

Pentecost Revisited (Part Two): Joshua 5

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In the last issue, we again broached the subject of the count to Pentecost, emphasizing the fact that God's instructions regarding the count should be applied consistently every year no matter when Passover might fall.

Scripture contains no alternative counting method when Passover occurs on a weekly Sabbath, so we are, in effect, adding to God's Word when we alter the count in these infrequent years. This article will focus primarily on Joshua 5, the historical incident that many use to say that the count should be modified when a Sabbath Passover occurs.

That Israel was a holy nation is far more important than is generally realized, and it affects our understanding of wavesheaf requirements. As a prelude to better understanding and properly appreciating many aspects of waving the sheaf, it is helpful to know that God specifically designated Israel a sanctified people. He set the entire nation apart as distinctive from the rest of the world's nations. As such, He gave them responsibilities to perform before the rest of the world as a testimony of their obedient service to God.

Deuteronomy 7:6 expresses this beautifully: "For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth."

God's declaration of certain things as "clean" and others as "unclean" helped to define this holiness to them. Some things declared unclean could not even be touched without making a person ceremonially defiled until he performed the prescribed rituals. Among the things declared polluted or unclean were the Gentiles, whose uncleanness was not inherent but lay in their idolatry: They did not worship the God of Creation who set the Israelites apart. As such, even a marriage between an Israelite and a Gentile was forbidden except within very narrow parameters.

The ceremonial aspects of the Israelites' responsibilities are quite detailed, and God expected them to be followed exactly as instructed because each detail fits precisely within His purposes for His relationship with His sanctified people. Are we wiser than He is? God is not the author of meaningless regulations. Waving the sheaf of grain is one of these ceremonial duties, containing explicit instructions with spiritual ramifications.

Joshua 4 and 5

The following quotation is from the *Pentecost Study Material*, assembled by Dr. Charles V. Dorothy during and following the 1974 study by the Worldwide Church of God (WCG), which provided the paper to its ministry:

Some brethren are concerned over the alleged "arbitrary" decision, especially since Joshua 5:10-11 *seems* to show the Israelites counted that Pentecost from Sunday, the High Day within Unleavened Bread. More study is needed and more is being done. (p. 73; emphasis his)

It appears that Dr. Dorothy was sensitive to some people's skepticism, otherwise why did he emphasize "seems"? Did he draw attention to the word because he felt that the doctrinal committee was banking on something vague, assuming some points, and reaching a conclusion it could not fully justify?

Joshua 5 is where the majority of the disagreement begins. Joshua 4:19 records that the children of Israel crossed the Jordan River on the tenth day of the first month. Joshua 5:1-9 leads a reader to conclude that the Israelite males were probably circumcised beginning on the eleventh day. But even this may be an assumption because Joshua 5:10-11 does not say that Israel kept Passover on the fourteenth day of the first month. In other words, it could have been lawfully kept in the second month (Numbers 9), although this scenario is less likely.

At no time or place in Scripture does God designate what month or day of the week this date fell upon that year. In fact, researchers are unable to give an absolute answer even to what *year* Israel entered the land. We always end up with calculated guesses. Should we build an important spiritual doctrine on a guess?

It is not this article's purpose to prove whether the Wavesheaf offering took place in the first or second month, only that Joshua 5 does not prove that the Israelites offered one at all. If they did not make one, it absolutely destroys the assumptions of a first day of Unleavened Bread Wavesheaf ceremony, since Joshua 5:10-11 is the source used to "support" this deviation.

So where is the authority from God's Word that Israel's observance of Passover that year was on a weekly Sabbath and that Wavesheaf Day was the next day, a Sunday, the first day of Unleavened Bread, a high-holy-day Sabbath? What positively, absolutely, biblically affirmed events are these conclusions based upon?

Notice that, thus far, the chapter makes:

1. No mention of an altar.
2. No mention of a priest.
3. No mention of the offerings God commanded to accompany the waving of the sheaf (Leviticus 23:12-13).
4. No mention whatever of a harvest.
5. No mention of the waving of the sheaf.

Interestingly, God mentions the circumcisions (which had not been performed during the wilderness journey), yet He makes no mention of what would have been the first altar, first sacrificial offerings, and first formal service in the Promised Land. It would also have been the first waving of the sheaf in the land.

However, Joshua 5:11 does say, "They ate the produce of the land on the day after the Passover, unleavened bread and parched grain, on the very same day." There is nothing wrong with this

statement unless one claims that the Israelites had to wave Canaanite-grown grain before God for acceptance before they could eat it. Do the ceremonial instructions give them permission to do this? Do the wavesheaf instructions require that they do this?

The answer to both questions is "No." In fact, such a wavesheaf is strictly forbidden. Exodus 23:16 says this in direct reference to Pentecost: "The Feast of Harvest, the firstfruits of *your* labors which *you have sown* in the field" (emphasis ours throughout). The offering had to be made of something the Israelites had sown by their own labors! Pentecost ends the harvest begun on Wavesheaf Day. Therefore, the same "you have sown" qualification applies to Wavesheaf Day as to Pentecost.

The Israelites had surely labored in harvesting grain in Canaan, but they had not sown what they harvested upon entering the land. It was an incomplete production and therefore not qualified. God could not accept such an offering because it did not meet the qualifications He had laid down for a holy people.

For God to accept such an offering would break the spiritual principle Paul mentions in I Corinthians 3:9: "We are laborers together with God." The Israelites were not part of the cycle of cooperation of purpose between them and God in the production of this particular harvest. It was therefore unacceptable for use as the wavesheaf.

"Nor From a Foreigner's Hand"

Furthermore, in Leviticus 22:18-25, just before the chapter containing the names and dates of all of God's festivals, He gives the following instruction:

Whatever man of the house of Israel, or of the strangers in Israel, who offers his sacrifice for any of his vows or for any of his freewill offering, which they offer to the Lord as a burnt offering—you shall offer of your own free will a male without blemish from the cattle, from the sheep, or from the goats. Whatever has a defect, you shall not offer, for it shall not be acceptable on your behalf. And whoever offers a sacrifice of a peace offering to the Lord, to fulfill his vow, or a freewill offering from the cattle or the sheep, it must be perfect to be accepted; there shall be no defect in it. Those that are blind or broken or maimed, or have an ulcer or eczema or scabs, you shall not offer to the Lord, nor make an offering by fire of them on the altar to the Lord. Either a bull or a lamb that has any limb too long or too short you may offer as a freewill offering, but for a vow it shall not be accepted. You shall not offer to the Lord what is bruised or crushed, or torn or cut; nor shall you make any offering of them in your land. *Nor from a foreigner's hand* shall you offer any of these as the bread of your God, because their corruption is in them, and defects are in them. They shall not be accepted on your behalf.

Some claim that, since these specific instructions are given in reference to animals offered to God, the principle of giving one's best to the Master does not apply to vegetable or grain offerings! Does that mean we may give God any old vegetation we happen to have lying around? As living sacrifices (Romans 12:1-2), are we free to give God any old thing, and He must accept it or else? Does He not deserve the best we have?

A holy people must give holy offerings! A holy offering is one given according to the details that God lays down. Jesus gives a practical application of this principle in Matthew 5:23-24: "Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you,

leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift."

He is essentially saying, "First things first." If a reconciliation does not take place, God has no obligation to accept the offering. It has been made based on a corrupt relationship with a brother, making the offering unacceptable. Likewise, God has no obligation to accept a defective, corrupted animal or unqualified grain offered before Him.

Furthermore, the principle of holiness comes to the fore in an additional way, for God plainly stipulates in Leviticus 22:25 that nothing is to be offered to Him from a foreigner's hand because the foreigner's corruption is in them. The uncleanness from the foreigner's idolatries is in the thing offered. The foreigner is not a holy, sanctified, or set-apart person.

In the case of Joshua 5, the Israelites clearly would have had to offer produce from the foreigner's hand—if they offered anything, which they did not—because that was all they would have had to offer. Having just come from the wilderness, they had no harvest of a crop they had sown, as Exodus 23:16 demands.

"Prepare Provisions"

In Joshua 1:11, just before crossing the Jordan into Canaan, Joshua commands the Israelites, "Prepare provisions for yourselves, for within three days you will cross over this Jordan, to go in to possess the land which the Lord your God is giving you to possess." Where did the Israelites obtain these provisions? It could not have been manna because manna could not be stored. There is only one possibility: The Israelites were already gathering food, including grains (remember, it was the spring harvest season), in the area in which they were camped. This leads to the inescapable conclusion that the Israelites were no longer completely dependent on manna.

This is pertinent because Joshua 5:11 says, "And they ate of the produce of the land on the day after the Passover, unleavened bread, and parched grain on the very same day." If this took place on the fifteenth day of the first month, as is most likely, it was a high-holy-day Sabbath, so no manna would have fallen that day.

They did not go hungry because they had the produce of the land (at the very least the provisions of Joshua 1:11) to eat. They could eat it without restriction because it was produce that Gentiles had sown. If they had had to wait until the wavesheaf ceremony had occurred before they could harvest (Leviticus 23:14), thresh, winnow, and grind the grain into flour, then bake unleavened bread or parch the grain "the very same day," they really would have been pushing any Sabbath liberty (Exodus 16:23-24; 12:16)! Instead, their food preparation had been completed before the holy day arrived because they were not required to wait for a wavesheaf ceremony!

It is a well-known historical fact that, despite many differences among their various sects over when the sheaf was to be waved, no Jewish group throughout history ever resorted to observing Wavesheaf Day on any Sabbath. They always kept it on a common workday because the labor of harvesting began immediately after the sheaf was waved.

Consider yet another factor drawn from the wavesheaf symbolism: Does not the sheaf above all else represent the true First of the Firstfruits—Jesus Christ? Our Savior was an Israelite, from the tribe of Judah. The Most Holy of all men was born into the holy people (John 1:11). Can grain from a Gentile

source—an unclean source in the symbolism—represent this greatest and purest of all Israelites, especially so since it typifies Him as just resurrected?

Deuteronomy 12

Deuteronomy 12 is important in clarifying why no altar, priests, wavesheaf, or sacrificial offering appears in Joshua 5:10-11:

These are the statutes and judgments which you shall be careful to observe in the land which the Lord God of your fathers is giving you to possess, all the days that you live on the earth. You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations which you shall dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. And you shall destroy their altars, break their sacred pillars, and burn their wooden images with fire; you shall cut down the carved images of their gods and destroy their names from that place. You shall not worship the Lord your God with such things. But you shall seek the place where the Lord your God chooses, out of all your tribes, to put His name for His dwelling place; and there you shall go. There you shall take your burnt offerings, your sacrifices, your tithes, the heave offerings of your hand, your vowed offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks. And there you shall eat before the Lord your God, and you shall rejoice in all to which you have put your hand, and your households, in which the Lord your God has blessed you. You shall not at all do as we are doing here today—every man doing whatever is right in his own eyes—for as yet you *have not come to the rest and the inheritance* which the Lord your God is giving you. But when you cross over the Jordan and dwell in the land which the Lord your God is giving you to inherit, and *He give you rest from all your enemies* round about, so that you dwell in safety, *then* there will be the place where the Lord your God chooses to make His name abide. *There* you shall bring all that I command you: *your burnt offerings, your sacrifices, your tithes, the heave offering of your hand, and all your choice offerings* which you vow to the Lord. And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God, you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levite who is within your gates, since he has no portion nor inheritance with you. *Take heed to yourself that you do not offer your burnt offerings in every place you see*; but in the place which the Lord chooses, in one of your tribes, there you shall offer your burnt offerings, and there you shall do all that I command you. (Deuteronomy 12:1-14)

The WCG's *Pentecost Study Paper* refers to Deuteronomy 12 five times, each time *only* to reference certain words on how to count to Pentecost. Not even one time does it refer to what Deuteronomy 12 is actually saying in regard to a significant subject pertinent to Joshua 5:10-11.

Moses wrote Deuteronomy in the last months before Israel entered the Promised Land. The book is a prelude to renewing the covenant between God and Israel and what would immediately follow. As such, when Israel entered the Land, some of the worship patterns followed in the wilderness were to undergo a radical change.

Moses divided Deuteronomy into at least four sections. The first section serves to remind Israel of the many things God had done for Israel to bring them to where they were just about ready to inherit

the land. The second section, beginning in chapter 12, contains instructions on the response God expected from the Israelites once they entered the land. It calls for a number of changes in their worship of Him.

In verses 1-4, He makes it abundantly clear that He would not tolerate even a shadow of syncretic mixing with the gods and religions of the people of the land. Regardless of location, every place where the Canaanites worshipped was to be utterly destroyed, and every idol of stone or wood smashed and/or burned to ashes. They were even to eradicate the names of those places!

The imagery is of God storming into the land as a conquering General who will brook no interference from the conquered people. He shows His disdain for everything they hold dear and important in their worship of the gods they admire and are devoted to. By doing so, He also shows the Israelites the weaknesses of Canaanite gods. They cannot protect the Canaanites.

Change in Worship

Verse 5 begins to relate instructions for one of the more radical changes involved in Israel's worship of God. Once in the land, they would no longer be permitted to worship by erecting an altar and offering sacrifices at any place, except as God Himself appointed. No Israelite was free to choose for himself where worship could take place. God would be worshipped at His Tabernacle, His dwelling place in Israel, and it would be located and erected where He and He alone would choose. There and there only, on the Tabernacle's brazen altar—just outside His front door, as it were—would they be able to offer their sacrifices.

God had already given Israel a prelude to this. Once the Tabernacle was constructed in the wilderness, all religious and civil affairs revolved around the location where it was set up. Every time Israel camped in one place long enough to erect the Tabernacle, it became the center of their encampment, and each tribe was assigned its never-varying place in relation to the Tabernacle. All religious and civil affairs were thus conducted in His presence.

The context of Deuteronomy 12 makes it clear that, to God, there are two overriding issues behind these commands. The first is loyalty to Him only as God. The first commandment reads, "You shall have no other gods before Me," meaning "no other gods in place of Me." God will not brook sharing the relationship with Him with another "god" on any level of devotion. The second issue is the Israelites' unity with each other as a nation. Unlike other nations, Israel's national unity was not driven by political or military forces but by religion, the one God gave to them through Moses. This is why the central sanctuary is of supreme importance to them as a nation.

In the wilderness, the Israelites had already shown themselves to be easily attracted to heathen practices. They had also exhibited a strong, independent spirit that drove them to go their own way, to do their own thing, whether or not religion was directly involved. Once settled in the land, they would be scattered over an area far larger than any wilderness encampment. Their free moral agency was thus about to be severely tested. They needed a central sanctuary to retain their relationship with God and their unity as a nation.

The charges given to them in Deuteronomy 12 are strongly reinforced by the demand of verse 32: "Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it." If they were to remain the holy people of God, no deviations were allowed!

Beginning in verse 8, God strictly forbids them to do as they had done in the past, erecting altars virtually wherever they wished. They are to understand that they were no longer a wandering people but a nation anchored in the land, and their worship of God and actions as a nation must reflect that. Their days of transition in the wilderness from a slave to a free people, from a loosely scattered, blood-related people to a united nation, were over! Their real birth as a nation under God had begun.

Central to this idea is that all sacrificing, except for the Passover, had to be done on one national altar. The festivals, especially the three major ones, had to be kept in one central location, and all tithes were to be sent to that same central place of worship. This did not mean that they could not hold Sabbath services in their home locations, but any local services would have to be conducted without the sacrificing of animals or any of the rituals assigned to festivals, daily acts of worship like evening and morning sacrifices, and voluntary offerings that an Israelite felt compelled to give. This general prohibition against local sacrifices included the waving of the sheaf, which was always done at the Tabernacle/Temple within the "Passover season," which continued from Passover until Pentecost.

The Tabernacle was not erected until the land had rest from the warfare of conquering the Canaanites. This occurred as God appointed in Deuteronomy 12:9-11. The period of peace that satisfied God's requirements was not reached until seven years after the Israelites crossed over the Jordan. At that time, His choice of location for the Tabernacle and its altar was Shiloh: "Then the whole congregation of the children of Israel assembled together at Shiloh, and set up the tabernacle of meeting there. And the land was subdued before them" (Joshua 18:1).

Does this mean that no sacrificing as part of the normal worship of God was done for seven years? Yes, but consider that, regarding the Joshua 5 circumcisions, Scripture says that no Israelite male born in the wilderness had been circumcised (Joshua 5:2-7). In fact, only two people alive at the time, Joshua and Caleb, had lawfully been able to partake of perhaps the most important of all rituals—Passover—for the entire forty years!

It also means that none of those uncircumcised males—probably a million or more men!—had been able to make the Old Covenant with God (Exodus 12:43-49). Seven years spent doing God's work of conquering the land was a drop in the bucket compared to other long-term works He had them do by His command. Even so, He would have that work done by a circumcised people. This is another case of God saying through His example, "First things first."

Two Altars

The concept of one central sanctuary and altar was so deeply and emotionally ingrained that Joshua 22 relates the history of a war that nearly erupted between the tribes on the east side of the Jordan River and those on the west. The western Israelites charged those in the east with building an altar, breaking God's commandment. Such an altar would compete with the sanctuary altar in Shiloh for the loyalty of the people. Building another altar would be a direct, rebellious act of idolatry against God, and it would destroy the unity of Israel as a nation under the God of Creation.

The west-side tribes were poised to launch a war against their eastern brethren until they heard the easterners' explanation. The "altar" was actually a monument, a memorial in the shape of an altar, raised to serve as a constant reminder of the east side's unity with their western relatives in common cause under the God of Israel. The memorial's shape was to remind them that their unity was in and through the God they worshipped.

Another altar, appearing briefly in Joshua 8:30, is also easily explained. It in no way conflicts with God's commands in Deuteronomy 12. Why? God Himself had commanded this particular altar to be erected as part of an important ceremony—a renewal of a covenant. The event in Joshua 8 has its beginning in Deuteronomy 11:26-32 where the ceremony is commanded. Immediately after, God begins His charge in Deuteronomy 12 concerning His expectations of the Israelites after they crossed into the land.

In Deuteronomy 29—30, which occurs while the Israelites were still outside the Promised Land but just about to enter into it, a special covenant is made between God and Israel. This covenant, with Moses presiding, served as a specific and immediate preparation for entering the Promised Land. Part of its purpose was surely motivational, highlighting the powerful, steadfast faithfulness of God.

In Joshua 8, with the conquest of the land just beginning, the tribes—in another solemn ceremony, this time presided over by Joshua—carry out God's command to repeat the renewal of the covenant within the land on Mounts Ebal and Gerizim. This one-time erection of an altar in no way conflicted with God's commands in Deuteronomy 12. It was not part of the normal worship of God. It was nonetheless an important reminder of their weighty responsibility to carry out God's work of conquering the land of their inheritance, and of His ever-present faithfulness in assisting them.

A Brief Summary

Joshua 5:10-11 gives absolutely no evidence of any wavesheaf ceremony. According to God's instructions on the matter, the Israelites had nothing acceptable to offer to Him. Any wavesheaf lifted before Him from Gentile-grown grain would have been an abomination!

Deuteronomy 12 absolutely forbids the erection of an altar for the normal ceremonial worship of God until the land had been conquered, Israel had peace, the location of the central sanctuary (the Tabernacle with all its furniture and priests standing to serve) had been determined, and the Tabernacle set up.

Due to the facts that no wavesheaf ceremony was possible, no accompanying sacrifices were permitted, and the Israelites' preparation for the holy-day Sabbath was finished in time, one cannot extrapolate with absolute certainty that that particular Passover occurred on a weekly Sabbath immediately prior to the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Further, one certainly cannot use such an assumption as permission to begin the count to Pentecost from a holy-day Sabbath, which can never be a common workday.

Leviticus 23 specifically states that the wavesheaf must be made on the day *after* a Sabbath, not *on* a Sabbath. The present practice of most of the churches of God is so unusual that no one else in the world of Christianity or Judaism may have ever done such a thing.

Basing an important doctrine on symbolism is a shaky proposition in the first place, especially when its application is tied to a lunar calendar with its annual shifting of days and dates. Should we build major doctrines on symbolism or the solidity of a direct statement or example?

Joshua 5:10-11 cannot be used as the basis to change God's firmly set rule established in Leviticus 23:15-16, which says to begin the count to Pentecost with the day following the weekly Sabbath that falls within the Feast of Unleavened Bread. When building on sandy assumptions, the foundation is inherently weak, and the conclusion will crumble when put to the test.

