119 MINISTRIES

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Can We Keep the Biblical Pilgrimage Festivals Today?

Many believers today celebrate the biblical festivals, such as Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. God commanded his people to celebrate these festivals in the Torah (Leviticus 23), and Jesus—known in Hebrew as Yeshua—urged his followers to keep the Torah's commandments (Matthew 5:19). Also, the apostles and earliest believers continued to observe these biblical festivals throughout the first century (e.g., Acts 2:1; 20:6, 16; 27:9; 1 Corinthians 5:7-8). So, for many followers of Yeshua today, keeping these festivals is one way that we walk out our faith in the same way that the earliest believers walked out *their* faith.

However, is it even accurate to say that we keep the festivals today? Some would say no. After all, there are some aspects of the festivals that most people simply *cannot* keep literally. Take, for instance, the three main harvest festivals that we mentioned earlier: Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. The Torah commands all males to appear before YHWH during these times at the place he will choose—namely, Jerusalem:

Deuteronomy 16:16

> Three times a year all your males shall appear before the LORD [YHWH] your God at the place that he will choose: at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, at the Feast of Weeks, and at the Feast of Booths. They shall not appear before the LORD [YHWH] empty-handed.
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> See also Exodus 23:14-17

Based on this passage, some have argued *against* celebrating the biblical pilgrimage festivals today. They argue that believers cannot actually keep these festivals because the Torah requires pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Deuteronomy 16:16 explicitly states that all males must appear before YHWH at the place he chooses, which refers to the tabernacle or temple in Jerusalem. Therefore, any attempt to keep the festivals outside the land is invalid. And even if a person today lived very close to Jerusalem, the commandment still cannot be fulfilled literally since there is no functioning temple at which one can present himself "before YHWH."

But does this argument hold up biblically? We would say no. In this teaching, we will look at how the

Torah itself provides accommodations for those living too far from the land and without access to the temple. We will also look at how the pilgrimage festivals were observed by early Jews and Christians outside the land of Israel and how this commandment was interpreted historically. Finally, we will end with some thoughts on how to best honor these festivals today. Let's get started.

Understanding the Commandment as an Ideal

Deuteronomy 16:16 states that all males are to appear before YHWH at the place he chooses during the three harvest festivals of Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. While this seems like a straightforward commandment, we would suggest that the Torah is describing an *ideal* and not necessarily an absolute requirement for every male in every circumstance.

Okay, but wait a minute, doesn't it say in Deuteronomy 16:16, as well as in Exodus 23:14-17, that "all your males" (כָּל־זְכוּרְךָ, *kol zekhurkha*) shall appear before YHWH? It does. However, this same kind of language appears in other passages where implied exceptions clearly exist. For example, the Torah commands "*all* the congregation of Israel" to eat the Passover on the fourteenth day of the first month (Exodus 12:47). But this can't be an absolute requirement for *literally every Israelite* to eat the Passover on the fourteenth day of the first month. Why? Because the Torah prohibits anyone who is ritually impure from eating sacrifices (Leviticus 7:20), and the Passover is a sacrifice. In fact, Numbers 9 shows that God even provides an alternative Passover in the *second month* for anyone who could not participate on the fourteenth day of the first month:

Numbers 9:9-11

> The LORD [YHWH] spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the people of Israel, saying, If any one of you or of your descendants is unclean through touching a dead body, or is on a long journey, he shall still keep the Passover to the LORD [YHWH]. In the second month on the fourteenth day at twilight they shall keep it. They shall eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.

This implies that the command for "all the congregation of Israel" to eat the Passover on the fourteenth day of the first month represents an *ideal*, but there is a built-in exception. It is assumed that not every Israelite would eat the Passover on the fourteenth day of the first month because some Israelites would be ritually impure through touching a dead body during that time.

The existence of this explicit exception to a commandment that is given to "all" Israelites may demonstrate a legal principle. The Torah acknowledges that certain unavoidable barriers sometimes hinder the literal performance of certain commandments. We may argue that, in principle, the pilgrimage fits this situation. The command for "all your males" to pilgrimage to Jerusalem represents an ideal, but it can be assumed that not literally every male would be able to do so for various reasons. Some of those reasons may include things like exile, distance, and the loss of the temple, which make literal fulfillment of the commandment impossible. So, just like with Numbers 9:9-11, there may be legitimate circumstances that prevent some individuals from appearing at the sanctuary.

Another passage we might consider is Deuteronomy 14:24-25:

Deuteronomy 14:24-25

> And if the way is too long for you, so that you are not able to carry the tithe, when the LORD [YHWH] your God blesses you, **because the place is too far from you**, which the LORD [YHWH] your God chooses, to set his name there, then you shall turn it into money and bind up the money in your hand and go to the place that the LORD [YHWH] your God chooses.

This passage discusses legislation for the festival tithe, which was to be brought to Jerusalem (Deuteronomy 14:22-23). In ancient Israel, this tithe consisted of things like grain, wine, oil, and cattle (Deuteronomy 14:23). However, as the text acknowledges, it would be logistically difficult for those living far away to bring this tithe to Jerusalem. So, the Torah provides an accommodation for those living far away: they can bring money instead.

Once again, the Torah recognizes that, in some situations, a commandment cannot be fulfilled literally and offers practical accommodations—here, specifically for those who live "too far" from Jerusalem. In other words, the Torah itself adjusts *how* a person can keep the commandment when distance prevents him from keeping it literally. If the Torah allows for accommodations with respect to the tithe because of distance, perhaps in principle, similar accommodations could also apply to the pilgrimage itself. And when we look at how the early Jews and Christians living in the diaspora practiced this commandment, we find that they did, in fact, interpret it in this very way.

Before we go further, it is important to state clearly what we are *not* saying. We are not saying that physical distance or any other hindrance gives people an excuse to just disregard the pilgrimage commandment entirely. The question is not *whether* it can apply to those living far away, but rather *how* it can apply. Even though, for most people, physical circumstances prevent them from applying the commandment literally, there are still ways to honor the spirit of the commandment where they are. Let's look at some ways early Jews and Christians in the diaspora applied this commandment.

Keeping the Pilgrimage Festivals Outside the Land

When we look at the commandments concerning Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, and Tabernacles, it becomes clear that many aspects of these festivals can be observed without being in the land. For example, during Unleavened Bread, we are told to eat only unleavened bread and remove the leaven from our homes (Exodus 12:18-19). During Pentecost, we are to "rejoice" and to show concern for the poor (Deuteronomy 16:11). During Tabernacles, we are to dwell in temporary shelters (Leviticus 23:33-43). All of these festivals also involve days of rest and the call to remember God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt. Again, none of these practices require being in the land or a physical temple. When diaspora Jews and Christians observed these festivals outside the land, they kept these aspects of the festivals where they lived.

Let's look at an example. The Book of Tobit, written sometime in the third or second century BC, is set among the exiled Israelites living in Nineveh after the fall of the northern kingdom. Its main character, Tobit from the tribe of Naphtali, is portrayed as a devout Israelite striving to keep the Torah in exile. The setting of this story is important, as it shows Tobit celebrating Pentecost, one of the pilgrimage festivals, even while living outside the land:

Tobit 2:1-2, NRSV

> Then during the reign of Esar-haddon I returned home, and my wife Anna and my son Tobias were restored to me. At our festival of **Pentecost**, which is the sacred festival of weeks, a good dinner was prepared for me and I reclined to eat. When the table was set for me and an abundance of food placed before me, I said to my son Tobias, "Go, my child, and bring whatever poor person you may find of our people among the exiles in Nineveh, who is wholeheartedly mindful of God, and he shall eat together with me. I will wait for you, until you come back."

Here, Tobit is depicted as celebrating Pentecost while living in exile in Nineveh. He even makes a point

of including the poor in his rejoicing, reflecting the instructions in Deuteronomy 16:11. The narrative takes place after the northern tribes had been exiled (2 Kings 17), meaning that pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem was not possible. Even so, Tobit is shown faithfully observing the festival in the way he is able to do so, keeping it locally while in exile.

Although the story is fictional, it offers valuable insight into how early Jews understood the pilgrimage festivals. The Jewish authors portray Tobit's observance of Pentecost in exile as fully faithful and legitimate. If keeping the festival outside the land were considered improper or invalid, we would expect them to condemn Tobit for doing so. Instead, the narrative consistently upholds him as a model of righteousness. The point is that it is good to do the best you can, even in less-than-ideal circumstances when the pilgrimage cannot be kept literally.

Diaspora Jews in the first century seem to have understood this principle. When discussing the pilgrimage festivals, Philo, a first-century Jewish teacher, acknowledges the practical reality that not everyone outside the land would be able to travel to Jerusalem. So, what did the early Jews do? The solution for these Jewish communities was not to disregard the festivals or even to disregard the pilgrimage commandment. As Philo records, the command to pilgrimage to Jerusalem was carried out vicariously through representatives (See Jonathan R. Trotter, *The Jerusalem Temple in Diaspora: Jewish Practice and Thought during the Second Temple Period* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2019), 88-89). The Diaspora communities would collect the temple tax and other offerings, and a representative from their communities would bring it to Jerusalem during one of the pilgrimage festivals. Here is what Philo writes:

> For it is commanded that all men shall every year bring their first fruits to the temple, from twenty years old and upwards; and this contribution is called their ransom...Accordingly **there is in almost every city a storehouse for the sacred things to which it is customary for the people to come and there to deposit their first fruits, and at certain seasons there are sacred ambassadors selected on account of their virtue, who convey the offerings to the temple**.
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> —Philo, *The Special Laws* 1.77-78 (Translated by Charles Duke Yonge). See also Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.312.

Thus, festival offerings were kept within the local community, and when the pilgrimage festivals arrived, a designated representative would carry them to Jerusalem. In this way, the diaspora Jewish communities could observe the pilgrimage vicariously through their representatives. As for most Jews who stayed behind, they kept the festivals as faithfully as they could in their own local communities, much like Tobit is depicted as doing in Nineveh.

This practice of sending a representative to Jerusalem for the festivals may also reflect the practice of the early followers of Yeshua. In 1 Corinthians 5:8, Paul instructs the Corinthians to celebrate the festival of Unleavened Bread, which is one of the pilgrimage festivals. However, Corinth was over 800 miles away from Jerusalem, making pilgrimage unrealistic for most believers. This means that the majority of the Corinthian community would have celebrated the festival locally, while possibly also designating a representative to travel to Jerusalem with money collected from the community (Jin K. Hwang, "Jewish Pilgrim Festivals and Calendar in Paul's Ministry with the Gentile Churches," *Tyndale Bulletin* 63.1 (2012), 89-107). In fact, Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 16 concerning the collection for the saints in Jerusalem closely resembles this Diaspora Jewish practice of collecting and transporting offerings to Jerusalem for the festivals. He states that this collection should be brought to Jerusalem by one of their representatives (1 Corinthians 16:1-4). For more on this, see our teaching, "**Celebrate the**

Festival (1 Corinthians 5:7-8)."

So, it would seem that early Jews and Christians did not disregard the pilgrimage festivals, even though many of them lived outside the land and could not travel to Jerusalem. They kept the festivals where they were. They also did not disregard the pilgrimage requirement. Even though their physical circumstances prevented them from keeping it literally, they looked for other ways to honor the spirit of the commandment.

Keeping the Pilgrimage Festivals Today

So, the Torah itself acknowledges that some situations—like distance, exile, ritual impurity, and so forth—can prevent us from keeping certain commandments literally and offers practical accommodations. Similarly, we have suggested that while the pilgrimage command for the harvest festivals cannot be fulfilled literally, there are other ways to obey the spirit of the command—and the evidence indicates that early Jews and Christians understood and applied this commandment accordingly. Many of them observed the festivals faithfully outside the land, honoring the pilgrimage requirement in whatever ways were realistically possible for them.

Today, our situation resembles that of early Jews and Christians living outside the land in the first century. Like them, we literally observe the parts of each festival that can still be kept. We eat unleavened bread, observe the days of rest, rejoice, give to those in need, dwell in temporary shelters, and so on. And for the aspects of the festivals we cannot keep—such as traveling to Jerusalem—we seek to honor the commandment the best we can. This might involve praying while facing Jerusalem as a way of directing our hearts toward the place YHWH chose, giving generously to the poor or to ministries in the Land of Israel, or celebrating and fellowshipping with other believers in our local communities just as we would if we were gathered in the land itself. Practices like these help us keep the spirit of the pilgrimage command. The goal is simply to do our best, wherever we are, to remember God's mighty works, rejoice before him, and honor his appointed times. We trust that God takes delight in our sincere efforts to please him.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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