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The holy days calendar

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THE SUSAN & ROGER HERTOOG EDITION OF LEVITICUS

תנ"ך קורן ארץ ישראל
THE KOREN
TANAKH
OF THE LAND
OF ISRAEL

LEVITICUS • ויקרא

EDITOR IN CHIEF

David Arnovitz

TORAH TRANSLATION BY

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The holy days calendar

Leviticus 23 instructs the Israelites regarding the observance of sacred times, which can be called “festivals,” on which all Israelites are to honor God and celebrate with Him. An essential way in which they honor Him on these occasions is by offering additional sacrifices (see also “The sacrificial calendar” in the Numbers volume of this series on page 180) to affirm the divine-human relationship. The rituals associated with the Israelite festivals, as well as the festival calendar itself, reflect the Torah’s revolutionary concepts of monotheism and a covenantal relationship with the deity, both of which stand in direct opposition to the pagan cultures of the time.

Human celebrations can involve banquets at which people eat and drink (Esther 1; Dan. 5), so it makes sense that the Israelites were commanded to eat special meals at the Sanctuary/Temple during the three pilgrimage festivals when all Israelite males are to appear with offerings for the Lord (Ex. 23:14–17, 34:22–24; Deut. 16:16–17).

Non-Israelites in the world of the Tanakh also celebrated festivals, which were prominent in ancient Near Eastern religious traditions from early times. Festivals were so important in ancient Anatolia that archaeologists have discovered more Hittite texts concerning these ritual events than any other genre of Hittite literature. Some Hittite festivals lasted for several weeks. No doubt the eleven-day Babylonian *Akitu* Spring New Year Festival was the high point of the year for the people

of Babylon because it included lavish processions of idols with high-ranking persons, including the king. Many festival activities could be witnessed only by elite individuals, such as priests, but sometimes common people could see otherwise inaccessible sacred objects displayed in festival parades, and they would also enjoy feasting and merriment.

Israelite festivals were joyful occasions too, but the Day of Atonement was mainly characterized by awesome solemnity. Unlike the pagan festivals, the Torah does not require that the sacred objects kept in the Sanctuary, and later the Temple, ever to be brought out and paraded around during any festival.

Pagan deities received special offerings on festival days, in addition to their regular offerings, a practice paralleled in the Torah (Num. 28–29). However, there are some basic differences between the Israelite festivals and the festivals of the surrounding pagan cultures. First, pagan festivals belonged to polytheistic and idolatrous ritual systems, in contrast to the monotheism of the Israelite religion. Second, the pagan festivals were linked to mythology, in which gods enjoyed banquets, as they needed to be fed. Unlike Israel’s Lord, pagan deities were regarded as consuming the food offerings that priests served to them. Third, the Israelite festivals function within the context of the unique covenant between God and His chosen nation, Israel. When all Israelite males came to the

Sanctuary before God with offerings at the three pilgrim festivals, they were regularly demonstrating their loyalty to Him as His subjects. In the ancient Near East, treaties were enacted between the sovereign ruler and the vassal king, and religious relationships with the most powerful gods were primarily conducted between the king and/or the priests and the deities. The revolutionary message of the Torah is that the covenantal relationship extends to the individual, between each Israelite and God – a tremendous privilege that carries personal responsibility for faithfulness to the covenant stipulations – God’s commandments.

The numerous pagan sacred occasions, lasting one or more days each, occurred at various times of the year, including new moons, equinoxes, and harvest seasons. However, the Israelite calendar of sacred appointed times in Leviticus 23 uniquely begins with



➤ Funerary banquet relief, marble, ancient Greece



➤ Seti I offering a tray of foods, painted relief, Abydos, 13th century BCE

The historical aspects of the Israelite holidays commemorated God's role in history, as opposed to the mythic events associated with the pagan gods.

the weekly Sabbath (v. 3), which is the foundation of sacred time (Gen. 2:2–3), a stipulation of the covenant between the Lord and Israel (Ex. 20:8–11), serving as a sign that He sanctifies His people (Ex. 31:13). Leviticus 23 does not include new moons as sacred occasions for the Israelites to observe, but these are acknowledged by some extra sacrifices at the Sanctuary (Num. 28:1–15), accompanied by trumpet blasts (Num. 10:10). There are seven annual sacred days when work was restricted or prohibited: three during the spring in the months of Nisan (month 1) and Sivan (month 3) and four in the autumn month of Tishrei (month 7).

The pagan festival rituals served a wide variety of functions. For example, they could honor certain gods; commemorate mythic past events, such as the initial entrance of a god into his city (especially in Mesopotamian *Akitu* festivals), or enact aspects of the seasonal dying and rising of the god Baal (in the Levant); seek prosperity, especially agricultural fertility, for the coming year; celebrate harvests; purify sacred spaces and objects; and judge people with special relationships to gods, such as the king or temple personnel. One festival, such as the Babylonian *Akitu* Spring New Year Festival, could carry several such functions and would also affirm the existing social order by showing the support of gods for leaders of the religious and political establishment.

The Israelite festivals, in addition to their focus on the covenant with God, had agricultural as well as historical aspects. The sacred times linked to the agricultural cycle

celebrated harvests that the Lord made possible.

The historical aspects of the Israelite holidays commemorated God's role in history, as opposed to the mythic events associated with the pagan gods. The linked sacred occasions of Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread recall and ritually re-enact elements of the historical founding of the nation of Israel at the exodus from Egypt (compare to Ex. 12–13). The festival of Sukkot includes a re-enactment of the experience of dwelling in temporary shelters in the wilderness after the Israelites departed from Egypt (Lev. 23:42–43). Through the holiday rituals, the people of Israel are to keep alive the memory of God's deliverance of His people from slavery and His protection during their desert wanderings (Ex. 12:24–27; 13:3–10; Lev. 23:43). This emphasis on God's care for and saving of the people in these annual festivals had no parallel in the ancient Near East. ■ RG