

Was Joshua Required To Offer The Wavesheaf?

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When the Worldwide Church of God under Herbert Armstrong began keeping Pentecost, a new thing was created. From what we can tell from history, nobody ever kept Pentecost on Monday each year until the WCG did. It was without precedent. Now, I do not say this to cast aspersions on Herbert Armstrong. As we know, his understanding was incomplete (as is everyone's), and when he saw that he was wrong, he repented and changed. He did not dig in to come up with a way to justify what he had been doing.

That new thing was discarded in 1974 by almost everyone when the WCG started keeping Pentecost on Sunday. However, when that happened, another new thing was created, perhaps inadvertently. This second new thing was the insistence that Wavesheaf Day, rather than the Sabbath, had to fall within Unleavened Bread, even when it put Wavesheaf day on a holy day. Now, by "new," I don't mean that nobody thought of that, but it was new in the sense that none of the groups at the time of Christ and the early church did that.

There is a simple yet substantial reason why the Jews then did not allow Wavesheaf Day to coincide with the First Day of Unleavened Bread, and that is that Wavesheaf Day marked the beginning of the harvest. This point may not register with us today because we are not an agrarian society, but for most of the Israelites' history, the harvest was their livelihood and much depended on it. In one parable, Jesus said, "when the grain ripens, immediately [the farmer] puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come." They didn't wait around for something to spoil the harvest. The waving of the sheaf was not just a ceremony. It was a critical day when the harvest began, and thus, it was a common work day, not a holy day, until recently.

God told Israel in Deuteronomy 16:9, "begin to count the seven weeks from the time you begin to put the sickle to the grain." Whatever day they did the work of putting the sickle to the grain, that was the day they started counting. During the time of Christ, even though the Pharisees, Sadducees, and the

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Essenes all had different interpretations of when to start the count, none of them put the beginning of the harvest on a day about which God said, “You shall do no customary work.”

Now, if you have studied into the count, you know that there is not a verse somewhere that makes everything clear. Everyone has to make some inferences or assumptions. You also probably know that right about now, the discussion usually turns to Joshua 5. We won't turn to it, but I will refresh your memory. The first nine verses of Joshua 5 record Joshua overseeing the circumcision of the nation because the people had neglected it in the wilderness. And then, starting in verse 10, it says,

Joshua 5:10-12 Now the children of Israel camped in Gilgal, and kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the month at twilight on the plains of Jericho. 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. Then the manna ceased on the day after they had eaten the produce of the land; and the children of Israel no longer had manna, but they ate the food of the land of Canaan that year.

There is no mention of the Wavesheaf being offered. Nevertheless, the new view holds that because of Joshua's faithfulness, the Wavesheaf would have been offered because it appears to be required. That's what we are going to look at today: whether the Israelites were required to offer the Wavesheaf in Joshua 5. Please turn with me to Leviticus 23:

Leviticus 23:9-11 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: ‘When you come into the land which I give to you, and reap its harvest, then you shall bring a sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest to the priest. He shall wave the sheaf before the LORD, to be accepted on your behalf; on the day after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it.

Our main focus will be on the phrase in verse 10, “when you come into the land.” This phrase is the reason it is often assumed that the Israelites offered the Wavesheaf in Joshua 5. There is nothing tricky in the translation, but sometimes a meaning is attached to it that is not warranted. It is easy to interpret the phrase to mean, “As soon as you come into the land,” or, “As

soon as you cross over the Jordan.” In this interpretation, Israel came into the land under Joshua, and so as soon as there was a spring holy day season, the Israelites must have offered a sheaf of barley in order to comply with these instructions.

The phrase, “when you come into the land,” or its cousin, “when the [Eternal] brings you into the land,” is used 15 times. God gave 15 specific instructions that would apply when Israel was in the land, as contrasted to when they were in the wilderness. We won’t go through them all, but we will see that the phrase is general, and simply refers to Israel being in the land. It is not limited to the day or even the year after Israel crossed the Jordan. The phrase is not an absolute, meaning it does not override God’s other instructions.

Let’s look at some of the other usages, beginning in Deuteronomy 26:

Deuteronomy 26:1-3 “And it shall be, when you come into the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, and you possess it and dwell in it, that you shall take some of the first of all the produce of the ground, which you shall bring from your land that the LORD your God is giving you, and put it in a basket and go to the place where the LORD your God chooses to make His name abide. And you shall go to the one who is priest in those days, and say to him, ‘I declare today to the LORD your God that I have come to the country which the LORD SWORE to our fathers to give us.’”

This is a typical “when you come into the land” instruction, and it concerns a firstfruits offering. Whether this includes the Wavesheaf is not directly stated. Even if it does not, the instruction still helps us to understand the scope of “when you come into the land.” Verse 1 says that the Israelites had to possess and dwell in the land. That did not happen until after the conquest was complete. Simply crossing the Jordan was not sufficient. Verse 2 says they were to go to where God made His name abide. God did not place His name anywhere until the land was at rest, which took about seven years. And in verse 3, God says, “go to the one who is priest in those days.” He doesn’t say, “in that day,” but “in those days.” This involves a future span of time, not just one time when Israel entered the land. This was given a month before Israel entered the land with Eleazar as priest, but it looks beyond that

to whomever was the priest when all the conditions were right. What this shows is that “when you come into the land” does not stand on its own. It can be modified by other requirements. If this passage includes the Wavesheaf—and it’s hard to find a reason why it wouldn’t—then Israel was not required to offer it in Joshua 5 on the First Day of Unleavened Bread.

The next one we will look at is in Numbers 15:

Numbers 15:17-21 Again the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: ‘When you come into the land to which I bring you, then it will be, when you eat of the bread of the land, that you shall offer up a heave offering to the LORD. You shall offer up a cake of the first of your ground meal as a heave offering; as a heave offering of the threshing floor, so shall you offer it up. Of the first of your ground meal you shall give to the LORD a heave offering throughout your generations.

This “when you come into the land” instruction is incredible in its implications. The heave offering mentioned here is not the same as the Wavesheaf, though there are similarities. Like the Wavesheaf, this offering is a “when you come into the land” instruction. And like the Wavesheaf, this offering must be performed in conjunction with eating the grain of the land. We know Israel ate from the land in Joshua 5, but this heave offering, like the Wavesheaf, is not mentioned as being made. But what is critical is that if we apply the same reasoning to this offering that the new view applies in assuming the Wavesheaf was offered in Joshua 5, we end up with a real problem.

Consider all the work that this offering required. There was the labor of reaping the grain. The threshing floor is mentioned, and threshing is certainly labor intensive. Then there was the work of grinding the grain, which is even more work. But before grinding comes the work of winnowing to get out all the chaff. This is what we miss by being so far removed from agriculture. If we assume that the Israelites waved the sheaf in Joshua 5 on the First Day of Unleavened Bread, then we must also assume that they performed all of this reaping, threshing, winnowing, and grinding on the same holy day when they ate of the bread of the land. Those assumptions have serious implications because they suggest that the sanctity of a holy day is of no account. So,

either the Israelites performed all this work on the First Day of Unleavened Bread when they also (allegedly) waved the sheaf, or else they refrained because the conditions were not right, and thus, there is no example of a Wavesheaf on the First Day of Unleavened Bread.

It is worth remembering that Israel went into captivity in large part for defiling God's Sabbaths—for not keeping them holy—so it's no wonder that all the Jewish groups steered clear of starting the harvest and the corresponding count on an annual Sabbath.

We will look at one more example:

Exodus 12:24-25 And you shall observe this thing as an ordinance for you and your sons forever. It will come to pass when you come to the land which the LORD will give you, just as He promised, that you shall keep this service.

This is the first “when you come into the land” instruction, and it concerns the Passover. We know the Israelites obeyed this one in the first month when they came into the land. Remember, though, that all the Israelite men were circumcised first, even though there is no mention of circumcision in these instructions. God does not give all the Passover requirements here—He simply says, “Observe this when you come into the land.” But Joshua knew from what else God had said that the Israelites had to be circumcised before they could eat the Passover. He recognized that this instruction in Exodus 12 did not stand on its own. It did not override the other instructions—they all had to work together.

In the same way that the Passover has requirements that are not spelled out in this “when you come into the land” instruction, so also the Wavesheaf offering had requirements that faithful Joshua would have presumptuously ignored if he thought the Wavesheaf had to be offered as soon as they came into the land. One very simple yet highly significant requirement prohibited the Israelites from offering either the Wavesheaf or the heave offering we read about. That is, God would not accept offerings of grain that the Israelites did not sow. He only accepted offerings that came from the Israelites' own labors. They could not offer anything that came from a foreigner's hand—God says it contains defects and corruption. It was fine

for the Israelites to eat, which they did. But they could not offer it to the holy God. You can find that principle in Exodus 23:16 and Leviticus 22:25 (also see Deuteronomy 12:8-11). Incidentally, this also means the Israelites could not have made the Pentecost offering of the two loaves that first year, because the only grain available was not from their own labors.

As we have seen, the phrase, “when you come into the land,” is a general instruction for when the Israelites were in the land of promise, but there could be other instructions that modify whether something was applicable right away. Because of this, Joshua and the Israelites were not required to make the Wavesheaf offering, even though they were “in the land.” Joshua 5 fails to support the new thing—the idea that Wavesheaf day and the beginning of the harvest could fall on a holy day. What Joshua 5 does, though, is provide a test of our willingness to inquire into the whole counsel of God, and live by His every word.

What is on trial within the question of when to begin the count is God’s holiness—something else that has faded from view in these sophisticated days. God’s annual Sabbaths are holy days—they are sanctified—and how much that sanctification weighs on us affects how we make conclusions about God’s intent when something is not directly spelled out. In the same way, holiness determines whether an offering is acceptable to Him. Cain thought one offering was as good as another, and God rejected it. Nadab and Abihu made an offering with the wrong type of fire, and God executed them. The offering was of incense, but God called the fire they used profane because it came from the wrong source. They took God’s holiness lightly, but God does not. What is offered, when it is offered, and everything associated with it, matter to God, and these things should matter to us as well.