

Acts 2:1-47 (Part I)

Introduction

It was three weeks ago now that we came to Acts chapter 2 and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. We saw that this is the beginning of the restoration of the kingdom to Israel—an Israel of which we are now a part. It's the dawning of the eschatological age. We remember the noise that came from heaven like a gale force rushing wind and the tongues like (blazing, consuming) fire dividing themselves and resting on each one of the disciples. And we remember that these things happened when the Day of Pentecost had “fully come.” In the arrival of this day, the time on God's redemptive calendar has been “filled up”; the age of the risen Messiah and therefore of His life-giving Spirit is here (already/not yet). But why on the Day of Pentecost? Why should the Day of Pentecost be chosen for this climactic redemptive-historical moment? To understand the answer to this question, we need to go back and try to understand the “ethos”—the defining character—of Israel's annual feasts.

Israel's calendar was a lunar calendar. Each month began on the new moon (the middle of the month coming, therefore, at the full moon). Whereas our agricultural year begins in the spring with planting season, Israel's agricultural year began in the fall in the month of Tishrei (our Sep/Oct; cf. Exod. 23:16; 34:22). That's when the planting of barley and wheat began. It was six months later (after the winter rains) in the month of Abib (our Mar/Apr) that Israel's harvest season began. Harvest season, in turn, lasted for six months and included not only the grain harvest in spring, but the grape harvest in summer, and the harvest of figs, pomegranates, olives, etc. in late summer and early fall. It was this six-month harvest season that was also the season for Israel's appointed feasts. There were three pilgrim feasts (at which all adult males in Israel were required to come and appear before Yahweh at the temple; Deut. 16:16; Exod. 23:14-17; 34:22-23; 2 Chron. 8:12-13; 31:2-3), and each of these feasts coincided with specific milestones in the progress of the harvest. So what is the nature of this connection between Israel's feasts and Israel's harvests?

I. The Feast of Passover / Unleavened Bread

In the first place, God sovereignly “timed” His redemption of Israel from Egypt so that it coincided perfectly with the beginning of the harvest season in the month of Abib (Mar/Apr). It was on the 14th/15th day of Abib (during the full moon) that God brought Israel out of Egypt and established the annual feast of Passover and Unleavened Bread.

Passover (probably, “Cover-over”) was a feast celebrating the day when God “covered over” the dwellings of the Israelites so that the destroyer would not enter to kill their firstborn (Exod. 12:23; Heb. 11:28). (To avoid confusion, I'll refer to the Cover-over feast by the more traditional “Passover” [Yahweh “passed over” Israel's dwellings and did not enter to destroy the firstborn].) Through the blood of the Passover lamb or goat applied to the doorposts of their houses, the people were delivered from God's righteous judgment (Exod. 12:21-28). But they were also delivered on this same day from their slavery to the Egyptians (Exod. 12:29-32). It was this deliverance and redemption that the people of Israel celebrated in the annual Passover feast on the 14th/15th day of Abib (cf. Exod. 12:1-13, 21-28; Lev. 23:5; Num. 28:16; Deut. 16:1-2). The

Passover meal, in turn, marked the beginning of the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread (cf. Exod. 12:14-20; 23:15; Lev. 23:6-8; Num. 28:17-25; Deut. 16:3-8). The unleavened bread was a reminder of Israel's "bread of affliction" (Deut. 16:3) and of how when God redeemed them from Egypt, they had to leave in haste, "[taking] up their dough before it was leavened, with their kneading bowls bound up in the clothes on their shoulders" (Exod. 12:34).

In the case of this first feast, the harvest connection was *added* later. Passover and Unleavened Bread was originally a historic festival (marking the anniversary of Israel's redemption from Egypt), and yet we remember that God sovereignly "timed" His redemption of Israel so that it coincided with the beginning of the harvest season in Canaan. Of course, during Israel's 40 years in the wilderness they couldn't celebrate any agricultural festivals because they weren't planting and harvesting. But in Leviticus, when God gave instructions for what celebrating Passover and Unleavened should look like *after entering Canaan*, we read:

- Leviticus 23:9–14 — "When you enter the land which I am going to give to you and reap its harvest, then you shall bring in the sheaf of the first fruits of your [barley] harvest to the priest. And he shall wave the sheaf before Yahweh for you to be accepted; on the day after the sabbath the priest shall wave it [either the fixed first day of Unleavened Bread which was effectively a sabbath-rest (Pharisees), or the movable regular weekly sabbath that falls during Unleavened Bread (Sadducees)]..."

See how there's this connection that's being established between Israel's redemption from Egypt and Israel's fruitful harvests in Canaan? Just as God sovereignly "timed" His redemption of Israel from Egypt to coincide with the beginning of harvest, so He also sovereignly "timed" the culmination of that redemption when Israel crossed the Jordan and first set foot in the Promised Land to coincide with the beginning of harvest.

- Joshua 5:10–11 — Then [after crossing the Jordan] the sons of Israel camped at Gilgal and *celebrated the Passover* on the evening of the fourteenth day of the month on the desert plains of Jericho. And on the day after the Passover [the first day of Unleavened Bread], on that very day, they ate some of the *yield of the land*, unleavened cakes and roasted grain.

What does this connection between Israel's redemption from Egypt and Israel's harvest in Canaan mean?

It's important for us to understand that Israel's redemption was a typological redemption (a shadow being cast backward in time by the substance which was still to come). The majority of the people who were redeemed from slavery in Egypt and even from God's judgment in the death of the firstborn were not actually redeemed from their more ultimate slavery to sin and death (cf. 1 Cor. 10:1-10; Heb. 3:16-19). It was this typological redemption via the blood of the Passover lamb that pointed to the peoples' need for the greater and ultimate redemption that would come through Christ. Likewise, many of those who entered the promised rest of the land of Canaan never entered into the eternal rest of God's people in heaven. Many of those who inherited Canaan never inherited heaven. It was this typological rest in Canaan that pointed to the peoples' need for the greater and ultimate heavenly rest that the Messiah would accomplish for His people (cf. Heb. 3:12-4:10). So also, the fruitful harvests of Canaan—of a land flowing with

milk and honey—were a typological foreshadowing of all the true spiritual blessings in the heavenly places that would be lavished on us in Christ (cf. Eph. 1:3-14).

The goal of Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt was their enjoyment of the blessings of life in Canaan (Exod. 3:7-8; Jer. 2:6-7). And yet if Israel was to enter into those blessings and continue to enjoy them in the land, it was necessary that they keep the covenant that God made with them at Sinai. If the exodus from Egypt and the entrance into Canaan are the bookends of Israel's redemption, then it's impossible to separate out that which comes in the middle—the giving of the law covenant at Mount Sinai. God said to Moses, "When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God at this mountain" (Exod. 3:12). Moses was to say to Pharaoh, "Thus says Yahweh, '...Let My son go *that* he may serve Me'" (Exod. 4:23; cf. 5:1; 7:16). God redeemed Israel from Egypt in order that they might keep His covenant (Sinai). And God gave the people His covenant at Sinai in order that by keeping that covenant they might enter the land and always enjoy its blessings (for as long as that typological covenant was in effect; Canaan). Moses said to the people in Deuteronomy:

- Deuteronomy 11:8–9 — "You shall therefore *keep every commandment* which I am commanding you today, so that you may be strong and go in and *possess the land* into which you are about to cross to possess it; so that you may *prolong your days on the land* which Yahweh swore to your fathers to give to them and to their seed, a land flowing with milk and honey."

Do you see how the exodus from Egypt and the covenant at Sinai and the entrance into the Promised Land and enjoyment of its blessings are all of one piece together?

Now we've seen how the exodus from Egypt and the entrance into the Promised Land point to all the spiritual blessings that have been lavished upon us in Christ under the Covenant of Grace. But what about the law covenant at Sinai? What does this point to? For the *spiritual* seed of Abraham who were partakers of the Covenant of Grace (the New Covenant in promise form), keeping the law was the expression of the fact that they were already justified by faith in the coming Messiah (temple; priesthood; sacrifices; the law written on their hearts; Ps. 1, 19, 119). But for the nation of Israel, as a people formed and constituted not by the Covenant of Grace but by the Mosaic (Law) Covenant itself, keeping the law was the *condition* for the enjoyment of God's blessings in the land of promise (Lev. 26; Deut. 28). For the *fleshly* seed of Abraham (the nation as a whole), the Mosaic (Law) Covenant pointed backwards to a broken covenant of works ("do this and live"). It was the law written not on the heart, but only on tablets of stone. In this sense, then, the fulfillment of Israel's redemption from Egypt (which was life in a land flowing with milk and honey) was contingent upon their obedience in a "typological" Covenant of Works. In Exodus 13 we see how all three of these redemptive-historical realities are commemorated in the Feast of Passover and Unleavened Bread.

- Exodus 13:3–6, 8–9 — And Moses said to the people, "*Remember this day in which you went out from Egypt, from the house of slavery; for by a strong hand Yahweh brought you out from this place. And nothing leavened shall be eaten. This day, in the month of Abib, you are going out. And it shall be when Yahweh brings you to the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Hivite, and the Jebusite, which He swore to your fathers to give you, a land*

flowing with milk and honey, that you shall do this service in this month. For seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a feast to Yahweh... It will be as a sign to you on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, that the law of Yahweh may be in your mouth; for with a strong hand Yahweh brought you out of Egypt."

To celebrate Passover and Unleavened Bread was to celebrate the redemption from Egypt (exodus), and so also it was to renew the nation's commitment to keeping the covenant (Sinai) so that they might continue to enjoy the blessings of life in the land with all its fruitful harvests (Canaan). Now maybe we can see why God took the originally historical feast of Passover and Unleavened Bread and added the seasonal agricultural element with the offering of the sheaf of the first fruits of the harvest (Lev. 23:4-14). The offering of the first fruits reminded the people that God was the source of the blessings of harvest as the one who had redeemed them from Egypt and who had given them the covenant at Sinai.

We know that today the Passover sacrifice and meal is fulfilled in Jesus who is, Himself, our Passover sacrifice and meal (cf. Jn. 6). Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper as He was eating the Passover meal, and then He was crucified on the following morning—the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The Apostle John points out that just as no bone of the Passover sacrifice was to be broken, so also, no bone of Jesus was broken (Exod. 12:46; Jn. 19:36). The Apostle Paul writes:

- 1 Corinthians 5:7 — Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, also was sacrificed.

Jesus delivers us not just from the temporal judgments of God, but from eternal destruction in hell. Jesus delivers us not just from slavery to external taskmasters, but from slavery to the internal taskmaster of sin. And so in Jesus, every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places is guaranteed to us *not* on condition of our obedience in a covenant of works but because of God's gracious guarantee that the requirement of the law will now be fulfilled in us who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Rom. 8:1-4). Jesus, in His sacrificial death on the cross is the fulfillment of Passover and Unleavened Bread.

II. The Feast of Ingathering/Booths

We remember that the harvest season in Israel lasted six months and that each of Israel's three pilgrim feasts coincides with a specific milestone in the progress of the harvest. Passover and Unleavened Bread marked the beginning of the harvest in the month of Abib. Exactly six months (to the day) later, in the month of Tishrei (our Sept/Oct), the seven-day Feast of Ingathering marked the end of the harvest season (not just the spring harvest of barley and wheat, but also the summer harvest of grapes, and the late summer and early autumn harvests of figs, and pomegranates, and olives).

- Exodus 23:16b (cf. 34:22) — “[You shall keep] the Feast of the Ingathering at the end of the year when you gather in the fruit of your labors from the field.”

We've already seen in the feast of Passover and Unleavened Bread that Israel's harvests in Canaan are only to be enjoyed in the light of Israel's redemption from Egypt and the law covenant that was given at Sinai. And so another name for the Feast of Ingathering is the Feast of Booths (or Tabernacles). Listen to God's instructions concerning this feast in Leviticus 23:

- Leviticus 23:34, 39–44 — “On the fifteenth of this seventh month [at our Sept/Oct full moon] is the Feast of Booths... [W]hen you have gathered in the produce of the land, you shall celebrate the feast of Yahweh for seven days... And on the first day you shall take for yourselves the foliage of beautiful trees, palm branches and boughs of leafy trees and willows of the brook, and you shall be glad before Yahweh your God for seven days... You shall live in booths for seven days... *so that your generations may know that I had the sons of Israel live in booths when I brought them out from the land of Egypt.*”

The Feast of Ingathering (or Booths) celebrates the blessings of a settled life in a watered and fruitful land (cf. Deut. 8:7-9; a type of the spiritual blessings in the heavenly places that are lavished upon us in Christ) by reminding the people of the days when they were living in temporary shelters after God brought them out from the land of Egypt (a type of our deliverance from sin and death and of God's protective presence until we enter fully into our inheritance). But we remember that Israel could not presume on the blessings of this settled life in Canaan. God was the source of their fruitful harvests in the land not only as the one who had brought them out from Egypt and led them through the wilderness, *but also as the one who had given them the law covenant at Sinai so that by keeping the covenant they might live long in the land.* This explains what we read in Deuteronomy 31:

- Deuteronomy 31:10–12 (Neh. 8:13-18) — Then Moses commanded them, saying, “At the end of every seven years... at the Feast of Booths... you shall read this law in front of all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people, the men and the women and little ones and the sojourner who is within your gates, so that they may hear and so that they may learn and fear Yahweh your God and be careful to do all the words of this law.”

We see again how the exodus from *Egypt* and the covenant at *Sinai* and life in *Canaan* (the Promised Land) are all of one piece together. In the celebration of the Feast of Ingathering/Booths all three of these redemptive realities are brought together. Are we beginning to see the ethos—the defining character—of Israel's feasts?

If Passover and Unleavened Bread at the beginning of the harvest season emphasizes especially the first of these redemptive realities (the exodus from Egypt), then the Feast of Ingathering/Booths at the end of the harvest season emphasizes especially the blessings of Israel's inheritance in the land of promise. And so the Feast of Ingathering/Booths is fulfilled in the rest that we have in Christ and all the spiritual blessings in the heavenly places that He has lavished upon us (Heb. 3:12-4:10; Eph. 1:3-14). It will be fulfilled ultimately in the resurrection when we enter fully into our inheritance (1 Pet. 1:3-5).

III. The Feast of Weeks/Pentecost

But there's still one more annual pilgrim feast that's connected with a specific milestone in the progress of Israel's harvest. The feast of Passover/Unleavened Bread marked the beginning of Israel's harvest season, and specifically of Israel's grain harvest (the barley ripened first). The feast of *Weeks* marked the end, not of the entire harvest season (that was the Feast of Ingathering/Booths), but rather the end specifically of the grain harvest with the gathering in of the later ripening wheat. So we read in Exodus:

- Exodus 23:16a; 34:22 — “Also you shall keep the *Feast of the Harvest* of the first fruits of your labors from what you sow in the field... You shall celebrate the *Feast of Weeks*, that is, the first fruits of the wheat harvest...”

Why was this “Feast of the Harvest” also called the “Feast of Weeks”? While the feasts of Passover/Unleavened Bread and Booths were both assigned specific dates on the calendar (the 14th/15th day of Abib and the 15th day of Tishrei), the Feast of the Harvest was not assigned its own specific date. Instead, the date of its observance was calculated each year by counting days starting with the offering of the first fruits of the barley harvest during the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

- Leviticus 23:15–16 (cf. Deut. 16:9-10) — “*You shall also count for yourselves* from the day after the sabbath [during Unleavened Bread], from the day when you brought in the sheaf of the wave offering [the first fruits of the barley harvest]; there shall be seven complete sabbaths [weeks]. *You shall count* fifty [Gr. *pentekonta* (Pentecost)] days to the day after the seventh sabbath; then you shall bring a new grain offering near to Yahweh [the Feast of Weeks].”

The Feast of Weeks/Pentecost was in this way (by counting) tied to the Feast of Passover and Unleavened Bread. While the feasts of Passover/Unleavened Bread and Booths each lasted for an entire week, this Feast of Weeks lasted for only one day. While the Feast of Unleavened Bread emphasized unleavened bread, the Feast of Weeks was the only time when leavened bread was required to be brought as an offering (Lev. 23:17; cf. Wenham). So the *leavened* bread at the *one-day* Feast of *Weeks* marks a sort of conclusion and culmination to the seven-day feast of Passover and Unleavened Bread. Indeed, “in rabbinic literature [the Feast of Weeks] is known as ‘*atseret*, which seems to mean ‘concluding feast’—[the concluding feast] of Passover” (Sarna).

On the one hand, this Feast of Weeks marks the conclusion and culmination of the grain harvest. Jeremiah says that Yahweh is the one “who keeps for [Israel] the appointed weeks of the harvest [referring to the seven weeks between Unleavened Bread and Pentecost; Jer. 5:24].” On the other hand, the Feast of Weeks also marks a certain conclusion and culmination to Israel's redemption. Passover and Unleavened Bread (which marks Israel's deliverance from Egypt) is concluded at the Feast of Weeks. In what sense? *Why* did God bring the people out of Egypt (Passover and Unleavened Bread)? In order that they might serve Him at Sinai (Exod. 3:12; 4:23; 5:1; 7:16)—in order that He might give them His law and that they might keep His covenant, so that by keeping His covenant they might enjoy the blessings of life in Canaan (Ingathering/Booths). And so we read in Exodus 19:

- Exodus 19:1 — *In the third month* after the sons of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt [Abib; Iyar; Sivan (inclusive reckoning)], on this day they came into the wilderness of Sinai.

It was also in the third month that the Feast of Weeks was to be observed (Abib; Iyar; Sivan [7 weeks; 50 days]). We remember that Passover (exodus from Egypt) and Booths (enjoyment of life in Canaan) were both times when Israel reaffirmed its commitment to keeping the law covenant given at Sinai (Exod. 13:6-9; Deut. 31:10-12). We're not surprised, then, when Moses concludes all the instructions regarding the Feast of Weeks with these words:

- Deuteronomy 16:12 — “And you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt [Passover/Unleavened Bread], *and you shall be careful to observe these statutes* [see Christensen].”

Again, are we seeing the ethos—the defining character—of Israel's feasts? As harvest feasts, all three of Israel's annual pilgrim festivals were to be a reminder that the blessings of the harvest were the result of faithfulness in keeping the covenant — the law given at Sinai. We see this connection with the Feast of Weeks in Jeremiah chapter five when God speaks these words through Jeremiah:

- Jeremiah 5:23–25 — “But this people has a stubborn and rebellious heart; they have turned aside and gone away. They do not say in their heart, ‘Let us now fear Yahweh our God, who gives rain in its season, both the early rain and the late rain, *who keeps for us the appointed weeks of the harvest.*’ Your iniquities have turned these away [the appointed weeks of the harvest], and your sins [your law-breaking] have withheld good from you.”

The blessings of harvest in the land depended in every way on observing and keeping the covenantal law, and so the Feast of Weeks was to be in every way a celebration of the law and a reaffirmation of the people's commitment to keeping that law (“you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, *and you shall be careful to observe these statutes*”; Deut. 16:12).

During the reign of King Asa (910-869 BC), the people assembled at Jerusalem in the third month — the month when the Feast of Weeks was to be observed (2 Chron. 15:10). It was apparently at this Feast of Weeks (*sa-bu^a / שָׁבוּעַ*) when “they entered into the covenant to seek Yahweh, the God of their fathers, with all their heart and soul” (2 Chron. 15:12).

- 2 Chronicles 15:10–15 — Moreover, they *swore* [*sa-ba / שָׁבַע*] to Yahweh with a loud voice, with shouting, with trumpets and with horns. All Judah was glad concerning the *oath* [*s^ebu-ah / שְׁבוּעָה*], for they had *sworn* [*sa-ba / שָׁבַע*] with their whole heart and had searched for Him with all their desire, and He was found by them. So Yahweh gave them rest on every side.

The threefold reference to swearing an oath indicates that we're meant to see the word play between “oath” and “week.” The Feast of Weeks (*sa-bu^a / שָׁבוּעַ*) was in this case the Feast of Oaths (*s^ebu-ah / שְׁבוּעָה*; cf. Japhet; Thompson), reminding us of the words that the people spoke at Sinai after Moses had read the book of the covenant in their hearing:

- Exodus 24:7–8 (cf. v. 3; 19:8) — “‘All that Yahweh has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!’ So Moses took the blood and sprinkled it on the people and said, ‘Behold the blood of the covenant, which Yahweh has cut with you in accordance with all these words.’”

Here again, we see the Feast of Weeks as a celebration of the law and a reaffirmation of the people’s commitment to keeping that law.

Conclusion

All three of Israel’s annual pilgrim feasts are intimately associated with the law covenant at Sinai. However, if Passover and Unleavened Bread at the beginning of the harvest season emphasized especially the exodus from Egypt, and if the Feast of Ingathering/Booths at the end of the harvest season emphasized especially the blessings of Israel’s inheritance in the land of promise, then the Feast of Weeks/Pentecost reminds us especially of the gift of the Law at Sinai and of the people’s obligation to keep that law if they would continue in the land, enjoying its harvests. The law is essential to redemption. It is, on the one hand, the goal of redemption — God delivered His people from Egypt so that they might keep His covenant. It’s also, on the other hand, the precondition to redemption — God gave His people the law so that by keeping it, they might enjoy long life in the land.

And now we see the fulfillment of all these things in the redemption that we have in Christ. Israel’s redemption from slavery in Egypt and from God’s judgment in the death of the firstborn was a type of the greater redemption from slavery to sin and death that Christ would accomplish for His people (the Feast of Passover/Unleavened Bread). Israel’s entrance into the promised rest of the land of Canaan—a land flowing with milk and honey, was a type of the eternal rest that Christ would accomplish for His people and all the true spiritual blessings that would be lavished on us in Him (the Feast of Ingathering/Booths). And so also the gift of the law at Sinai points us to Christ first of all as the one who has fulfilled the law and borne the curse of the law in our place, and second of all as the one who through His Spirit has given us the law afresh by writing it not upon tablets of stone (as in the Old Covenant) but by writing it upon the tablet of our hearts (2 Cor. 3:3; the Feast of Weeks/Pentecost)—thus guaranteeing our future “entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 1:11).

It’s only in Christ that we see how Pentecost is truly the conclusion and culmination of Passover and Unleavened Bread. Christ has redeemed us from sin and death so that we might keep His covenant (the law written now upon our hearts; cf. Eph. 1:4; Rom. 8:1-4). And Christ, through His Spirit poured out upon us, has written His law upon our hearts so that we might not fail to enter into our eternal inheritance (cf. Heb. 12:14).