks between Passover and Weeks. Then there are three festivals together in the seventh month.

PASSOVER

This time is the one most obviously connected with redemption, as it celebrates the deliverance of Israel from bondage in Egypt. It is also the most frequently mentioned of all the appointed times. In particular, there are seven explicit biblical references to the celebration of Passover. Obviously, the first mention is the initial Passover, as it is described in Exodus 12. The second reference is to the first anniversary of the deliverance, in which Israel observes Passover before leaving Sinai on the way to the Promised Land (Num. 9). The third reference is to the Passover observed by the Israelites after the crossing of the Jordan under Joshua (Josh. 5). The fourth reference is to the observance of the Passover during the reign of Hezekiah (2 Chron. 30). The fifth reference is to the celebration under Josiah in 2 Chronicles 35. The sixth reference is after the Exile as recorded in Ezra 6. The final reference to the observance of the Passover is in the gospel accounts of the Last Supper.³ So in its biblical representation, the Passover itself is fulfilled in its seventh observance. It should not surprise us then, that in 1 Corinthians 5:7 Paul identifies Christ as our Passover lamb. Paul revisits the idea of the Passover in 1 Corinthians 11:23–26 with his directions for the observance of the Lord’s Supper. Finally, the Passover is mentioned with reference to the faith of Moses in Hebrews 11:28.

UNLEAVENED BREAD

Unleavened bread is connected with, but distinguished from, Passover. Passover is technically the meal observed

2. The naming of these feasts varies, except for Passover, depending on the English translation. For convenience, I am using the terminology of the KJV.

3. There are incidental references to the Passover scattered throughout both Testaments, and particularly in the gospels. However, my concern here is to point out that there are few accounts where the observance of the Passover is dealt with in some detail. Thus in the gospels, it is only with the Last Supper that we have a detailed treatment of some observance of Passover.

on the evening of the fourteenth day of the first month. Unleavened Bread is then observed for the following week. Passover celebrated the deliverance from bondage in Egypt, while Unleavened Bread celebrates the following period when the Israelites traveled to the Red Sea, during which they ate unleavened bread (Exod. 13). The appointed time Unleavened Bread is mentioned elsewhere in the Old Testament primarily in connection with the observance of Passover. This connection is retained in the New Testament, particularly in Paul's connecting the new life in Christ with a putting away of the leaven of malice and evil (1 Cor 5:6–8). As Passover was then invested with a new meaning for the Christian, so Unleavened Bread is also invested with a new meaning for the Christian. Yet, as mentioned earlier, there is no indication in the New Testament that the early church made any annual observance of either appointed time, since they were both subsumed in the Lord's Supper.

FIRSTFRUITS

Firstfruits is a little-noted appointed time. Many perhaps read Leviticus 23 and miss it entirely. It is connected with Passover and Unleavened Bread, and is observed during the course of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The firstfruits under consideration is the beginning of the barley harvest. According to Leviticus 23:11, Firstfruits is observed on the day after the Sabbath. There is some debate as to which Sabbath this refers. Keil and Delitzsch argue that the Sabbath referred to is the first day of Unleavened Bread.⁴ However, the first day of Unleavened Bread, while indirectly identified as a Sabbath (that is, there is a holy convocation, and no ordinary work is to be done), it is not explicitly identified as a Sabbath. Further, the word "Sabbath" in Leviticus 23:11 has the definite article attached, which most likely indicates that the reference is not to the first day of Unleavened Bread, but rather to the regular weekly Sabbath. This is further indicated by the fact that references in the Pentateuch to the regular weekly Sabbath have the definite article. The result of this is that the waving of the Firstfruits takes place on the first day of the week during the observance of Unleavened Bread. In 1 Corinthians 15:20–23 Paul identifies Christ as the firstfruits. It should also be noted that the resurrection of Christ, which Paul is dealing with in that passage, took place on the first day after the Sabbath, the first day of the week during the period of the observance of Unleavened Bread.

4. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament: The Pentateuch* (repr., Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 2.440–441.

WEEKS

The name, Weeks, is derived from the fact that the time of its observance is determined by counting seven weeks from the observance of Firstfruits. This makes the time of its observation also the first day of the week. This is also made clear by the fact that in Leviticus 23:15 the "seven full weeks" of the ESV is more literally "seven Sabbaths" (see KJV). Because the observance of Weeks involves a grain offering of the newly harvested wheat, which ripens later than the barley, it too is sometimes referred to as Firstfruits (see, for example, Num. 28:26). Thus, in the New Testament, the use of firstfruits may refer to the resurrection of Christ, as it does in 1 Corinthians 15, or it may refer to the first generation of believers in Christ, beginning with those converted on the Day of Pentecost. Paul identifies Christians as having the firstfruits of the Spirit (Rom. 8:23) and refers to the Thessalonian believers as "the firstfruits to be saved" (2 Thess. 2:13).

Another way of thinking about both Firstfruits and Weeks is to think of them as representing literal harvests, which then point to a spiritual harvest. The latter begins with the resurrection of Christ, is continued with the harvesting of believers through the proclamation of the gospel, and culminates with the resurrection of believers (1 Cor. 15:2–23).

TRUMPETS

It has been suggested that the trumpets in view in Leviticus are not the silver trumpets of Numbers 10, but rather the ram's horn (*shophar*). However, the term used in Leviticus 23:24 is also used in Numbers 10:5–6. Aside from its mention here and in Numbers 29, nothing is said about this particular appointed time in the rest of the Old Testament. Further, it is not mentioned explicitly in the New Testament. The use of the term in Numbers 10 does give perhaps some further guidance on the significance of this appointed time. The silver trumpets were used to call an assembly, to call for the marching forth of the people as they moved through the wilderness, to lead the people into battle, and to sound a warning. In Leviticus 25:9, the trumpet is sounded on the Day of Atonement to announce the Jubilee Year. In the New Testament, apart from the Book of Revelation, there is only a handful of references to the trumpet. In these few references, however, the sound of the trumpet is connected with the announcement of the second coming (see, for example, 1 Cor. 15:52 and 1 Thess. 4:16). Paul also uses the sound of the trumpet

as an illustration of the importance of the clear proclamation of the gospel (1 Cor. 14:8). This perhaps comes from the use of the trumpet to announce the Jubilee year, which is a clear foretaste of the gospel (see Luke 4:16–21). It appears, then, that Trumpets might relate to the proclamation of the gospel, the warning of the second coming of Christ in judgment, and a calling of Christians to arms, remembering that the church on the earth is the church militant.

DAY OF ATONEMENT

The Day of Atonement comes on the tenth day of the seventh month and it is specifically referred to as a Sabbath (Lev. 23:32). This day was the only required fasting day in the Old Testament. Aside from Leviticus 16 and 23, and Numbers 29, the Day of Atonement is not otherwise mentioned in the Old Testament. The most significant element of the Day of Atonement is that it provides atonement for all the sins of Israel (see Lev. 16:34). Though the Day of Atonement is not mentioned by name in the New Testament, it is the subject of extended treatment in Hebrews 9–10. Here the contrast is made between the high priest going into the Most Holy Place (that was a copy) once a year, and Christ, who entered the Most Holy Place (that was the reality) once for all. The sacrifices of the copy had to be made repeatedly, because they only represented the reality. They were not the reality. But Christ in his work is the reality, so that in his one sacrifice for sin is once for all. Thus, what was represented in the Day of Atonement, the removing of all sins from Israel, became a reality in Christ, who removed all sins from his people.

TABERNACLES

Tabernacles was the appointed time which began on the fifteenth day of the seventh month. The first day was a Sabbath, on which there was a holy convocation, and no ordinary work was to be done. The feast was celebrated for seven days. Then an additional eighth day was observed on which was also a holy convocation and no ordinary work was to be done. The additional eighth day seems to have been a sort of special ending to the entire liturgical year, as Tabernacles was the last appointed time of the year. During Tabernacles in the Sabbath years, the entirety of the law was to be read before the gathered Israelites (Deut. 31:9–13). We have only one account of that taking place, and that was in the post-exilic period in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah (Neh. 9). There is explicit mention of Tabernacles in the

New Testament only in John 7. On that occasion Jesus visited the temple, and on the last day of the feast, the great day (this would have been that eighth day of the festival) “Jesus stood up and cried out, ‘If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water’” (John 7:37–38). This is in reference to the fact that Tabernacles was to remind the people how God had provided for them in the wilderness (see Lev. 23:43). Paul likely alludes to Tabernacles as well in 1 Corinthians 10:3–4 when he writes, “and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.”

SUMMARY

In the case of each of the annual appointed times it is clear that they were designed to point to the work of Christ. Christ is the Passover lamb who protects his people from the death angel. Christ is the pure unleavened bread who calls us to a life of purity. Christ is the firstfruits of the resurrection; and in his resurrection we have the certain promise of our own. In Weeks, Christ begins the harvest of the gospel with the Day of Pentecost. Trumpets declares both the proclamation of the gospel and the second coming of Christ. The Day of Atonement declares the completed single sacrifice for sins accomplished by Christ, who now sits at the right hand of God. Finally, Tabernacles declares Christ’s ongoing provision for his people: true spiritual food and drink on the way of our wandering in the wilderness of this world. In these God-appointed times, there is a full-orbed presentation of the gospel.

AND THE CHRISTIAN SABBATH

As noted above, the annual appointed times are founded in and developed out of the Sabbath. In addition to the fifty-two weekly Sabbaths, there would have been additional Sabbaths during the course of the year, connected with these appointed times. The first and last days of Unleavened Bread, Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the first and eighth days of Tabernacles were all additional Sabbaths. Thus over the course of a year the faithful Israelite would have fifty-eight days of rest. It is clear, however, that these feasts did not make the transition from Judaism to Christianity. It is probably the case that in Romans 14, in the matter of considering one day more holy than another, Paul is addressing the issue of whether these appointed times (beyond the

fifty-two weekly Sabbaths) ought still to be observed. His argument is that they should not, but those Jews who, in the period of Apostolic transition, still think them sacred should be allowed to continue to observe them (it is clear that Paul was opposed to any imposition of these observances on Gentile converts). The situation is similar in Colossians 2:16. Paul uses the phrase “with regard to a festival, or a new moon, or a Sabbath” (ESV). Two comments should be made here. First, the wording is Sabbaths, plural, not singular. Second, this phrase is also found in virtually identical language in a number of places in the Old Testament, such as 1 Chronicles 23:31; 2 Chronicles 8:13; Ezekiel 45:17. In most of the cases what is in view is the annual appointed times, plus the new moon festivals at the beginning of the months, the additional Sabbaths that occur as a result of the appointed times, and the regular weekly Sabbaths.⁵ Paul’s allusion in Colossians 2:16 to the Old Testament passages that use the phrase “festival, new moons, and Sabbaths” is most likely then a reference to the Leviticus 23 appointed times. Paul is making the point that these appointed times are no longer significant, that their significance has been fulfilled. So Paul’s prohibition is not directed against the regular weekly Sabbath.

The Old Testament appointed times did not become part of Christian observance. The New Testament is completely silent regarding the development of a Christian collection of regular feast days. But it can be shown on other grounds that the regular weekly Sabbath remains for the people of God. In addition, three of the seven appointed times of the Old Testament in theological hindsight suggest a shift of the weekly Sabbath from the last day of the week to the first day of the week. Firstfruits, which pointed to the resurrection of Christ, was on the day after the Sabbath, that is, the first day of the week. Pentecost, which is fulfilled in Acts 2, was also on the first day of the week. Then Tabernacles lasted eight days, with the eighth day being an additional Sabbath, coming after seven days of celebration, and thus, in a manner of speaking, being the first day of a new week.

Those who follow a Christian liturgical calendar will sometimes describe Sabbatarianism as not being able to celebrate the birth of Christ, or his resurrection, or his crucifixion, since no Sabbath is dedicated to those things in the way that their Christmas, and Good Friday, and Easter Sunday are. But what we should notice is that, while in the Old Testament these appointed times

5. It is not clear at what point Israel began to have celebrations at the beginning of every month, but it seems to be the case that they did. Such regular monthly observances are not, however, set out in the Law of Moses.

presented an “exploded view” of the full meaning of the Sabbath, in the New Testament all this significance is condensed back into the ordinary weekly Sabbath.

So the response of the Sabbatarian is that he celebrates those things every week. Every Sabbath, Christ the Passover Lamb is set forth. Every Sabbath, Christians are called to leave behind malice and envy and live, as it were, an unleavened life. Every Sabbath firstfruits is celebrated, both in the resurrection of Christ and in the harvest of the gospel. Every Sabbath the call of the gospel is trumpeted forth; the believer is called to take up arms against the world, the flesh, and the devil; and the believer is assured of the promise of the Lord that he is coming soon. Every Sabbath the believer is reminded that Christ died, once for all, for the sins of his people. Every Sabbath the believer is reminded that Christ provisions us day by day on our journey through the wilderness of this life. How much better, how much more glorious is this weekly reminder than the annual celebrations in which the work of Christ is cut into pieces rather than being presented whole. ■

In Brief: The Lord’s Day is no Human Constitution

So that I may conclude with him that says, *Fecerunt hoc Apostoli*—the apostles did make this change, as appears by their writings, whose examples we do well to follow, as of whom it is said, “he that heareth you heareth me” (Heinrich Wolf, *Chronologia sive de Tempore* [Tiguri: in Ofeicina Froshoviana, 1585] 93). Or rather with Junius:

Quamobrem ... cum dies Dominicus, etc. Wherefore, seeing the Lord’s Day is both by the fact of Christ ([*scilicet*, “namely”] His resurrection and often appearing to His disciples upon that day), by example and institution of the apostles, and by the continual practice of the ancient Church, and by the testimony of the scripture, observed and substituted into the place of the Jewish Sabbath, *Inepte faciunt*, They do very foolishly, who say that the observation of the Lord’s Day is of tradition, and not from the scriptures, that by this means they might establish the traditions of men (Franciscus Junius, ΠΡΩΤΟΚΤΙΣΙΑ ... *In Tria Prima Capita Geneseos Prælectiones Francisci Junii* [Commelinus, 1589], page 64).

Cited in Nicholas Bownd, *Sabbathum Veteris et Novi Testamenti: or, The True Doctrine of the Sabbath* (Naphtali Press and Reformation Heritage Books, 2015), 112–113. ■