

# Exodus 23:14-19

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*The LORD establishes three feasts—the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of the Harvest, and the Feast of the Ingathering. Added to the discussion are laws concerning how to worship during the feasts. They were designed to give the people times to share the bounty of the LORD with Him, with one another, and with the poor. There is much more discussion about these feasts in the book of Leviticus.*

The first part of the section, vv. 14 – 17, describes the three annual pilgrimage feasts that were to be observed. The LORD declared that *three times a year you shall celebrate a feast to Me* (v. 14).

The context of this verse is that the entire nation of Israel is in the wilderness with the Lord dwelling in their midst. Verses 14-19 look forward to the future when Israel will dwell in the Promised Land, as indicated by the references to harvesting crops, something not done in the wilderness.

The parallel passage in Deuteronomy made it clear these feasts were to be pilgrimages once the Israelites entered the Promised Land. During the feasts, the people were to journey to “the place where the Lord your God chooses to establish His name” in order to participate in the celebration ([Deuteronomy 16:6, 11,16](#)).

In the wilderness God dwelled among Israel and they were constantly in His presence, (which resided visibly upon the tabernacle around which they camped, [Exodus 40:33-38](#)). In [Exodus 29:42](#) the tabernacle is called “... the tent of meeting before the LORD, where I will meet with you to speak to you...”

Verse 15 states *none shall appear before Me empty-handed*, and verse 17 states *all your males shall appear before the Lord*. The word *appear* in both of these verses indicate a physical presence of the Hebrew participant. The phrases *before Me* and *before the Lord* in the Hebrew are literally “before my face” and “before the face of the Lord.” So, while the command that these feasts are to be pilgrimages does not occur until Deuteronomy, the concept is included in these verses, in that it is clear that the people are to physically appear before the location of the presence of God.

Once Israel entered the land, they would scatter and settle throughout it, yet God's visible presence would ultimately reside in only one location. So, in order to worship God in the place of "His name," they would ultimately have to travel to that place. After the conquest of Canaan, the tabernacle and the ark appear to have been placed initially at Shiloh ([Joshua 18:1](#); [1 Samuel 1:3](#)). The ark was captured by the Philistines ([1 Samuel 4](#)) then returned to various places in Israel, and was ultimately moved to the "City of David" (Jerusalem) under King David ([2 Samuel 6:12](#)). God then relocated His presence to the temple built by Solomon ([1 Kings 8:10](#)).

The first feast discussed is *the Feast of Unleavened Bread* (v. 15). This feast was introduced in [Exodus 12:14 – 20](#). The rules discussed for observing it here are the same as set forth in Exodus—*for seven days you are to eat unleavened bread, as I (the LORD) commanded you at the appointed time* ([Exodus 12:15](#)). The Israelites ate *unleavened bread* when they departed Egypt in haste, and there was insufficient time for the bread to rise ([Exodus 12:34](#)). This feast was to remember and celebrate Israel's departure from Egypt.

The feast was to be celebrated *in the month Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt*. The month of "Abib" occurred in late March and early April in our calendar (the Hebrew calendar was lunar, the USA uses a solar calendar). Abib was associated with the barley harvest. The Israelites were never to forget the LORD's deliverance from Egyptian slavery. Because He delivered them, proper acknowledgement of this was required, so *none shall appear before Me empty-handed*, meaning that everyone was to bring a portion of the harvest to the LORD in gratitude for and in remembrance of His deliverance.

The first part of v. 16 discusses the second annual feast to be observed. It is *the Feast of the Harvest of the first fruits of your labors from what you sow in the field* (v. 16). This feast (also called the feast of Weeks, or Pentecost) was to be celebrated at the beginning of the wheat harvest which occurred in the spring ([Exodus 34:22](#)). More information can be found in [Deuteronomy 16:8 – 11](#) and [Leviticus 23:15 – 22](#).

The second part of v. 16 describes the third feast, the *Feast of the Ingathering* (also called the feast of Booths or Tabernacles). It was to be celebrated *at the end of the year* (i.e., early autumn, September-October) *when you gather in the fruit of your labors from the field*. It was associated with the harvest of grapes, olives, and other crops. More information on this feast can be found in [Deuteronomy 16:13](#) and [Leviticus 23:33 – 36](#).

In v. 17, the LORD commanded that *three times a year all your males shall appear before the Lord God* (v. 17). Males were required to come into the presence of the LORD three times a year. We know that women and children would accompany the males when these became pilgrimage festivals after Israel entered Canaan, as when Jesus attended with His mother and father traveling to Jerusalem for Passover ([Luke 2:41-43](#)).

God set Israel up to be self-governing. But He also established these festivals which would help them retain a national identity as His covenant people. Each person was responsible to keep the covenant, and love their neighbor. But the covenant was between the LORD and all the people. These feasts were opportunities for the people of Israel to remember their national history, remember their covenant, and enjoy the benefits of being the LORD's people. He delivered them, He protected them, and He constantly provided for them. In return, they, in unity, were to acknowledge His gracious acts on their behalf.

Verses 18 – 19 contain laws that govern how worship was to be performed at the festivals. The first law stipulated that the people could *not offer the blood of My sacrifice with leavened bread* (v. 18). This probably meant that a person could not kill a sacrificial animal when leaven was in the house. For example, all leaven had to be removed from one's house before observing Passover, the festival that celebrated the LORD's deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt ([Exodus 12:15, 19](#)).

This law prohibited *the fat of My feast to remain overnight until morning*. This probably does not refer to the animal's fat in a literal sense. The Hebrew word for fat (Heb. "ḥēleb") can refer to the literal fat that surrounds the internal organs of an animal ([Leviticus 3:3 – 4](#)). The word is also used to refer to the best of something. For example, in [Genesis 45:18](#), the word refers to the choicest parts of Egypt. Also, in [Deuteronomy 32:14](#), it is translated "finest" when referring to wheat. Here, it is probably a reference to the whole sacrificial animal ([Exodus 34:25](#)). God's people must give the best of their lives for His glory. Nothing is to be left out.

The next law is in the first part of v. 19. It states that the people were to *bring the choice first fruits of your soil into the house of the Lord your God* (v. 19). Earlier, the LORD set aside the "firstborn" as a first fruit belonging to Him ([Exodus 13:2; 22:29](#)). Here, the concept of "first fruits" is expanded to include harvested crops. The people were to bring portions of the first harvest of their crops to the LORD. Here, the phrase "your God" is added to emphasize the fact that the LORD is their sovereign Creator. He created the crops, and He commanded that He receive the first produce of those crops.

This again was to help the Israelites to remember who He is and what He has done for them. It would also create national unity, and a time of celebration. This self-governing society depended upon each individual choosing to care for one another. Celebrating together was likely intended to create a social dynamic conducive to mutual collaboration.

The last part of v. 19 has been interpreted in many different ways. It commands the people *not to boil a young goat in the milk of its mother*. The best explanation seems to be that it is a prohibition against participating in a pagan practice seen in Canaanite worship of their gods.

The command *none shall appear before Me empty-handed* emphasizes the worship aspect of the feasts. These were gatherings for national worship. They were to worship by bringing a portion of what God had given them and giving it back to Him as an acknowledgement of His provision by bringing the first fruits. [Deuteronomy 16:17](#) expressed the principle of proportional generosity: “Every man shall give as he is able, according to the blessing of the LORD your God which He has given you.” This was a major part of worship in the Old Testament and one that carries over into the New Testament, as stated in [1 Corinthians 16:2](#): “On the first day of every week let each one of you put aside and save, as he may prosper...”

### **Biblical Text:**

**<sup>14</sup>“Three times a year you shall celebrate a feast to Me.<sup>15</sup> You shall observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread; for seven days you are to eat unleavened bread, as I commanded you, at the appointed time in the month Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt. And none shall appear before Me empty-handed.<sup>16</sup> Also *you shall observe* the Feast of the Harvest *of* the first fruits of your labors *from* what you sow in the field; also the Feast of the Ingathering at the end of the year when you gather in *the fruit of* your labors from the field.<sup>17</sup> Three times a year all your males shall appear before the Lord God.**

**<sup>18</sup>“You shall not offer the blood of My sacrifice with leavened bread; nor is the fat of My feast to remain overnight until morning.**

**<sup>19</sup>“You shall bring the choice first fruits of your soil into the house of the Lord your God.**

**“You are not to boil a young goat in the milk of its mother.**