

God and Holy Days

By
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“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.”

-Exodus 20:8-11

Once again, we are still in the holiday season, which is fairly apt for this paper, so I won't be writing a full essay, but merely giving my basic thoughts to each of the points made here.

We are still going over, what I have called, the mediating structures of the law. The elements of Judaism that allow for the people of God to draw near to Him, without having a direct encounter with God, which is impossible due to His holiness. The main way that these structures are presented to us in the ten commandments is the Sabbath day. However, since we have already discussed the Sabbath day in a previous study, I wanted instead to go over the three major holidays presented to us in the book of Exodus so that we can understand the purpose of Holy days both in the Old and New Covenant.

“Three times you shall keep a feast to Me in the year: “You shall keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread (you shall eat unleavened bread seven days, as I commanded you, at the time appointed in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt; none shall appear before Me empty); “and the Feast of Harvest, the firstfruits of your labors which you have sown in the field; and the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you have gathered in the fruit of your labors from the field.”

-Exodus 23:14-16

While more holy days are given in the book of Leviticus, and even more were developed throughout the history of Israel, I wanted to keep our study focused on these three, which are the main three holy days of the Jewish people, Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. They aren't really explained well here, so we will go to other passages to see them in greater detail but I first want to address something before we do this.

The Law and Holy Days

“One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks.”

-Romans 14:5-6

Two quick notes before we discuss these Holy days, or holidays. First, this will become a major theme in all the remaining mediating structures that we discuss, but ancient cultures had a very different way of approaching the world than we do. The person who helped me understand this better than anyone was a personal friend of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, Owen Barfield. Though brilliant, he is a bit difficult to read so I will give the cliff notes here. Barfield believed that the consciousness of ancient peoples had a direct similarity to all cultures until the enlightenment in western Europe in the 1600's. Up until that point, mankind was fairly unified in a way of thinking that he deemed, original participation.

In this mindset there was no distinction between the spiritual and the material, both participated perfectly with one another and contained each other. This was proven by the fact that all people groups until the enlightenment saw spirit as being a part of the material world. This is why the pagan gods lived on the earth, and why even medieval Europeans populated their imaginations with elves, dwarves, giants, and various monsters. It was supposed that these unseen entities were the ones who gave life to the various phenomena that we are witness to on a daily basis. In this mindset of participation, thought was transmitted and understood primarily through ritual and stories.

However, during the enlightenment, it was discovered that these phenomena can be scientifically explained through mechanistic properties. After this, our consciousness changed. Now we primarily learn through teaching and reading. This is important to understand because the Bible was written to cultures that lived during this time of original participation. Therefore, the primary way that they communicated was through ritual and story, not through direct teaching. This is what makes the books of Exodus and Leviticus so difficult for the modern reader, but so vital for the ancient reader.

We pour through these books looking for teaching, not understanding that the rituals preserved for us here *are* the teachings of the ancient Jews, they contain the wisdom of

this generation of Israelites and have been preserved to this day in the practice of Jews around the world and in our Scriptures.

This leads to the second point. The early church was made up of pagan converts to Christianity. As such, while they had holy days, these days celebrated pagan wisdom in pagan religious practice. Therefore, when they converted, the earliest question posed to the early church was whether these gentile believers should “convert” to Judaism and celebrate the Jewish holy days in light of Christ. The answer given was that they didn’t have to, which led to another question, what should the early Christians celebrate?

This is really what Romans 14 is about. While these gentile believers were prevented from the excesses of pagan worship, summed up in Acts 15 as sexual immorality and eating meat with the blood still in it, they were also not coerced into adopting Jewish practices. This led, eventually, to the gentile Christians developing their own holy days with their own rituals attached. This is what makes the holidays of Christianity so rich, they contain the wisdom of our past *contained* in the various religious practices. All that being said, let’s look at the passage that describes these Holy days, and look at the three primary benefits that I see within these celebrations, embodied understanding, participation, and communion.

Embodied Understanding

“These are the feasts of the LORD, holy convocations which you shall proclaim at their appointed times. ‘On the fourteenth day of the first 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; seven days you must eat unleavened bread. ‘On the first day you shall have a holy convocation; you shall do no customary work on it. ‘But you shall offer an offering made by fire to the LORD for seven days. The seventh day shall be a holy convocation; you shall do no customary work on it.’”

-Leviticus 23:4-8

To go off of Barfield’s point, in the modern world, since we have elevated teaching, we have forgotten the importance of embodied understanding. For sure, this feast could have been celebrated merely with a reading of the Exodus story and a teaching on it, but instead God has the people celebrate this holiday on a particular day and with particular practices. This is also interesting because the overall themes of Passover are universal. The theme of liberty from captivity, the theme of God’s sovereignty, justice and how people reap what they sow and so on.

But while these are universal, God has His people *understand* these principles through a particular day and a particular set of practices. This is also why these days follow the crop cycle. The first day, Passover, is celebrated when the first fruits of the summer harvest first appear, and Passover even contains another holiday, the Feast of First fruits. But after the first fruits of the harvest appear, they need time to blossom and then to be harvested. Pentecost then becomes the day that celebrates the end of the harvest.

Finally the Feast of Tabernacles, or as it's called in Exodus, the Feast of Ingathering, is celebrated after the fall harvest. This is not, as some have suggested, a Jewish attempt to make the pagan festivals of their time holy, but it is this same principle. The universal principles are understood through the particular crop cycles. This is why the Christian holidays follow this same pattern with the resurrection of Christ coming during the spring, and the incarnation celebrated in the dead of winter.

This is what our modern world doesn't understand. We have taken the quasi miraculous advances of our civilization that have happened through the enlightenment, and we have thrown the baby out with the bath water. Instead of preserving this type of embodied understanding, we have instead tried to understand the universal directly, but this never works.

Our society is falling apart because of that misapprehension. We think we can throw away the principles of liberty that our society was built on to get to real justice, social justice, cosmic justice. But in getting rid of the particulars, we find ourselves in a society that is increasingly without justice. We think we can get rid of the particular expressions of manhood and womanhood to get to the universal expressions of *man and woman*, but we are now a culture that has lost all meaning for these terms. This has led to a backlash that is already underway.

As wrong as it is to think that we can understand the universal without the particular, it is equally dangerous to conflate the particular *with* the universal. The progressive, liberal excess, is to get rid of the particular, and this is what we have seen over the last couple decades or so in our society. The conservative excess is fundamentalism, to enforce one particular as the universal principle. This would be racial essentialism and the kind of "blood and soil" arguments that the Nazi's used to rise to power. While our national right hasn't done this yet, the seeds of this kind of movement are planted, and time will tell what fruit they bring forth.

Something similar has happened in the church itself. By denying the particular traditions of our past, we have elevated the pulpit and come to the false conclusion that we can

understand the universal principles of Scripture in a vacuum, without any tradition. This has led to the excesses of so-called “Progressive Christianity”, which I wouldn’t deem to be Christian at all. This belief has completely unmoored the church from any and all tradition and has replaced it with new liberal dogma about sexuality and gender at the center of their version of Christianity.

The modern backlash is beginning here in the form of the youth going to Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy in growing numbers, but this is the equal and opposite mistake. The varying traditions of the church express the universal through their particular systems of faith. But these systems are not divinely instituted, nor are they infallible. If practiced correctly, the particular contains the universal, but they are not the same thing.

The author James Joyce once said:

“For myself, I always write about Dublin, because if I can get to the heart of Dublin I can get to the heart of all the cities of the world. In the particular is contained the universal.”

-James Joyce

The particular contains the universal, we can understand it no other way. This prepared the conscience of man for the incarnation. Although he has yet to embrace Christ as his Messiah, Dennis Prager made this profound point in his commentary on Exodus:

“The practice of physical rituals helps keep people attuned to the reality of God’s presence; otherwise, God can become too abstract and difficult to connect to. Humans, being physical beings, need some physical connection to God.

This helps explain why Christianity has many fewer ritual laws than Judaism. For Christians, God has taken on a physical form that provides them with a physical connection to God. But for Jews, since God is always non-physical, the way to have a physical connection to God is through ritual.”

-Dennis Prager - “Exodus Commentary”

The perfect expression of God, who is the universal principle, is contained in a particular man who lived during a particular time in human history. And this particular man contains all that it means to be a human being.

“For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

-Galatians 3:26-28

Communion

“And you shall count for yourselves from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering: seven Sabbaths shall be completed. ‘Count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath; then you shall offer a new grain offering to the LORD. ‘You shall bring from your dwellings two wave loaves of two-tenths of an ephah. They shall be of fine flour; they shall be baked with leaven. They are the firstfruits to the LORD. ‘And you shall offer with the bread seven lambs of the first year, without blemish, one young bull, and two rams. They shall be as a burnt offering to the LORD, with their grain offering and their drink offerings, an offering made by fire for a sweet aroma to the LORD. ‘Then you shall sacrifice one kid of the goats as a sin offering, and two male lambs of the first year as a sacrifice of a peace offering. ‘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 proclaim on the same day that it is a holy convocation to you. You shall do no customary work on it. It shall be a statute forever in all your dwellings throughout your generations. ‘When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field when you reap, nor shall you gather any gleanings from your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and for the stranger: I am the LORD your God.’”

-Leviticus 23:15-22

This next Holy Day is called the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost. It celebrates the giving of the law on Sinai and happens fifty days after Passover. For this holy day I wanted to focus on the importance of communion and holidays. For the big three holidays that we are discussing, the defining feature is that all able bodied men must make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in order to celebrate the holiday. What this tells us is that God is concerned not merely with individual understanding, but collective understanding.

This is what this day signifies. It isn't the day that Moses encountered God at Sinai in Exodus 3, but when the whole nation encountered God and received His word. This is signified in the types of sacrifices given. After the harvest is gathered, the whole nation appears before God to celebrate His provision through a special type of offering called a “wave offering”. Unlike the offerings given on the altar, this offering is presented publicly to all people, and the smoke of the offering goes up in the presence of the people as the priest literally “waves” the smoking offering before the people.

This later is practiced by the Jews, and the church itself, through the waving of incense in a censer during service. This represents the collective prayers of the faithful before

the throne of God. This same symbol is preserved in the church during the feast of Pentecost after the Resurrection:

“When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.”

-Acts 2:1-4

Tongues were given to show, as we talked about previously, how the universal has come through the particular. Words of praise directed at God are given utterance, not in one particular language, but in multitudes. This becomes a symbol of gathering. That the people of God have been drawn together by a single spirit to commune with God Himself, and one another. This is why the details of the celebration end with this:

“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field when you reap, nor shall you gather any gleaning from your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and for the stranger: I am the LORD your God.’”

-Leviticus 23:22

The holiday is a time to remember communion. Communion with our friends and family, but even communion with the stranger. This same symbol is given for the Sabbath:

“Six years you shall sow your land and gather in its produce, “but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave, the beasts of the field may eat. In like manner you shall do with your vineyard and your olive grove. “Six days you shall do your work, and on the seventh day you shall rest, that your ox and your donkey may rest, and the son of your female servant and the stranger may be refreshed.”

-Exodus 23:10-12

The Sabbath year is a year of rest and charity for all people, especially the poor and destitute. This is why we celebrate modern holidays the way that we do. We gather together as families and rest from work. For Christmas we exchange gifts. We make the journey to church, with even those who aren't Christians celebrating with the faithful. And we give time and charity to the stranger and the poor. I like this quote from “A Christmas Carol” when Scrooge's nephew is trying to explain the glory of Christmas to him:

“I have always thought of Christmas time, when it has come round — apart from the veneration due to its sacred name and origin, if anything belonging to it can be apart from that — as a good time; a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time: the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys.’

-Charles Dickens - “A Christmas Carol”

For in all these holidays we remember encounters with God. The Israelites remember the encounter they had with God in slavery, the wilderness, and their guidance to the promised land. Christians remember the incarnation, when God drew near to man, and the resurrection when God redeemed man and has called us to be with Him forever. They are days of celebration and hope all circling around wonderful communion with God Himself.

Participation/Celebration

“Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to the children of Israel, saying: ‘The fifteenth day of this seventh month shall be the Feast of Tabernacles for seven days to the LORD. ‘On the first day there shall be a holy convocation. You shall do no customary work on it. ‘For seven days you shall offer an offering made by fire to the LORD. On the eighth day you shall have a holy convocation, and you shall offer an offering made by fire to the LORD. It is a sacred assembly, and you shall do no customary work on it. ‘These are the feasts of the LORD which you shall proclaim to be holy convocations, to offer an offering made by fire to the LORD, a burnt offering and a grain offering, a sacrifice and drink offerings, everything on its day—‘besides the Sabbaths of the LORD, besides your gifts, besides all your vows, and besides all your freewill offerings which you give to the LORD. ‘Also on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the fruit of the land, you shall keep the feast of the LORD for seven days; on the first day there shall be a sabbath-rest, and on the eighth day a sabbath-rest. ‘And you shall take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of beautiful trees, branches of palm trees, the boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God for seven days. ‘You shall keep it as a feast to the LORD for seven days in the year. It shall be a statute forever in your generations. You shall celebrate it in the seventh month. ‘You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All who are native Israelites shall dwell in booths, ‘that your generations may know that I made the children of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.’”

-Leviticus 23:33-43

I like this holiday because it is the most “active” holiday that God gives to His people. On this day, they commemorate the time when their ancestors stayed in “tabernacles”, which is another word for tents, before entering the promised land. While this time was prolonged due to the faithlessness of the people, they were still going to have at least a year living in wilderness before coming to the promised land. This is then commemorated by the people by staying in tents, or little “booths” for a week, after the final harvest of the year in the fall time.

What this practice really drilled down into the minds of the Israelites is the importance of participation in their celebration. What this means is that faith in God was never meant to be merely observational, or intellectual understanding. The purpose of faith is to be active and participatory. The people aren’t asked to merely “remember” what God did, they actually act it out, and in so doing, they participate in the wilderness wandering of their people.

This point is made explicit in the Hagaddah, Jewish for “Telling”, of the Passover, which contains the many practices of this feast day:

“In every generation, every individual must feel as if he personally had come out of Egypt. As the Bible says: ‘And you shall tell your son on that day, ‘It is because of that which God did for me when I came out of Egypt.’ ” For it was not our ancestors alone whom God, blessed be He, redeemed. He redeemed all of us with them. As it is said: “He freed us from there that He might lead us to and give us the land which He promised our ancestors.”

-The Passover Haggadah

They must feel as though they *personally* came out of Egypt. This is the amazing thing about ritual. By embodying the practice it allows us to “personally experience” the work of God in history in the lives of our ancestors.

This point goes deeper though, because we are also given the chance to participate directly in God. When the people of God dwell in tabernacles, they remember that God also “dwell” in a tabernacle during their time in the wilderness. It was generations later before God finally received a temple. This is also what is done even on the Sabbath. That as the people of God work through the week, we participate in God’s work of creation, and in our rest, we participate in His rest.

The church then has this same practice. This is another casualty of our modern enlightenment mentality, but church is meant to be participatory and not merely observational. If we come to church merely to “hear” the worship or the sermon, we

have missed the whole point. The service is not there to be observed, but to be participated in.

The Sunday service is the church's Sabbath. Throughout the week we celebrate acts of creation and, for the church, redemption. This is most seen in the week of Easter, when we celebrate the works of Christ during Holy Week. But on Sunday, we celebrate and participate in the rest of God. We acknowledge His finished work, we celebrate that work, and we participate in it through our worship, our study, our prayers, and our communion. This is how Paul talks about communion:

"For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me." In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes."

-1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Notice we don't merely remember the Lord's death, but we "proclaim" it. By taking His sacrifice into ourselves, we participate in His sacrifice, we receive it, reveal it, and proclaim it to the world. This is to remember, always, that our faith is not merely understood, but it is embodied, and participated in. This brings meaning to our lives, and brings life to our faith.