

# THINKING ABOUT THE HEBREW FEASTS

From the mighty Word of the Creator, this planet, its sun, moon and starry heavens came into existence 6000 years ago. David noted: “*For he spake, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast*” (Psalm 33:9).

Very little is known about God’s operations and purposes in that perfect world. Sin quickly blighted its precincts. The anticipated fall, however, had in waiting a restoration blueprint (Matthew 25:34, Ephesians 1:4, Revelation 3:8). The strategy? Establish a covenant relationship with fallen man whereby everything can *begin again* – without sin’s influence.

There was one thing God did inform us of regarding that sinless world. The celestial objects had a special, divine purpose. “*And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years: And let them be for lights in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth: and it was so*” (Genesis 1:14-15).

This is where our story must begin. These texts, along with subsequent verses, reveal that there were days and nights which were to be grouped into sevens. The sun and the moon would provide times, signs, periods and even years. Within those celestial body movements, the changing seasons (not defined) would be apparent. The word for “seasons” in that verse is *moedim*. This ancient Hebrew word had many meanings – secular and religious. It is simply conveyed as a predictable, set-aside change in time. The context of the usage of *moed* or *moedim* reveals how it is to be understood. Since the Creation story relates to a *perfect world*, it is described only as special, recurrent time that God had predetermined. Those *moedim* were apparently **distinct** calendric events that changed in relation to those celestial bodies.

Hebrew feast celebrations were also called *moeds*. They were introduced around 1540–1520 B.C. as part of the Mosaic Law. They were Hebrew people-specific decreed, from Mount Sinai forward.

Some have assumed, because of the *moedim* in Genesis 1:14, that **feasts** were started at Creation because of the plurality of the word *moed*. That is a contextual misapplication. The Hebrew feasts were celebrations and elevated studies into unique steps of God’s redemptive plan. They were mini-laboratories of *how God deals with sin*, choreographed through a chosen people. In a pre-Fall world, such feasts were not needed. They would have been a foreign element most unnecessary and out of character. In addition, the meaning of “seasons and times” and “day and night” within the realm of sinlessness is totally mysterious. We simply have no information regarding those times. To claim that it relates to a “sin-oriented” feast is indefensible.

## **The Growing Challenge**

Within the Protestant world a growing contingent of individuals have been convinced of the necessity to keep the ancient Hebrew feasts – along with their “sabbaths.” A celebration to honor those symbolic “waymarks” of redemptive history should be morally neutral. To claim that it is **necessary** for salvation is without Biblical support. This enters the realm of danger that Paul

firmly addressed many times related to Judaizers (“perverting the gospel” – Galatians 1:7; “let him be accursed” – Galatians 1:8; “false brethren” – Galatians 2:4).

An analysis of those feasts takes the student into an elevated journey of God’s unyielding love towards man. They summarize the gospel. They outline the story of redemption. They bring into focus every element required to fulfill that everlasting covenant. They are also profound prophecies that parallel much of Daniel and Revelation. Within a framework of seven “sacred months” those feasts template with precision the 7000 years given to mankind to fully “recover” from Adam’s fall (6000 years of probation – 1000 years to complete the judicial work).

Justification for **requiring** feast observance comes strongly from the assumption that Paul **kept the feasts**. But there are Biblical concerns over each claim. Here are examples:

*“But bade them farewell, saying, **I must by all means keep this feast that cometh in Jerusalem**: but I will return again unto you, if God will. And he sailed from Ephesus” (Acts 18:21).*

The phrase *“I must by all means keep this feast that cometh in Jerusalem”* is lacking in the older and major manuscripts. Translators are of the opinion that a scribe added these interpretive words. They are in the Textus Receptus but not in the best manuscripts.<sup>1</sup>

*“Therefore let us **keep the feast**, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Corinthians 5:8).*

The phrase *“let us keep the feast”* lacks the article “the” in the original. Without that the imagery becomes deeply spiritual and pastoral.<sup>2</sup> The Pauline expression draws on the **spiritual meaning** of Passover and Unleavened Bread. Remove the old leaven, or sin, from your lives.<sup>3</sup>

Paul did attend some feasts (e.g., Acts 20:6). But he illustrated a great principle that is to govern our witnessing: *“Them take, and purify thyself with them, and be at charges with them, that they may shave their heads: and all may know that those things, whereof they were informed concerning thee, are nothing; but that thou thyself also walkest orderly, and keepest the law”* (Acts 21:24). He became a “part of” many situations to be able to witness to others.

The Jerusalem counsel did keep the door open for anyone to keep some of the Mosaic laws, if a person chose. But it was not mandatory nor a proselytizing issue. “Paul did not bind himself or his converts to the ceremonies and customs of the Jews, with their varied forms, types, and sacrifices.”<sup>4</sup>

“Paul had prided himself upon his Pharisaical strictness; but after the revelation of Christ to him on the road to Damascus, the mission of the Saviour, and his own work in the conversion of the Gentiles, were plain to his mind; and he fully comprehended the difference between a living faith and a dead formalism. Paul still claimed to be one of the children of Abraham, and kept the ten commandments in letter and in spirit as faithfully as he had ever done before his

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<sup>1</sup> Robertson’s NT Word Pictures – Acts 18:21.

<sup>2</sup> Gaebelin, Frank E.; *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 10 (Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI), 1984, p. 218.

<sup>3</sup> Garland, David E.; *1 Corinthians* (Baker Academic; Grand Rapids, Michigan), p. 178.

<sup>4</sup> White, Ellen G.; *Sketches from the Life of Paul*, p. 105.

conversion to Christianity. But he knew that the typical ceremonies must soon altogether cease, since that which they had shadowed forth had come to pass, and the light of the gospel was shedding its glory upon the Jewish religion, giving a new significance to its ancient rites.”<sup>5</sup>

That apostle did make an effort to facilitate his influence: *“For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some”* (I Corinthians 9:19-22). But – he never compromised the truths which elevated the Christian dispensation. He never brought their moral standards into question. Nor did he advise any experience that took one’s eyes away from God’s justifying grace.

### **Mosaic Law Example**

*“Remember ye the law of Moses my servant, which I commanded unto him in Horeb for all Israel, with the statutes and judgments”* (Malachi 4:4).

This is in the middle of verses frequently applied to the very end of time. That command immediately precedes *“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord”* (4:5). Thus, it is assumed by some to be an invitation to continue the Mosaic statutes and judgments as part of earth’s final appeal.

Malachi 4:4, however, has been seen for centuries as standing **alone** within that brief chapter. The Septuigent, a Greek translation antedating Christ, actually put it at the end of the chapter.<sup>6</sup> The Masoretic text, however, placed it as in the KJV.

The book of Malachi was written approximately 400–397 B.C. The Hebrew people were 58–60 years into their final 490-year probationary period. Daniel’s earlier prayer which brought that prophetic period into notice, pled for the covenant restoration. In Daniel 9:24b Gabriel gave imperatives related to the Decalogue to eternally fulfill that request. However, in this closing narrative of the Old Testament, Malachi appeals to the Mt. Sinai/Horeb requirements of the Mosaic laws as an ongoing mandate to prepare for the *first* advent!

From that Elijah message, Christ later assured the people that John the Baptist was **the** messenger announced by Malachi (Matthew 11:10-14, Luke 7:27). The New Testament identifies John the Baptist as Elijah (Luke 1:16-17, 76-77; Mark 1:2-4; Matthew 3:1-6). This division of “law obligation” is distinct and relates to the two advents!

Intriguingly, the apostle John knew this and announced a dramatic **dispensation transition** within his Baptist narrative: *“For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ”* (John 1:17).

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<sup>5</sup> White, Ellen G.; *Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 3, pp. 370-371.

<sup>6</sup> Keil, C. F.; Keil and Delitzsch; *Commentary of the Old Testament*, vol. 10 (Hendrickson Publishing, reprint 2006), p. 663.

The Mosaic Law continued until Christ came, when the focus changed to grace and truth. At that time Malachi's Mosaic message ceased. For Messianic and ancient Hebrew people:

God will send His messenger (3:1)

I will send Elijah the prophet (4:5)

He will prepare the way before me (3:1)

He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children (4:5)

The Lord will come to His temple – suddenly (3:1)

For those who fear My name – that Sun of righteousness will arise with healing (4:2)

Remember the Law of Moses and its statutes and judgments (4:4), (get ready for that arrival!)

The imagery presents John the Baptist as preparing the people for Christ's first coming, and they are to remember how to prepare for that arrival. With the arrival of the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world, the Mosaic laws end. Christ then became the **great focus** since Old Testament promises morphed into a Christocentric fulfillment. The Mosaic system ceased when He cried, "It is finished."

Malachi has two endings or conclusions:

1. Verse 4: Remember the Torah of Moses. This command comes mainly from Deuteronomy, where it is more to "recall." It embodies "action." It links the covenant promise with the present and future obedience of those Hebrew people.<sup>7</sup>
2. Verses 5-6: It looks to the time when Elijah the messenger will come and reconcile and unify the people at a time of apostasy.

John the Baptist fulfilled the first prophetic meaning of these verses. At the end, the 144,000 will dramatically fill this role with a distinct focus on the Decalogue's Sabbath – to **be remembered**. There is then no feast orientation. Daniel 9 is our template of understanding.

### **An Overlooked Imperative within the Original Feast Laws**

A little-emphasized heavenly directive binds the ancient feast observance to the past:

**Passover:** *"Then Moses called for all the elders of Israel, and said unto them, Draw out and take you a lamb according to your families, and kill the passover. And ye shall take a bunch of hyssop, and dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and strike the lintel and the two side posts with the blood that is in the basin; and none of you shall go out at the door of his house until the morning. For the LORD will pass through to smite the Egyptians; and when he seeth the blood upon the lintel, and on the two side posts, the LORD will pass over the door, and will not suffer the destroyer to come in unto your houses to smite you. And ye shall observe this thing for an ordinance to thee and to thy sons for ever. And it shall come to pass, **when ye be come to the land which the LORD will give you, according as he hath promised, that ye shall keep this service**" (Exodus 12:21-25).*

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<sup>7</sup> Smith, Ralph L.; *Word Bible Commentary* (Thomas Nelson; Dallas, TX), vol. 32, p 342.

**Wave sheaf:** “Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, **When ye be come into the land which I give unto you**, and shall reap the harvest thereof, **then ye shall bring a sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest unto the priest**” (Leviticus 23:10).

**Unleavened bread:** “And it shall be **when the LORD shall bring thee into the land of the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites, which he swore unto thy fathers to give thee, a land flowing with milk and honey, that thou shalt keep this service in this month**. Seven days thou shalt eat unleavened bread, and in the seventh day shall be a feast to the LORD. Unleavened bread shall be eaten seven days; and there shall no leavened bread be seen with thee, neither shall there be leaven seen with thee in all thy quarters.... And it came to pass, when Pharaoh would hardly let us go, that the LORD slew all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man, and the firstborn of beast: therefore I sacrifice to the LORD all that openeth the matrix, being males; but all the firstborn of my children I redeem” (Exodus 13:5-7, 15).

**Feast of Weeks:** “And ye shall count unto you from the morrow after the sabbath, from the day that ye brought the sheaf of the wave offering; seven sabbaths shall be complete” (tied to the wave sheave in the promised land) (Leviticus 23:15).

**Feast of Tabernacles:** “Also in the fifteenth day of the seventh month, **when ye have gathered in the fruit of the land**, ye shall keep a feast unto the LORD seven days: on the first day shall be a sabbath, and on the eighth day shall be a sabbath” (Leviticus 23:39).

**Land Sabbath:** “Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, **When ye come into the land which I give you**, then **shall the land keep a sabbath unto the LORD**” (Leviticus 25:2).

The Mosaic Laws were given at Sinai, as was the Decalogue. Moses, however, was instrumental in recording his part in a “book.” “And it came to pass, when Moses had made an end of writing the words of this law in a book, until they were finished ... Take this book of the law, and put it in the side of the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, that it may be there for a witness against thee” (Deuteronomy 31:24, 26).

Those laws were summarized as “statutes,” “judgments” and “ordinances,” and within their vast directives the conduct of those feast celebrations were presented. They also laid out regulations for the social, religious, civil, health and agricultural life of that massive, emerging society. Note, however, the integrative plan that these laws had. Many of the statutes, especially the feasts, could not be celebrated or kept **outside of Canaan!** Though it was done, it had not been God’s intent or directive!

**The feasts were to be a Canaan experience.** This is a critical issue. They were agricultural grain, fruit harvest dependent, animal sacrifice centered and tied tightly to the seasons in Palestine. As we will later show, since the Hebrew people were rejected as God’s chosen, the feasts ceased to be a celebratory mandate. A semblance of those feasts will be our eternal experience as we “tabernacle” with Jesus in the heavenly Canaan. That is when Jesus will drink once again from the vine as a forever symbol that He was the Passover (I Corinthians 5:7). But the “celebration motif” is on hold. Our incredible invitation is to uncover the amazing redemptive truths, the deep things of God (I Corinthians 2:10) within their missives.

*“Verily I say unto you, I will drink no more of the fruit of the vine, until that day that I drink it new in the kingdom of God”* (Mark 14:25). A “new element” of celebration is fully anticipated in that eternal kingdom.

These land directives are incredible. The **“when”** imperative also orients our understanding as to prophetic time. The sequence from the spring Passover, when covered by the blood of the Lamb, to Tabernacles, when Jesus is eternally with us, are all embedded in those feasts. The **“where”** directive tells us that its antitype applies to the **land of promise!**

### **Clarifying the Law**

Within God’s Word are directives that set standards for thought and conduct. For man with a nature that is bent towards evil “continually” (Genesis 6:5), God gave moral laws that clarify what right and wrong are.

There are two great “bodies” of regulations within Scripture:

1. The Law of Moses (Luke 2:22) or “the book of Moses” (II Chronicles 35:12), known in today’s vernacular as the Mosaic Laws.
2. The Decalogue, known as the “two tables of testimony” (Exodus 31:18), “the testimony” (Exodus 40:20), referred to in the New Testament as the “royal law” (James 2:8) and the “law of liberty” (James 2:10-12).

There is additional understanding that is especially important to this Christian dispensation. The Mosaic Laws were divided into two important sections:

1. The Law contained in ordinances (Ephesians 2:15), which ended at the Cross (Colossians 2:14) – known also as the “ceremonial law”
2. Statutes that relate to preparation for the anticipated “Day of the Lord,” embellishing the meaning of the Decalogue (Daniel 9:24)

There is a temptation to focus, within the Mosaic requirements, on the words “statutes” and “judgments.” They gave functional and structural integrity to the meaning and purpose of the imperatives. To emphasize the word “statutes” as an elevated requirement tempts the student to take it out of context. That creates a breach in the moral purpose of God’s laws.

Expositor E. G. White saw this with deepening insight. There were statutes of importance to us today. But they singularly elevated the great understanding of the Decalogue.

“In consequence of continual transgression, the moral law was repeated in awful grandeur from Sinai. Christ gave to Moses **religious precepts** which were to govern everyday life. These statutes were explicitly given **to guard the ten commandments**. They were not shadowy types to pass away with the death of Christ. They were to be binding upon men in **every age as long as time should last**. These commands were enforced by the power of the **moral law**, and they **clearly and definitely explained that law** [this is a definitive statement which

separates the purpose of some statutes from all others] (*The Review and Herald*, April 15, 1875 [Reprinted in RH May 6, 1875]).”<sup>8</sup>

“He commanded Moses to write, as He should bid him, judgments and laws, giving minute directions in regard to what He required them to perform, and thereby **guarded the ten precepts** which He had engraved upon the tables of stone. **These specific directions and requirements were given to draw erring man to the obedience of the moral law**, which he is so prone to transgress.”<sup>9</sup>

The divisions that were made within the Mosaic laws **were based on their moral purpose**. This drives our understanding more deeply as to what was nailed to the Cross and what is retained to clarify God’s moral will for man. This is beautifully embellished again by expositor White when she noted:

“The whole world will be judged by the **moral law** according to their opportunity of becoming acquainted with it, whether by reason, or tradition, or the written Word.”<sup>10</sup>

“You cannot afford to be found a transgressor of **God’s great moral law**. You are to be judged by **its** precepts. If God had no law, there could be no Judgment, and the cases of men and women would not be called into the solemn tribunal, before the righteous Judge. If we have not been found in harmony with God’s requirements in this life, we will be no more in harmony with his requirements in the future life. What excuse can we plead for disobedience to the law of God’s Government?”<sup>11</sup>

The requirements that are retained from the Mosaic laws, which flow into the New Testament era, can only be ascertained and clarified, again, by their moral purpose. Clearly, the life and death of Christ brought to an end the types of regulations that were fulfilled. How then do we precisely determine what was nailed to the Cross and what remains?

### **The Ceremonial Laws – The Laws of Ordinances**

“Ordinances are requirements that God gave. They include statutes, judgments, commandments and laws.”<sup>12</sup> One must be careful to let the context guide how the inspired writer is using an expression. For instance, *hoq* (usually translated as “statutes”) can allude to a “custom” (Ezekiel 20:18, I Samuel 30:25, Judges 11:39), a “legal right” (Genesis 47:26), “regulations” governing nature (Psalm 148:6, Job 28:26), or even a “privilege” (Genesis 47:22).

Similar care must be exercised with the word translated “ordinance” (*dogma* – G). Perhaps the most definitive text to aid our grasp of what was “finished” at the Cross is in Colossians, where *dogma* or ordinances “*that were against us*,” relating to the keeping of the Law of Moses,<sup>13</sup> were “*blotted out*.” This tells us that they were *wiped away, obliterated*. This is used with the

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<sup>8</sup> White, Ellen G.; *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, p. 104 (emphasis added).

<sup>9</sup> White, Ellen G.; *Story of Redemption*, p. 148.

<sup>10</sup> White, Ellen G.; *The Faith I Live By*, p. 83 (emphasis added).

<sup>11</sup> White, Ellen G.; *The Signs of the Times*, December 29, 1887 (emphasis added).

<sup>12</sup> Barker, K. L.; *Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 4, pp. 543-544.

<sup>13</sup> *Thayer Lexicon – dogma* (CD: BibleWorks 7).

descriptive word of “handwritings.” Again, with many meanings, it is contextually a metaphor for the Mosaic Law.<sup>14</sup>

Colossians 2:14 states that these were “*nailed to the cross.*” Naturally, the question arises: Since there is so much overlap in meaning in the ordinances and statutes, what does Paul really mean? In verse 16 he answers this query.

In the churches that Paul started, “false brethren” or Judaizers were constantly infiltrating and trying to establish or reestablish many Mosaic customs. Though circumcision was the key area of agitation, other matters drew sharp divisions – **from** eating with converted Gentile brethren **to** worship rituals. Paul’s strong appeal was that these ordinances/statutes were no longer necessary. They were “shadows” of things to come.

*“Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.... Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days”* (Colossians 2:8, 16).

He presented the major issues that were the most contentious. “Don’t let these men of tradition try to judge or control you.” This is the context of Paul’s concern:

1. Circumcision – addressed in the previous verse
2. Certain food laws
3. Certain drink laws
4. Holy days, new moons and Sabbaths

Many of these issues were dealt with in detail when writing to the Galatians. Number four needs special comment: **When** these three phrases are used **together** they refer to the Jewish feasts (I Chronicles 23:31; II Chronicles 2:3, 31:3; Isaiah 1:13-14; Hosea 2:13 and Ezekiel 45:17).<sup>15</sup> These were nailed to the Cross. It is vital to note that Paul is not **addressing** the motive behind their observance but how one projects their observance as a requirement for salvation.<sup>16</sup>

These things were types, transitory in nature. Clearly, if the object of fulfillment was not kept in view, a great breach in spiritual understanding would occur. The first one and a half chapters of Colossians passionately address this!

### **Correct insight of Expositor Ellen G. White**

The historical, ancient ceremonial ordinances should now be seen by us today as *filled with sacred information, predictive and of vast prophetic value.*<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Sumney, Jerry L.; *Colossians* (Westminster John Knox Press; Louisville, KY), p. 151; O’Brien, Peter T.; *Word Biblical Commentary – Colossians, Philemon* (Thomas Nelson Publishers; Nashville, TN), p. 139.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>17</sup> White, Ellen G.; *The Great Controversy*, pp. 399-400.

“Christians who profess to be Bible students can appreciate more fully than ancient Israel did the full signification of the ceremonial ordinances that they were required to observe. If they are indeed Christians, they **are prepared to acknowledge the sacredness and importance of the shadowy types**, as they see the accomplishment of the events which they represent. The death of Christ gives the Christian a correct knowledge of the system of ceremonies and explains prophecies which still remain obscure to the Jews. Moses of himself framed no law. Christ, the angel whom God had appointed to go before his chosen people, gave to Moses statutes and requirements necessary to a living religion and to govern the people of God.”<sup>18</sup>

Repeating: “In consequence of continual transgression, the moral law was repeated in awful grandeur from Sinai. Christ gave to Moses religious precepts which were to govern the every-day life. These statutes were explicitly given to guard the ten commandments. They were not shadowy types to pass away with the death of Christ. They were to be binding upon man in every age as long as time should last. These commands were enforced by the power of the moral law, and they clearly and definitely explained that law.”<sup>19</sup>

A “new significance” is to come into our understanding relative to that ancient theocracy.<sup>20</sup> The issue is not whether there are sacrifices or no sacrifices. The issues are **which** statutes or judgments specifically elevate the moral law. **And** – how does the ancient Hebrew theocracy system prophetically clarify God’s apocalyptic end?

If these issues are understood, the “keeping” will be replaced with a beautiful elevated understanding of God’s great purposes in redemption. It will reinforce the hope we have in Christ.

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<sup>18</sup> White, Ellen G.; *The Review and Herald*, May 6, 1875 (emphasis added).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> White, Ellen G.; *Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 3, p. 371.