

The Book of Leviticus

St. Matthew Parish Bible Study

Feast of Booths (Leviticus 23:40-43)

The Feast of Booths or *Sukkot* is a 7-8 day holiday that commemorates Israel's forty-year journey in the desert, dwelling in foliage-covered temporary shelters (*sukkah*) on their way to the Promised Land. Today, when Jews construct such booths to celebrate Sukkot, they erect them outdoors and with at least three walls and a roof made of unprocessed natural vegetation—typically bamboo, pine boughs or palm branches. Materials such as processed boards and cloth, that is, whatever did not grow directly out of the earth, may not be used in constructing the booths. Inside the booth Jewish families gather and eat their meals and otherwise regard it as a kind of second “home” during the feast.

Animal sacrifice and personal offerings for sin

Animal sacrifices were a key element of Old Testament worship. Sacrifices were meant to atone or “cover” one's sin (Exodus 30:10) and sanctify or “set apart for God” the one making the offering (Exodus 29:33; 31:13). The sacrifice served as a substitute; that is, the animal died in place of the sinner. The steps in animal sacrifices were: (1) an animal without defect or blemish is chosen; (2) the offeror lays hands upon the animal to indicate that the animal bore the penalty for the offeror's sin; (3) the animal is killed because the penalty for sin is death; (4) the animal's blood is poured out at the base of the altar as the symbol of the sacrificed life; (5) the blood is smeared upon the altar to indicate that the sins of the offeror are atoned; (6) the sacrifice is burnt, the smoke rising up to God as satisfaction for sin; and (7) the animal's flesh is consumed as a symbol of fellowship with God (Ephesians 5:2). Salt was also used for sacrifices (animal and cereal) as a symbol of the purity of the sacrifice and the Jew's unbreakable—*preserved*—covenant with God (Leviticus 2:13). Of course, such sacrifices could not in fact remove sins (Hebrews 10:4), but were a foreshadowing of Christ's singular self-offering for all sin (John 1:29; 1 Peter 1:18-20; Revelation 13:8).

Forms of sacrifice

1. **Holocaust** = the sacrificial victim is burnt on the altar. Holocausts were offered morning and evening, on festive days and special occasions.
2. **Peace offering** = are sacrifices offered to God for favors received, hence a “peace” or friendly relationship with God exists. Part of the offering was consumed by the offeror and the priests who performed the sacrifice. The blood and the fat, being the more vital parts, were reserved for God and were burnt. Peace offerings were either to ask for a favor or thank God for a favor received.
3. **Sin offering and trespass offering** = are sacrifices to restore relations with God broken by sin. A sin offering was to rectify an offense committed through human frailty or passion. A trespass offering always pertained to an injustice to one's neighbor, and was offered if one was at fault or in debt to the neighbor. The difference between sin offerings and trespass offerings is that while a sin also meant one was at fault, it could have been due to ignorance or inadvertence. Trespass offerings were made to atone for material damage to one's neighbor. Generally, sin offerings cleansed ritual impurity (e.g., contact with a corpse or someone with a skin disease). The sin offering was made for sins committed in ignorance or unintentional sins. The sin offering varied depending on the status of the sinner. For example, a high priest who sinned unintentionally would offer a young bull. A king or a prince would offer a young male goat. Ordinary people would sacrifice a young female goat or lamb, and the poor offered two turtledoves or pigeons.
4. **Bloodless or cereal offering** = were offerings of the finest flour, which could be uncooked or baked in unleavened bread. Such offerings were a kind of gift or tribute to the Lord to express friendly communion with Him. Only a portion of the offering was burnt on the altar, and the remainder was consumed by the priest.

Clean or unclean/holy or common

A clean thing may be either holy or common. A common thing may be either clean or unclean. However a holy thing may never be unclean, nor an unclean thing holy. Holiness refers to the fitness or suitability of something to be in the presence of God. Since God came to dwell with Israel in the Tabernacle during their wilderness journey, all the people of Israel had to maintain themselves and their camp in a state of cleanliness, that is, suitable to be in the divine presence, the presence of the holy.

What does kosher mean?

Laws regarding clean and unclean animals later became known as kosher laws, that is, laws stipulating what is “suitable” (Hebrew, *kasher*). For example, the law prohibiting the eating of pigs or swine as well as shellfish or anything without fins and scales.

Reasons such foods were/are prohibited:

- 1) hygienics—unclean animals are bad for health. E.g., pork is notorious for the spread of trichinosis. Likewise shellfish are filter feeders which concentrate environmental toxins in their tissues.
- 2) aesthetics—animals that “creep” or “swarm” are considered repugnant and therefore unclean.
- 3) anatomical—animals should have both parted hooves and chew the cud. A lack of one of these characteristics or a mix of them with other features is forbidden. For example, a pig has parted toes but does not chew its cud. Similarly, fish should have fins and scales. Some shellfish may have fins but all shellfish lack scales.
- 4) liturgical—animals associated with the Gentiles and their pagan culture and religion are automatically deemed unclean. The prohibition against such animals was a way of separating the people of Israel from the Gentile nations.

The Day of Atonement and the scapegoat

On the Day of Atonement the Levitical priest slaughtered a goat for the sins of the people, its blood used to cleanse the Most Holy Place and altar within the Tent of Meeting (Leviticus 16:15-19). After the cleansing, a second goat, the *azazel*, was brought before the high priest. Laying his hands on the goat, the high priest confessed “all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites” (Leviticus 16:21). The goat was then sent away into the wilderness (Leviticus 16:20-22). Symbolically this goat “took away” the sins of the Israelites by it being cast out into the wilderness. In his translation of the Hebrew Bible into English, Protestant William Tyndale (1494-1536) rendered the Hebrew term *azazel* as “escape-goat,” which eventually became “scapegoat.”

Wave offerings (Leviticus 7:28-34; 14:12; 23:15-21)

Mosaic Law allowed for the symbolic act of making an offering to the Lord; that is, a “wave offering” whereby a portion of the thing being offered was literally waved in the air before the Lord. This wave offering was then deemed by God to be free for human consumption. The meat was given to the families of the priests.

Sorcery forbidden

“If a person turns to mediums and wizards, playing the harlot after them, I will set my face against that person, and will cut him off from among his people” (Leviticus 20:6).

Why did the ancient Jews turn to mediums? Usually it was to anticipate the future or uncover a secret. Other times it was to avoid errors in the important decisions of life, or to have some advantage over mere chance and the unexpected. The great Jewish philosopher, Maimonides (1138-1204) wrote that such practices are “are falsehood and lies with which the original idolaters deceived the gentile nations in order to lead them after them. It is not fitting for the Jews who are wise sages to be drawn into such emptiness, nor to consider that they have any value . . . Whoever believes in [occult arts] of this nature and, in his heart, thinks that they are true and words of wisdom, but are forbidden by the Torah, is foolish and feeble-minded . . .” The spirit world is real, but it is not innocent. The Chosen People of God were to seek wisdom, and wisdom comes from God.

Child sacrifice to Molech

The ancient Canaanites practiced the gruesome abomination that was child sacrifice. Typically such sacrifices were offered up to the god of fertility, Molech (or Moloch; from the Hebrew word *mlk*, which means *melek*, or "king"). Molech was a giant bronze statue with the body of a man and the head of a bull. The body portion of the figure was a seven-chamber furnace. It is believed that one of these chambers was reserved for child sacrifices.

Why the prohibition of blood and fat?

As blood represents the life of the animal, one of several reasons the consumption of blood is prohibited is that to eat animal blood is to mix the human spirit with the spirit of the animal: "For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it for you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement, by reason of the life. . . For the life of every creature is the blood of it . . ." (Leviticus 17:11,14). Moreover, meat is common to man and animals, and so the meat eaten became part of a man, but the blood, the "soul and spirit" of the animal remained. For the Jews blood applied to all land animals as well as fowl, but not to wild animals such as deer. Note: fish can be eaten whole with no particular preparations other than considerations of taste.