

Reinventing Ancient Rituals?

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Some church members where I live are teaching that it is necessary for Christians to observe Israelite festivals. Is this a biblical requirement?

Several Adventist scholars have looked into this subject, and the common conclusion has been that the Bible does *not* expect Christians to observe the Jewish festivals. Let me briefly summarize some of those conclusions.

1. *Festivals and the Sacrificial System:* Each of the festivals was characterized by the joy of bringing offerings and sacrifices to the Lord. In Leviticus 23 the different festivals are listed, and their purpose is summarized with the words "These are the Lord's appointed feasts, which you are to proclaim as sacred assemblies for bringing offerings made to the Lord by fire" (verse 37, NIV). The Hebrew preposition *l'* (for) is used here to express the idea of purpose. There is no indication in the Bible that during the festivals a spiritual sacrifice could take the place of a material one.

2. *Festivals and Centralized Worship:* A number of the festivals were to be celebrated at the Temple and not anywhere else in Israel. Three feasts are specifically required to be observed in the Temple, making it necessary for the people to appear before the Lord; namely, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Tabernacles (Deut. 16:16). Even Passover, which was originally a family celebration, was also centralized and connected with the Temple: "You must not sacrifice the Passover in any town the Lord your God gives you except in the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name" (verse 5, NIV). The Bible does not allow for the celebration of those festivals anywhere else. Any attempt to justify their celebration independent of the Israelite Temple is simply a human determination.

3. *Festivals and the Calendar:* Most of the festivals were closely tied to the Israelite agricultural calendar. This was clearly the case with respect to the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which was closely connected to the Passover (Lev. 23:5-11); the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost; Deut. 16:9, 10; Lev. 23:15-21); and the Feast of Tabernacles (Ex. 23:16; Deut. 16:13; Lev. 23:33-36). The same applied to the sabbatical years (Ex. 23:10, 11). The implication is that it was impossible for the Israelites to celebrate some of these festivals before they entered Canaan. This was particularly the case with the Feasts of Pentecost and Tabernacles (Ex. 23:16). No exceptions to those regulations are mentioned in the Bible, thus indicating that the celebration of those feasts was restricted to those living in the land of Israel. In fact, Hosea announced that Israel's exile would make it impossible for them to celebrate the Lord's feasts (Hosea 9:1-5).

4. *Festivals and Ethnic Identity:* The religious and ethnic identity of the Israelites was closely associated with the celebration of some of the festivals, such as the Passover, which was restricted to Israelites and to those who through circumcision became Israelites (Ex. 12:43-50). It may well be that the reason the Judaizers Paul confronted were requiring Christian Gentiles to become Jews by being circumcised (Acts 15:1); otherwise they could not celebrate Passover and other festivals and Jewish rituals.

5. *Festivals and Christians:* The New Testament makes clear that the sanctuary services of the Old Testament came to an end through the sacrifice of Christ on the cross and through His high-priestly ministry in the heavenly sanctuary. The

ceremonial law was "a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves" (Heb. 10:1, NIV). We no longer abide by the ceremonial Levitical law; we have a new High Priest who does not belong to the order of Aaron; and "when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law" (Heb. 7:12). This is not the law that regulated priestly lineage; it is rather the law that could not bring perfection (verse 19).

During the apostolic period Jewish Christians may have observed the festivals, but there is no biblical evidence to support the conclusion that this was required of Gentile Christians. On the contrary, the Bible indicates that the celebration of the festivals had geographical and temporal limitations; their religious function found its fulfillment in Christ.

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