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Israelite Festivals: From Cyclical Time Celebrations to Linear Time Commemorations

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Abstract: The Pentateuch and later Jewish tradition associates the key pilgrimage festivals with stories about Israel's past. Nevertheless, these festivals all began as agricultural or seasonal festivals. Using comparative evidence from the ancient Near East, and looking at the Covenant Collection, the earliest biblical law collection, through a redaction critical lens, we can uncover the early history of these festivals and even how they developed in stages. A similar process is evident with the Sabbath, which appears to have begun as a moon festival, as per certain biblical references and from comparative evidence, but which eventually developed into the seventh day of rest as part of the institution of the week, and then comes to be associated with the story of God resting after creation. These developments, from celebrating agricultural and lunar cycles to celebrating mnemohistorical events, can be seen as part of two parallel processes: the coalescing of Israelite cultural memory and the institution of the linear calendar as the dominant conception of time.

Keywords: Israelite festivals; Sabbath; calendars; pilgrimage festivals; full-moon celebrations; harvest celebrations; firstborn rituals; first produce rituals

1. Introduction: Experiencing Time

After smelling the burnt offerings offered him by Noah after the flood,[1] YHWH decides that he will no longer curse the earth on account of humanity (Gen 8:22): "So long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease."[2] The verse in Genesis paints a picture of a cyclical world, where one time or season follows another without end. The final item, day and night, is different from the other three in that it is about the daily cycle, while the others are about the yearly cycle.

The first pair, seed time and harvest time, happen in the autumn and spring respectively, and, they are the inverse of each other, since one harvests that which the other plants. The next two, cold and heat/summer and winter are ostensibly synonymous with each other, with the pairs being written one after the other in a boustrophedonic or chiastic pattern (ABBA). Thus, the verse presents the reader with three cycles that YHWH is promising not to interrupt: agricultural, seasonal, and astronomical.

As observed by Mercea Eliade, time can be experienced as linear or cyclical (Eliade 1959).[3] Modern calendars emphasize linear time. They begin from a fixed point (creation of the world, Mohamed's hijra

[1] It has been argued that the original context of this verse in the J story was not after a flood, but after a drought (Dershowitz 2016).

[2] All quotes from the Hebrew Bible follow the NJPS (New Jewish Publication Society) translation with some adjustments by the author.

[3] This dichotomy is somewhat artificial as humans likely always experience aspects of both, but it is a useful heuristic to paint human experience of time in broad strokes.

to Mecca, etc.)[4] and continue from there. For instance, in the Gregorian calendar, the year 2018 is two thousand and eighteen years since the officially recognized birth of Jesus. But this linear conception of forward movement from a fixed point in the past is not the only way in which we experience time. In addition to imagining time as a line, humans also imagine it as an endless circling. This is what is being pictured by the verse about days and seasons.

2. Festivals at Set Times

An important part of calendars in all cultures is the marking of festivals celebrating something of importance at a given time of year. Festivals can celebrate both kinds of time. For example, the Pennsylvania Dutch celebration of Groundhog Day, is tied to the belief that a groundhog knows whether the winter cold will be long or short in a given year, based on whether it sees its shadow or not when it emerges on February 2. This yearly ritual of watching the groundhog is not tied to some event in the past or a commemoration of previous Groundhog Days; rather, it is simply part of the cycle of winters. The Jewish festival of *Tû bə-Šəbāt*, the New Year for Trees, is essentially the same, as it simply marks the point of midwinter. At the opposite end of the spectrum would be July 4th, which celebrates American independence from England, or the practice of celebrating one's anniversary or birthday.

Sometimes a festival, on its face, may appear to be celebrating something in linear time, while at the same time, be masking a more basic or primal celebration of something in cyclical time (Z. I. Farber 2018, pp. 443–44, 449–50). This masking of a cyclical time festival with a linear time conception (commemorating an important event) seems to underlie what happened with the Israelite festivals found in the Hebrew Bible.

The aim of this paper (in accordance with the aim of the entire issue) is to present an overview of the topic, rather than a detailed and comprehensive argument for a new thesis. Even so, the way the material will be presented should present the reader with a new, overall picture of the development of the Israelite festival calendar. To do this, we will look at the development of the texts, in the light of source and redaction criticism, as well as with comparative models in the ancient Near East. Nevertheless, as the paper is necessarily broad in scope, in order to cover this large topic, many of the specific defenses of given claims and readings will have to rely on works cited in the bibliography where the original research is presented in detail.[5]

3. Moon Festivals (*Ḥōdeš* and *Šabbāt/Kēseʾ*)

The ancient Israelites/Judahites celebrated two moon holidays monthly. The New Moon festival was called *Ḥōdeš*, which comes from the Hebrew root ח.ד.ש meaning "new." The full moon festival was called either *Šabbāt*, a loanword from the Akkadian name for this day (*Šabattu*/*Šapattu*)[6] or, less commonly, *Kēseʾ*, another word for full moon that also appears in Aramaic and Syriac.[7]

In early biblical texts, these holidays are often paired together. Thus, in 2 Kings 4 (8th cent.),[8] when the woman whose son has died wishes to see the prophet Elisha at once, her husband (who does

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4 It does not matter whether these are actual historical events, or mnemohistorical fictions. In either case, this is the internal or constructed logic of the calendar.

5 For an overview of the biblical material, see (Soulnier 2012, pp. 71–82).

6 The idea of Shabbat as *Vollmondfest* goes back to the work of Johannes Meinhold (1905, 1909). Recent arguments in favor of this theory can be found in J. L. Wright (2015), Grund (2011), and Robinson (1988). A succinct summary of the argument can be found in (Albertz [1992] 1994, pp. 408–9). The connection is rejected by a number of scholars, who see the sound similarity as coincidental and the differences between the two as extreme. See (Levine 2008, p. 77; Tigay 1998a, pp. 22–25).

7 *The Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon*, s.v. "*ksʾ, ksʾʾ*," accessed 22 April 2019.

8 There is never a consensus on the dating of biblical texts, and a full attempt to argue the dating of each would treble the size of this essay, so I will briefly note in discussions as to when I date a text and why. In this case, though the Deuteronomistic History is certainly no earlier than the late 7th century, and much is even post-exilic, the work was based on earlier sources, which it incorporated. In this case, the stories of the northern prophets, Elijah and Elisha, are most likely northern traditions. Following (Rofé [1982] 1988, p. 73), I see Elisha's *vita* set in the late 9th century and penned before the destruction of the north in the late 8th century.

not know their son has died) asks her (v. 23): "Why are you going to him today? It is neither *Ḥōdeš* nor *Šabbāt*." This implies that seeking an audience with a prophet or religious figure was something people would do on these festivals.

These were days when people would assemble, and offerings be brought to God, as implied by Isaiah's criticism (Isa 1:13): "Bringing oblations is futile, incense is offensive to Me. *Ḥōdeš* and *Šabbāt*, proclaiming of solemnities, assemblies with iniquity, I cannot abide" (early 7th cent.). In connection with Isaiah's description of days of "proclaiming," Psalm 81:3[4] (8th cent.) describes how the horn would be blown on these holidays: "Blow the horn on *Ḥōdeš*, on *Kēseʾ* for our festival day."[9]

From Amos' rebuke of the northern Israelites' business practices (8th cent.), we can deduce that business was not conducted on these days (8:4–6):

> [4] Listen to this, you who devour the needy, annihilating the poor of the land, [5] saying, "If only *Ḥōdeš* were over, so that we could sell grain; *Šabbāt*, so that we could offer wheat for sale, using an ephah that is too small, and a shekel that is too big, tilting a dishonest scale, [6] and selling grain refuse as grain! . . . "

Other passages show that these festivals were often celebrated as family meals. For instance, when the seductress in Proverbs is convincing the young man that her husband is going to be gone for a long time, she says (Prov 7:20): "He took his bag of silver with him and will return only on the day of *Kēseʾ*" (8th cent. or earlier).[10] The family feast day concept is also the premise of the story about David's retreat from Saul in 1 Samuel 20:

> [24] . . . *Ḥōdeš* came, and the king sat down to partake of the meal. [25] . . . but David's place remained vacant. . . . [27] On the day after *Ḥōdeš*, the second day,[11] David's place was vacant again. So Saul said to his son Jonathan, "Why didn't the son of Jesse come to the meal yesterday or today?" [28] Jonathan answered Saul, "David begged leave of me to go to Bethlehem. [29] He said, 'Please let me go, for we are going to have a family feast in our town and my brother has summoned me to it. . . . '" [34] Jonathan rose from the table in a rage. He ate no food on the second day of *Ḥōdeš* . . . (9th cent.)[12]

The above sketch likely reflects the practice of the pre-exilic period in Israel and Judah. Each one of these festivals changes in later texts, starting in late pre-exilic Judah (7th century) and continuing into the exilic and post-exilic periods. *Ḥōdeš* mostly disappears from popular practice, though it remains "on the books" for priests, as it involves a special set of sacrifices in the Temple (Num 28:11–15) accompanied by ritual trumpet blasts as a reminder (*zîkārôn*) before YHWH (Num 10:10).

The transformation of *Šabbāt* was much more radical. First, the original *Šabbāt* or *Kēseʾ* disappears entirely, even from the Priestly sacrificial lists. This may have happened for the same reason that *Ḥōdeš* vanishes as a festival. At one point, these two festivals celebrated the cyclical moon cycle, which goes from full-to-new-to-full. At some point, the relationship to the moon cycle changed, and the main conceptualization of this cycle became a way to mark time. (We will return to this point in a later section.) As such, *Ḥōdeš* became important, not as a moon celebration, but as the beginning of a month.

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[9] This is a northern psalm, so it should be dated to before the destruction of the north.

[10] This observation fits with the view of Carr (2011), who dates much of Proverbs, including chp. 1–9 to the early monarchic period (pp. 403–31). Other scholars date Proverbs, especially chp. 1–9 much later. See, e.g., (Schmid [2008] 2012, pp. 186–89), who dates it as late as the Ptolemaic period.

[11] According to this source, *Ḥōdeš* may have been celebrated for two days. Perhaps this is connected to the ancient Near Eastern practice of also marking the day of the moon's disappearance (*ūm bubbulim*) which would come right before the new moon (Horowitz 1998, pp. 162–63).

[12] Samuel is one of the oldest, if not the oldest, narrative books in the Bible. Though it shows editorial layers, as with most biblical books, the stories connecting Saul and David are early enough that they still reflect 10th century realities (Fleming 2012, p. 105).

Consequently, the full moon *Šabbāt* lost its meaning, since there is little reason to mark the middle of a month.[13]

Nevertheless, the name *Šabbāt* does not disappear. Rather, it is reinterpreted. In later texts, *Šabbāt* is no longer the name of the full-moon day but is understood as deriving from the Hebrew root ש.ב.ת meaning "rest." It thus gets connected to an entirely different ancient rule, found in the 8th century Covenant Collection, requiring Israelites to rest every seven days (Exod 23:12):

> Six days you shall labor, but on the seventh day you shall cease (תִּשְׁבֹּת), so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and the son of your maidservant and the resident alien may be refreshed.[14]

This rule originally expressed the need to give rest or vacation to one's servants and animals, and may very well have been observed by different Israelites on different days, since there was, as yet, no concept of days of the week. The number seven was likely chosen for its symbolic importance.

The creation of a seventh-day *Šabbāt* came together with a fixing of the weekly calendar, a practice that begins with the Assyrian *ūmū-lemnutū,* (always written in Sumerian logograms, UD.ḪUL.GAL$_2$), meaning, "evil days."[15] The inclusion of such days in Mesopotamian menologies (ritual calendars) goes back at least to the 10th century B.C.E., but in its earlier phases, the exact days varied according to month (Landsberger 1915, pp. 119–26; Langdon 1935, pp. 73–90). By the time of the late Neo-Assyrian Empire, however, the *ūmū-lemnutū* occur on days 7, 14, 19, 21, and 28. With the exception of the 19th, the rest of the days are clearly based on lunar quarters, with the last day or two of the month (*ūm bubbulim*) likely not counted as part of the division but instead as a festival (Langdon 1935, p. 89).

On these days, the king was warned against certain practices, such as conducting business, eating cooked food, changing clothes, riding on his chariot, etc. For example, we are told regarding day 7 of the month in the Neo-Assyrian calendar:

> [Lucky] and sinister. King as shepherd of the peoples may eat no cooked flesh and baked bread. He may not change his garments, may not make sacrifices, ride in a chariot, nor speak as a lord. Seer shall not prophesy and physicians not practice. Unsuited for doing anything desirable. (Langdon 1935, p. 75)

Similarly, a letter written to a Neo-Assyrian king states:

> The 19th day (is the day) of wrath . . . an auspicious day, an evil day. The shepherd of the great people does not eat anything cooked on fire; he does not change the garment of his body, put on clean ones, nor does he perform a sacrifice. The king does not ride a chariot, nor speak in an authoritative tone. (Parpola [1983] 2007, p. 206)

Parpola notes that these days have a somewhat contradictory character, both positive ("lucky or auspicious") and negative ("bad or evil"):

> These days were not simply "inauspicious": every "evil day" is characterized in the series *Inbu Bēl Arḫi* as "auspicious" (UD ŠE). The attribute "evil" probably derives from a learned association of every seventh day of the month (the principal lunar phases) and their multiple ($7 \times 7 = 49 = 30 = 19$: the 19th day) with the seven evil demons, through number symbolism. (Parpola [1983] 2007, p. 178)

It is easy to see the connection between a system of every seven days being declared special and off-limits to certain types of activities and what becomes the Judean Sabbath day by the late first

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[13] Grund (2011, pp. 136–42) discusses the moon festivals from this perspective in the section aptly titled "Linear and cyclical views of time in Israel and its environment" (*Lineare und zyklische Zeitauffassung in Israel und seiner Umwelt*).

[14] See also, Exod 34:21, which seems to be working with the same model.

[15] See *CAD* (*Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*), Volume 9 (L), s.v. "Lemnu," C3, p. 122. (Gelb 1956–2010).

Temple or exilic period, and many scholars have made this connection. Certainly, as Jeffrey Tigay cautiously notes, one cannot argue for a simple adoption of the *ūmū-lemnutū* by the Judeans, due to a number of important differences:

- The Mesopotamian practice was to divide the month by quarters, not to have a seven-day week;
- The Mesopotamian days included day 19 either with or in place of 21, and sometimes neither of these;
- The days were generally seen as negative (though not exclusively so).

Despite these differences, even Tigay admits that the connection is attractive and that the *ūmū-lemnutū* were likely at least a factor in the reimagining of *Šabbāt* (Tigay 1998b, pp. 93–96). Therefore, rather than dismissing this connection, we might suggest that the Judean practice, inspired by the connection with the seventh-day vacation rule, disentangled the *Šabbāt* from the lunar month entirely, and connected their rest day for workers with the Neo-Assyrian rest days for the king (and other officials), emphasizing the solemn importance of these days, and the importance of not profaning them with work. This process would have begun in the 7th century, when Judah was a vassal state to Assyria.

Significantly, *Šabbāt*'s reinvention as a weekly rather than monthly holiday, not only made it much more frequent, but changed the nature of the more ancient day of rest by turning "every seventh day" (a subjective counting) into "every Day Seven" (a communal, fixed counting), thereby incorporating weeks into the communal calendrical conscience. This is a significant development, since weeks, unlike lunar months or solar years, do not reflect natural phenomena, but rather, are based on human conceptual schemes, which may explain why *Šabbāt* continued to undergo two further, contradictory conceptual changes, both of which attempt to make sense of the law.

First, in the Deuteronomic school, the day-of-rest law was explained as existing because God took Israel out of Egypt (Deut 5:15). In other words, it is loosely connected to linear time. This is not really a radical change, since the conceptual link is clear: Israel should treat their slaves and workers well, remembering how unfairly they were treated in Egypt. Second, the Priestly revision—probably from post-exilic scribes of the Holiness school[16]—connects the seventh-day *Šabbāt* to the creation of the world and claims that the reason *Šabbāt* must be observed is because it commemorates God's resting on the seventh day (Gen 2:1–3; Exod 20:10, 31:17).

In sum, looking at the moon festivals, we can see the virtual disappearance of two festivals that originally celebrated natural, cyclical phenomenon. *Ḥōdeš*, which celebrated the new moon is discontinued in everything but name, remaining only as a Temple-based sacrificial law, while *Šabbāt* as a celebration of the full moon disappears entirely, reemerging as the name of a seventh-day holiday, inspired by the exodus from Egypt and commemorating God's creation of the world. We will see that similar developments took place with other festivals as well.

4. The Wheat Festivals: *Maṣṣôt*, *Qāṣîr*, and *Šabūʿôt*

The Covenant Collection in Exodus (21:1–23:19) is believed by many scholars to be the oldest of the Pentateuchal legal collections (Levinson 1997; D. Wright 2009). It includes a description of three festivals (Exod 23:14–17):

> [14] Three times a year you shall hold a festival for Me: [15] The Feast of *Maṣṣôt* (Unleavened Bread) you shall observe—eating unleavened bread for seven days as I have commanded you—at the set time in the *Ḥōdeš* (New Moon) of *ʾĀbîb* (Green Ears), for in it you went forth

[16] Although for a long time, H was considered to be earlier than P and pre-Exilic, for the past two decades, the majority of scholars have embraced the idea that H is a revision of P or even the editor of the Pentateuch itself. As such, without taking a position on whether P is pre- or post-exilic, it seems quite likely that H is, though some scholars disagree. (See Knohl [1995] 2007; Schectman and Baden 2009).

> from Egypt; and none shall appear before Me empty-handed; [16] and the Feast of the *Qāṣîr* (Harvest), of the first produce of your work, of what you sow in the field; and the Feast of *ʾĀsîp* (Ingathering) at the end of the year, when you gather in the results of your work from the field. [17] Three times a year all your males shall appear before the Sovereign, YHWH.

The three holidays here are not of a piece. The first is described as a commemoration of the exodus from Egypt, the latter two as agricultural holidays, celebrating the successful growth season of certain products. And yet, part of the difference derives from redactional supplements (supplements are indented):

> The Feast of *Maṣṣôt*—
>
> > you shall observe, eating unleavened bread for seven days as I have commanded you—
>
> at the set time in the *Ḥōdeš* of *ʾĀbîb*,
>
> > for in it you went forth from Egypt;

The first supplement is easy to recognize, since this phrase was added into a number of biblical passages, interrupting the flow of the text (e.g., Exod 12:15–16, 13:6; Deut 16:3).[17] The second was part of the attempt to redefine many different observances as being commemorations of the exodus (more on this later). Thus, the oldest layer of the *Maṣṣôt* passage follows the same structure as the other two: name of festival plus season of observance.

And yet, the festivals are still not of a piece. The time for celebrating *Maṣṣôt* is marked by a date, while the time for celebrating *Qāṣîr* and *ʾĀsîp* is marked by an agricultural stage, when you harvest or gather the given product. Moreover, the meaning of the latter festivals is clear—thanksgiving for a good harvest—whereas the meaning of the *Maṣṣôt* festival is opaque. What are the unleavened flatbreads for?

The first clue comes from the date—the first of the month of "Green Ears" (*ʾĀbîb*).[18] To what grain does this refer? An important find that sheds light on the agricultural calendar for ancient Canaan/Israel is what scholars call "the Gezer Calendar," discovered in 1908 at Tel Gezer by R.A.S. Macalister, and dated to the 10th century (roughly the time of David according to biblical chronology). I will quote the calendar in full, as we will make reference to other parts of it later in the piece.

> His double-month is ingathering. His double-month is sowing. His double-month is late-planting. His month is chopping flax. His month is barley harvest. His month is harvest and measuring.[19] His double-month is pruning. His month is summerfruit. Abiya (trans., P. Kyle McCarter, *COS* 2, 2003, p. 222 [#2.85]). (Hallo and Younger 2003)[20]

For our purposes, it should be noted that immediately preceding the wheat harvest is the barley harvest. Wheat was a much more significant product to the farmers than barley, and as we already see in the Gezer Calendar, where the word "harvest" without a modifier refers to wheat harvest. Similarly, the Bible also specifies "barley harvest" when it has this in mind (2 Sam 21:9, Ruth 1:22), whereas the word "harvest time" on its own, likely refers to the wheat harvest. In any event, Exodus 34, which is a later revision of parts of Exodus 23 (Gesundheit 2002), specifically states that the holiday of *Qāṣîr* celebrates the wheat harvest. But what about the festival of *Maṣṣôt*?

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[17] Although many scholars still read this text as coming from one author, a number of scholars have suggested redaction along the lines discussed above. The specific, critical redaction suggestion here is based on Gesundheit (2002). Reinhard Kratz refers to the addition in v. 15 as "syntactically clumsy" (Kratz [2000] 2005, pp. 142, 152 n49). A middle position, in which the author of the whole passage is the author of the Covenant Collection, but that this author was reworking older material, is found in Wright (2009, pp. 310–11).

[18] As *Ḥōdeš* can mean month, the phrase could be translated as "at the set time in the month of green ears." This would then assume that the reader knows the set time for this festival.

[19] The translation of this word is disputed. Others, such as King and Stager (2001, pp. 88–89) suggest "feasting."

[20] The language of this document, specific translations of given words, and even the nature of the document, are all matters of dispute. See discussion in (Talmon 1963; Lemaire 1976; Young 1992; Sivan 1998).

The Hebrew word *Maṣṣôt*, in the biblical text, refers to flatbreads, likely made from barely (Avrahami 2018). As the stores of wheat would have been depleted if not entirely used up by this point in the year, flatbreads would have been the only bread available in this season; green ears of wheat can be eaten parched (*qālûy* in biblical terms, known today by the Arabic term, freekeh), but cannot be made into flour for baking. What is the festival's meaning?

On one level, it seems possible that the festival celebrates the barley harvest (Schmidt [1968] 1983, p. 120). If so, it would work well with the other two festivals, as each celebrates a different harvest. And yet, this only partially explains the festival for two reasons. First, if it were to be exactly like the other two festivals, then one would imagine the first barley being offered not eaten. Second, the verse never mentions this being the time of gathering barley. Instead, the only marker is a date, and this is a reference to the green ears of unripe wheat, not the ripe barley.

Thus, the eating of (barley) flatbreads may have been an apotropaic ritual to ensure the success of the wheat harvest (Propp [1999] 2010, pp. 429–34). Specifically, it appears to be a privation ritual, the logic of which comes from the idea that showing wealth can bring about the opposite. We know from other biblical passages that in years of plenty, the stores of wheat grain could last into and even past the next year's wheat season (Lev 26:10). And yet, as fates and gods are capricious in many cultures' conceptions, eating baked wheat bread at the beginning of the wheat harvest season could be understood as implying that the farmers have "no need" of this new crop or any divine help. Such an implication could anger the relevant deities, causing them to demonstrate how much they are needed by destroying the crops with blight or bad weather.

An argument for the likelihood of this interpretation comes from the concomitant ritual act that, although not mentioned in the Covenant Collection or the Ritual Decalogue (and thus perhaps a later development), appears in all other references to this festival: the prohibition to eat leaven (Exod 12:15, 13:3, Deut 16:3) and the requirement to remove all leaven from one's midst (Exod 12:19–20, 13:7, Deut 16:4). Noting this, Yael Avrahami (2018) has argued that the ritual of the *Maṣṣôt* festival mimics the practice of a bad year by having the Israelites live as if they had no wheat in stock. Such an act of self-privation was meant to ensure the opposite; as the deity would not want his people to go hungry, he would watch over the growing wheat and ensure the harvest went well.

According to this, the wheat harvest had two festivals attached to it. *Maṣṣôt* before the harvest as an apotropaic ritual, and *Qāṣîr* when the wheat was harvested, as a ritual of thanksgiving. And yet, this brings up a new problem: the first cut of wheat—the referent of "the first produce (*bîkkûr-*) of one's work"—would be very soon after the festival of *Maṣṣôt*, since the first cut would take place later that same month. This hardly seems as it if were two different times or seasons.

The description of the *bîkkûrîm* grain offering in Leviticus implies that the first cut was not of ripe grain but of green ears (Lev 2:14):

> If you bring a grain offering of first produce to YHWH, you shall bring green ears (*ʾābîb*) parched with fire, grits of the fresh grain, as your grain offering of first produce.

If son, *Maṣṣôt* and *Qāṣîr* would have been contiguous festivals, one after the other. Good evidence of such a practice can be found in an alternative ritual that appears in the Holiness legislation. Leviticus 23–24 is a festival calendar, which begins in the spring. According to this calendar, *Maṣṣôt* is a seven-day festival that begins on the 15th of the month, i.e., the full moon (vv. 6–8), as opposed to the new moon of Exodus 23. Immediately after this holiday, the text lays out another ritual:

> [10] … When you enter the land that I am giving to you and you reap its harvest, you shall bring a sheaf (*ʿōmer*), the first of your harvest to the priest. [11] He shall elevate the sheaf before YHWH for acceptance in your behalf; the priest shall elevate it on the day after *Šabbāt* … [14] Until that very day, until you have brought the offering of your God, you shall eat no bread or parched grain or fresh ears; it is a law for all time throughout the ages in all your settlements.

The ritual here does not describe itself as a festival (*ḥag*) and yet it uses the key words that describe the *Qāṣîr* festival in Exodus 23, i.e., it describes what is to be done with the first cut. As the final verse

forbids the consumption of any wheat products, including parched or raw wheat, it would seem that the law envisions such a cut to be taken from the very first green ears, and that the ritual of bringing the sheaf (*ʿōmer*) is what permits consumption of wheat.[21]

The ritual logic of this offering goes hand in hand with that of the *Maṣṣôt* festival, which is its mirror image. Both likely originated as independent rituals to ensure a good harvest. The *ʿōmer* is a classic offering to God of the first produce and is a variation on what the Priestly text in Leviticus 2 calls the grain offering of the first produce. The *Maṣṣôt* ritual is before the first cut and is an apotropaic ritual also aimed at ensuring the successful harvest. Unlike the *Maṣṣôt* festival here, the *ʿōmer* offering is not given an exact date, except for "after the *Šabbāt*," a vaguery that has caused no end of religious polemic for millennia.

And yet, as the Holiness Text here is making use of an older law, it seems possible that *Šabbāt* refers not to the Priestly seventh day (as referenced at the beginning of the chapter) but to the 15th of the month. If so, then the verse does include an exact date, the 16th, and it would be the second day of the seven-day *Maṣṣôt* Festival, which is, in fact, the day many Jewish sects (including contemporary rabbinic Jews) mark the day of the *ʿōmer*.

A further piece of evidence that this may have been the intention comes from a passage in the book of Joshua, which describes what happens after the Israelites enter the land and offer the paschal offering for the first time (Josh 5):

> 5:10 . . . the Israelites offered the paschal sacrifice on the fourteenth day of the month, toward evening. 5:11 On the day after the paschal offering, on that very day, they ate of the produce of the country, *maṣṣôt* and parched grain. 5:12 On that same day, when they ate of the produce of the land, the manna ceased. The Israelites got no more manna; that year they ate of the yield of the land of Canaan.

According to this text, the Israelites ate flatbreads and parched grain on the same day, the 15th of the month, and this was their first consumption of the local grain. This appears to be a mythical origin story for the ritual of waiting until midmonth to eat from the local produce. The *ʿōmer* text differs only by having one follow the other; first the day in which barley flatbread is consumed (15th), then the offering of the new green ears of wheat, which permits the consumption of the new wheat of that season (16th).

Returning to the Covenant Collection legislation, if its *Maṣṣôt* festival was originally just one day, and celebrated on the first of the month, when was its *Qāṣîr* festival? The text never says, but, since agricultural patterns remained relatively constant, one would imagine that it came within days or at most, two weeks or so later. Such a proximity of dates would only have been possible in a society in which local altars abounded. It is hardly surprising that as time went on, and the centralization of worship in the Temple in Judah became the official standard, the *ʿōmer* ritual merged with *Maṣṣôt*. As a consequence, the celebration of the first-produce festival was pushed off until the end of the harvest season instead of its beginning.

We can see this in the dating of the festival in Deuteronomy (7th cent.) as well as that of the Holiness school (exilic/post-exilic):

> Deut 16:9 You shall count off seven weeks; start to count the seven weeks when the sickle is first put to the standing grain. 10 Then you shall observe the Festival of *Šabūʿôt* (Weeks) for YHWH your God, offering your freewill contribution according as YHWH your God has blessed you.
>
> Lev 23:15 And from the day on which you bring the sheaf of elevation offering—the day after the *Šabbāt*—you shall count off seven weeks. They must be complete: 16 you must count until

[21] For a discussion of the relationship between the *ʿōmer* offering and the first cut in Exodus, see (Weyde 2004, pp. 74–79).

> the day after the seventh week—fifty days; then you shall bring an offering of new grain to YHWH. [17] You shall bring from your settlements two loaves of bread as an elevation offering; each shall be made of two-tenths of a measure of choice flour, baked after leavening, as first produce (*bîkkûrîm*) to YHWH . . . [21] On that same day you shall hold a celebration; it shall be a sacred occasion for you; you shall not work at your occupations . . .

These two texts assume that the dating of this festival should be seven weeks after the first cut. Leviticus never names this festival, but the offering is still described as *bîkkûrîm*, first produce, as it was in Exodus. However, instead of offering the first cuts of new grain, bread is offered. In other words, the festival celebrates the final product of the wheat harvest. Deuteronomy does not say anything about new produce, and simply names the festival after the counting process. Notably, Deuteronomy does have a *bîkkûrîm*-like ritual in chapter 26, though again it does not use that term:

> [1] When you enter the land that YHWH your God is giving you as a heritage, and you possess it and settle in it, [2] you shall take some of every first produce of the soil, which you harvest from the land that YHWH your God is giving you, put it in a basket and go to the place where YHWH your God will choose to establish His name. [3] You shall go to the priest in charge at that time and say to him, "I acknowledge this day before YHWH your God that I have entered the land that YHWH swore to our fathers to assign us." [4] The priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down in front of the altar of YHWH your God. [5] You shall then recite as follows before YHWH your God . . . . [10] . . . You shall leave it before YHWH your God and bow low before YHWH your God. [11] And you shall enjoy, together with the Levite and the stranger in your midst, all the bounty that YHWH your God has bestowed upon you and your household.

The text never clarifies when this is to occur, and even to what products it refers when describing "every first produce," though it is hard to imagine it refers only to wheat.[22] Thus, in Deuteronomy, we seem to have a total separation between the festival of *Šabūʿôt*, as an outgrowth of the older *Qāṣîr* festival, and the practice of bringing first produce as an offering at the Temple. The text in Exodus 34:22 would seem to be a hybrid in this regard, since the name of the festival was changed to *Šabūʿôt* and yet, according to the simple meaning of the verse at least, the festival is still based on the bringing of the first cuts.

In Leviticus 23, the connection between first cuts and the festival remains implied, since on this festival, *bîkkûrîm* are brought, and it is connected by this counting ritual to the earlier day, when the first cut is brought. In both cases, however, the first cut ritual and celebration are separated, with the latter being moved to the end of the season. The tension between a first-produce festival and an end-of-season festival is never really solved in this text, and it can be seen clearly in how the 3rd century BCE book of Jubilees attempts to deal with it (Jub 6:20–21):

> Now you command the Israelites to keep this festival during all their generations as a commandment for them: one day in the year during this month, they are to celebrate the festival because it is the festival of weeks and it is the festival of firstfruits. This festival is twofold and of two kinds. (Vanderkam 1989, p. 40)

As stated above, having an artificial first-produce holiday at the end of the season, fifty days after the first cut ritual, is likely a result of the centralization of the cult which would have made separating a *Maṣṣôt* festival from a first cut festival, virtually impossible for people living outside Jerusalem.

Despite the permutations *Qāṣîr* undergoes in its transformation into *Šabūʿôt*, no biblical text connects it to a mnemohistorical event—i.e., a ritual that commemorates an event from Israelite cultural

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[22] This problem is what lead the Qumran sect to have three separate *bîkkûrîm* festivals, each fifty days after the other (Sweeney 1983).

memory—the way *Maṣṣôt* is connected to the story of the exodus.[23] Thus, *Qāṣîr*/*Šabūʿôt*/*Bîkkûrîm* remains a purely agricultural festival in the Bible. Nevertheless, its transformation into a commemoration is only postponed; in the Second Temple Period, the festival becomes associated with God's revelation at Sinai.[24]

5. *ʾĀsîp*, Sukkôt, and the Autumn New Year

The third festival in the Covenant Collection list is *ʾĀsîp*, the Festival of Ingathering. But to what form of produce does this refer? The Gezer calendar quoted above opens with "his double-month is ingathering" which must occur in the autumn, considering its placement. The product being ingathered is most likely olives, which are gathered after the summer fruit has been picked (Borowski 2003, p. 28; King and Stager 2001, pp. 88–89), perhaps also grapes. The festival calendar in Exodus 23 refers to *ʾĀsîp* being "at the *ṣēʾt* of the year," which could mean the "end of the year" or alternatively, "the emergence of the year" (HALOT 3886) (Köhler and Baumgartner [1967–1995] 1994–2000).

Beginning the year with the ingathering fits with the Gezer calendar, which opens with the ingathering. It also works with what we know from many extra-biblical sources, uncovered over the past two centuries of archaeological excavation, namely, that the ancient Near East had two different periods in which the new year could be marked: Autumn and Spring, which is reflected in the Akkadian names for these months.

Autumn opens with the month of *Tašrītu*—from the Akkadian *šurrû*, meaning "beginning," likely a reference to the time of planting.[25] This also marks the beginning of the rainy season in the Levant, which lasts until spring. Spring begins with the month of *Nissanu*—from the Akkadian word for "first-produce,"[26] since, as discussed above, this was the time when wheat began to ripen. It seems hardly coincidental that the two core harvest festivals, *Qāṣîr* and *ʾĀsîp* are celebrated in the autumn and spring. Instead, it would seem that these two festivals marked the two new years for the ancient Israelites.

It may seem strange to imagine two new-years, since, from the perspective of linear, calendrical time, it is necessary to mark one, and begin the year at a clear point. Nevertheless, as noted at the beginning, from the perspective of cyclical time, each of these marks a beginning and is a kind of new year. In fact, we know that in Mesopotamia, each of these new year seasons was marked by a festival called the Akītu (Bidmeade 2002, pp. 1, 44; Cohen 1993, pp. 306, 327).

We know of an overlapping autumn calendar, from Ugarit, the celebration of which began in the previous month, which was when they gathered grapes from the vine:

> On the month of Rashu-Yeni ("Beginning of Wine"), on the day of the New Moon (*ym.ḥdt*;), cut a bunch of grapes for Ilu (=El) as a piece offering (*shelamim*) . . .

The text continues by describing how the king makes preparations starting on the 14th, and then, on the 15th begins a seven-day celebration. Finally,

> On the day of the new moon of {the following month, equivalent to *Tašrītu*} . . . the king will offer a sacrifice . . . on the roof where there will be dwellings of branches, four on one side four on the other, a ram as burnt offering, a bull and a ram as peace offering, to be repeated seven times. According to what is in his heart, the king will speak. (Pardee 2002, pp. 63–65)

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[23] Mnemohistory differs from history in that it is not an attempt to retrieve the past, but rather, to construct it. For a general introduction to this field, see (Halbwachs [1941] 1992; Assmann 2006). For the application to biblical literature, see (Davies 2008; Edelman and Ben-Zvi 2013).

[24] The Book of Jubilees connects it with other covenants as well, such as God's covenant with Noah (Jub 6:21) and the birth of Isaac (Jub 16:13).

[25] *CAD* vol. 18 (*Tav*), pp. 297–98, s.v. *tašrītu*. (Gelb 1956–2010).

[26] *CAD* vol. 11a (N-2), pp. 265–66, s.v. *nisannu*. (Gelb 1956–2010).

This month-long ritual ends with the New Moon celebration on *Tašrītu*. In the middle of the month comes a seven-day festival. This is highly reminiscent of what we know about the equivalent holiday *ʾĀsîp* in other biblical texts, namely *Sukkôt* (Del Olme Lette 2004).

> Deut 16:15 You shall hold a festival for YHWH your God seven days, in the place that YHWH will choose; for YHWH your God will bless all your crops and all your undertakings, and you shall have nothing but joy.[27]

Of particular interest is the reference to dwellings of branches, which is reminiscent of the supplementary biblical commands about this festival at the end of Leviticus 23:

> 39 Mark, on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in (א.ס.פ) the yield of your land, you shall observe the festival of YHWH *to last* seven days . . . 40 On the first day you shall take the product of *hadar* trees, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before YHWH your God seven days . . . . 42 You shall live in booths seven days; all citizens in Israel shall live in booths, 43 in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I YHWH your God.

As it is difficult to imagine the direct borrowing of Israel or Judah from Ugarit, it is more likely that the text from both cultures reflect versions of the same practices that have ancient roots in the region. The purpose of these branches and booths differ in the Ugaritic and biblical conception. In Ugarit, these dwellings were for the gods, and the king would then be able to go up on the roof and speak with them, making his requests. In Leviticus, there are two different conceptions—the first is so that the people can rejoice with lovely branches, and the second so they themselves can dwell in the booths. In the Persian Period, these two conceptions were merged, with the booths being made of lovely branches (Neh 8:15). Nevertheless, the ancient origins of the Israelite/Judahite ritual may be seen in the Ugaritic practice (De Moor 1972, p. 22; Waganaar 2005, p. 23).

Another notable element in the festival at Ugarit is that the celebration was multipodal. Significantly, it featured a seven-day festival starting on the 15th (full moon) of the sixth month, and concluded on the first of the seventh month (new moon). In the Priestly and Holiness calendars, we see something similar. The first of the seventh month is a festival of horn blasts, the tenth of the month is a time for atonement and cleansing (*Yôm Hakīppūrîm*), both of the people and of the sanctuary, and the 15th marks the seven (or eight) day festival of *Sukkôt*.

It would seem that, in this tradition, we have a month-long celebration, as described in Nehemiah 8, with the New Year element coming at the beginning instead of the end. Dividing the new year proper from the agricultural festival allowed *Sukkôt* to concentrate on celebrating the ingathering season, as well as to look forward to the upcoming rainy season. Although the biblical text does not discuss *Sukkôt* as a rain festival, this is certainly what the festival marks in the Second Temple period, and it seems reasonable to assume that this goes back to earlier times, since Iron Age Israel and Judah were also agricultural societies depending on rainfall.

Comparative evidence, as well as later tradition, point to the virtual certainty that the autumn festivals marked the new year, and that this was the meaning of the festival of horn blasts in the Priestly literature. In fact, the connection between horn blasts, enthronement ceremonies, and ancient Near Eastern new year festivals suggest the likelihood that YHWH was ceremonially enthroned on this new year celebration in the First Temple period (Mowinckel 1962, vol. 1, pp. 107–92). Nevertheless, the biblical texts only state that it is the first of the seventh month. Why is the new year's element being

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[27] The two festivals were a month apart, but they are still versions of the same basic autumn new year celebration. Note that according to 1 Kings 12:32–33, the northern kingdom of Israel celebrated its autumn festival the month after Judah's (i.e., month 8 and not month 7), perhaps because produce ripens later in the north (Talmon 2005).

suppressed here? The answer may come from the realities of the exilic period and the influence of Babylonian culture. To quote Julye Bidmeade (2002, p. 44):

> Initially, the Mesopotamian calendar was based on a lunar cycle—the occurrence of the rising new moon after sunset indicated the beginning of the new month. The full moon marked the middle of the month, and the *ūm bubbulim* (the day of disappearance) indicated the end of the month . . . . Eventually the calendar was adjusted to correspond to the solar year. The year was divided into two six-month periods determined by the equinoxes. Because of this division, the celebration of a New Year could occur both at Nisannu and at Tašrītu. However, in lexical lists, economic documents, and other official inscriptions, Nisannu is always the first month of the Standard Mesopotamian calendar.

I would argue that the Israelite calendrical conception goes through a similar shift. Beginning with a celebration of cycles, the moon cycle and the seasonal/agricultural cycle, the moon and year become ways of marking linear time. As such, it became important to fix the beginning of the month and the beginning of the year.[28] For this reason, the Priestly or Holiness text makes it clear the spring month is the first month of the year (Exod 12:2). This is also why the Ritual Decalogue, which revises parts of the Covenant Collection,[29] describes *ʾĀsîp* occurring not at the "end (or emergence) of the year" (בְּצֵאת הַשָּׁנָה) but at "the turn of the year" (תְּקוּפַת הַשָּׁנָה) implying that it happens in the middle of the year, as would be the case in a spring calendar.

It may even be that this is what brought about the use of numbered month-names as opposed to what we find in some ancient passages in the book of Kings, in which at least certain months have other names:

> In the four hundred and eightieth year after the Israelites left the land of Egypt, in the month of *Zīw*—that is, the second month—in the fourth year of his reign over Israel, Solomon began to build the House of YHWH. (1 Kgs 6:1)

> And in the eleventh year, in the month of *Bûl*—that is, the eighth month—the House was completed according to all its details and all its specifications. (1 Kgs 6:38)

> All the men of Israel gathered before King Solomon at the Feast, in the month of *ʾĒtānîm*—that is, the seventh month. (1 Kgs 8:2)

We can add to this list the name *ʾĀbîb*, encountered above, which was the older name for what becomes the first month. These month names probably reflect what the local Canaanite population used as well (Vanderkam 1998, p. 6), but the priestly scribes, who accepted the Babylonian imperial calendar, and wished to emphasize that the year began in the spring, adopted numbers as names. That this did not necessarily filter down into popular practice is implied from the fact that, at least in the exilic period, the Jews adopted the Babylonian names of the months and did not use numbers.

The official adoption of the spring new year goes together with the cancellation of the full moon *Šabbāt* and the reconceptualization of *Ḥōdeš* not as a moon celebration but as the beginning of a month. In short, the originally cyclical month-time that went from full-to-new-to-full, etc., became a way of marking the beginning of the month, which was determined to be at *Ḥōdeš*. Full moon *Šabbāt* was no longer marked, though in Tishrei and Nissan, it remained as the date of the great agricultural festivals *Sukkôt* and *Maṣṣôt*. In addition, it is hardly coincidental that three other "festivals" in the later Jewish calendar are celebrated on the full moon: *Tû bə-Šəbāt* (15th of Shevat, the new year for trees), *Tû bə-ʾAb* (15th of Av, the festival of love), and *Šabūʿôt*, celebrated on the 15th of Sivan according to the sectarian calendar.

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[28] This was a standard trajectory of calendars in the ancient period, including the Egyptian and Greek calendars (Stern 2012).

[29] The claim here that the Ritual Decalogue revises the Covenant Collection follows (Gesundheit 2002, pp. 12–43). This is contra the view that this text was older and perhaps even the source for the passage in the Covenant Collection.

6. Animal Husbandry Rituals (Firstborns and *Pesaḥ*)

In the biblical account of history, the conflict between farmers and shepherds goes back to the first brothers in human history, with Abel as the shepherd and Cain as the farmer. The conflict story is connected to the very different lifestyle that farmers and shepherds lived. Farmers were entirely sedentary, tilling the same plots of ground year after year. Although some shepherds were sedentary, others would travel with their flocks, taking them to different pastures depending on the season (Borowski 1998, pp. 40–45). Even so, the two cultures did not live entirely independently of each other, as semi-nomads relied on grains grown by farmers while the farmers were in need of meat, skins, milk, and wool from the shepherds.

The book of Genesis depicts Israel's ancestors consistently as shepherds, and Exodus depicts Moses as a shepherd, thus showing that the biblical authors were conscious of animal husbandry as being an important and even respected part of their culture. It would be surprising, therefore, if among the festivals and rituals of ancient Israel, we did not find some that were specifically the province of shepherds. Moreover, whereas large flocks of sheep and goats would generally be kept by wandering shepherds, cows and bulls were kept by farmers, and they would have had rituals of their own relevant to these animals (Knauf and Guillaume 2016, pp. 57–59).

The Covenant Collection has a doublet of laws having to do with offering first produce and firstborns to YHWH, in chps. 22 and 23 respectively:

> Exod 22:28 You shall not put off the skimming of the first yield of your vats.[30] You shall give Me the first-born among your sons. 29 You shall do the same with your cattle and your flocks: seven days it shall remain with its mother; on the eighth day you shall give it to Me.
>
> Exod 23:19 The choice first produce of your soil you shall bring to the house of YHWH your God. Do not allow the kid to grow fat on its mother's milk.[31]

The laws here emphasize that the first of many products go to YHWH, ostensibly as sacrifices: wine, sons, cattle and flocks, produce (wheat?), and flocks again. These verses may derive from a unit separated by the splicing in of other laws. The main idea of these laws was to bring the "firsts" to YHWH immediately, and this is emphasized in both iterations of the animal law. In most cases, the animals would have been born in the winter and weaned in the spring, but the verse insists that the firstborn should be offered almost immediately, without waiting for weaning.

That the first of these laws is about wine production fits with what we saw about the Ugaritic calendar, which began preparation for the autumn new year celebration in the month of new wine, though from the Gezer calendar, we might infer that the grape gathering season was in early summer. Perhaps the first wine is a little later than first "grape juice," or perhaps the wine offering was supposed to come in the summer and not the autumn.

We will skip for a moment the offering of firstborn sons, which would not be a yearly ritual, of course, as it would only occur once per mother. Nor would it be limited to a given season, since human births happen any time of the year.

As for bringing the first born of animals, sheep and goats give birth between December and February (Borowski 1998, pp. 52, 82 n17; Hirsch 1933, p. 59). If the firstborn animals are to be brought before they are weaned, this means midwinter. Cows go into heat periodically, and their sexual cycle is not seasonal, so a firstborn calf can be born at any time of the year.

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[30] This is the NJPS translation. The Septuagint (LXX) understood the first word (מְלֵאָתְךָ) as referring to harvest produce and the second word (דִּמְעֲךָ) as referring to the first wine. Nevertheless, the use of the first word in Num 18:27 and Deut 22:9 in the context of vineyards and wine production implies that this term is also connected to wine. The phrase may simply be a hendiadys here (*HALOT* 2121). (Köhler and Baumgartner [1967–1995] 1994–2000).

[31] This appears to be the original meaning of the obscure phrase לֹא תְבַשֵּׁל גְּדִי בַּחֲלֵב אִמּוֹ usually translated as "do not cook a kid in its mother's milk." For an alternative translation, see (Schorch 2010).

First produce, assuming this is a reference to wheat, would be cut in the spring as discussed above. In fact, this rule overlaps with the festival of *Qāṣîr* which celebrates the bringing of the first cut of wheat. This overlap suggests a radical possibility hinted at above:

The three festivals, *Maṣṣôt*, *Qāṣîr*, and *ʾĀsîp* are not original to this text, but were added. Originally, the rule was not about festivals but simply that each Israelite male must appear at his local altar three times a year with the appropriate offerings. This is implied not only by the overlap but also by the fact that *Maṣṣôt* and *Qāṣîr* themselves overlap, i.e., they come about in the same season.

This suggestion solves a number of textual problems. For instance, 23:15 and 23:17 say the same thing in different words. This is best explained as a *Wiederaufnahme* (resumptive repetition), often a sign that a supplement was added into the text.[32] Second, the festivals of *Maṣṣôt* and *Qāṣîr* are separated by a phrase that seems unrelated to the *Maṣṣôt* festival but closely related to the general statement in the previous verse. Here is how I would reconstruct what happened with this text—I use two indentations to show two levels of editing and underlining to show the *Wiederaufname* (Exod 23:14–17):

Three times a year you shall hold a festival for Me:

The Feast of *Maṣṣôt* (Unleavened Bread)
you shall observe, eating unleavened bread for seven days as I have commanded you—
at the set time in the *Ḥōdeš* (New Moon) of *ʾĀbîb* (Green Ears),
for in it you went forth from Egypt;

and none shall appear before Me empty-handed;[33]

and the Feast of the *Qāṣîr* (Harvest), of the first produce of your work, of what you sow in the field; and the Feast of *ʾĀsîp* (Ingathering) at the end of the year, when you gather in the results of your work from the field.

Three times a year all your males shall appear before the Sovereign, YHWH.

The original did not specify a time or a name, since it was understood that the person should come to his local altar when his produce or animal was ready for sacrifice. I suggest that in this pre-redacted version of the "three festival" law, we have a competing set of rituals, which a later scribe reinterpreted to be a reference to "famous" communal festivals, and chose three agricultural ones, even though two (*Maṣṣôt* and *Qāṣîr*) were related to the same event (first cut of wheat) and would be celebrated at the same time.

Part of the ritual for each of these appearances at the altar seems to have been an animal sacrifice, which may have been the original meaning of the phrase "none shall appear before me empty-handed."[34] The same "rush" we see in the laws of the first produce or firstborn can be seen with the sacrifice, which is the import of v. 18:

Exod 23:18 You shall not offer the blood of My sacrifice with anything leavened; and the fat of My festal offering shall not be left lying until morning.

The existence of altar rituals unconnected to the pilgrimage festivals fits with what we know from other biblical texts that there were festivals that existed that are not mentioned in the Pentateuchal law codes. Shilo, for instance, had its own festival (Judg 21:19, 1 Sam 1:3, 2:19) and the account of how maidens weep yearly over Jephthah's daughter (Judg 11:40) explains an existing festival. And these

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[32] Exodus 34 lacks the opening of this pericope, possibly because the author of the Ritual Decalogue saw the redundancy and removed it. He also has the phrase "don't see my face empty-handed" after the description of the firstborn offering which he adds here.

[33] Perhaps the scribe put the *Maṣṣôt* text before this phrase since it is the one festival that comes with no produce, since it is an apotropaic ritual and not an offering ritual. Alternatively, it could just have been an error.

[34] This may also be the import of the Cain and Abel story—YHWH does not accept sacrifices of vegetation only.

are just examples that happened to be noted in biblical verses. Moreover, individual families may have had their own family festivals.

7. *Pesaḥ*: An Apotropaic Ritual

The most famous of all festival offerings is the *pesaḥ*, which has an elaborate ritual with clear apotropaic connotations. A number of scholars have suggested that this began as a way of protecting the flock, before the shepherd moves them to spring pastures. Yet, the ritual is very much focused on the house. For this reason, other scholars have suggested it originates as an offering not to YHWH but to the family, ancestor deity (Zevit, pp. 280–81).

A third group of scholars have suggested that it has its origins in an apotropaic ritual to protect babies, similar to the Akkadian lullabies to protect newborns from being snatched by Lamashtu (Propp [1999] 2010, pp. 434–39; W. Farber 1989, pp. 34–39; 1990). This would connect the ritual with the story behind the ritual, which becomes so central to it, that it saved the Israelite firstborns.

I suggest a related possibility, that this was a family ritual to protect the house in lieu of the sacrifice of the firstborn. To clarify, let us return to the law in Exodus 22:28, which commands the offering of the firstborn son to YHWH. Although some interpret this to mean dedicating the son to serve at an altar, others understand this to be a requirement for child sacrifice. This is the only biblical law collection that requires child sacrifice (Levenson 1993, pp. 3–17). The binding of Isaac story (Gen 22), which originally ended with the son being sacrificed (Yoreh 2010, pp. 65–78), may be the only other biblical text that looks on this favorably. Although Leviticus 27:28–29 does allow for human sacrifice, this is not a requirement, and probably refers to a slave.[35]

Other texts are quite negative about it, such as Psalm 106:37–38, which speaks of this as worship of demons, or the passages in Kings (2 Kgs 23:10) and Jeremiah (7:31–32, 19:11–14) that describe the Tophet, where children were sacrificed (Stavrakopoulou 2012–2013). Nevertheless, all of these texts take it for granted that Israelites sacrifice their children, and the reference to a Tophet points to a ritual shared with the Phoenicians and Carthaginians, for which we have archaeological evidence (Vainstub 2010). Whereas Jeremiah claims that this practice has not been sanctioned by YHWH at all, Ezekiel claims that child sacrifice was indeed commanded by God, but only as an expression of his anger towards his people:

> Jer 32:35 and they built the shrines of Baal which are in the Valley of Ben-hinnom, where they offered up their sons and daughters to Molech—when I had never commanded, or even thought *of commanding*, that they should do such an abominable thing, and so bring guilt on Judah.
>
> Ezek 20:25 Moreover, I gave them laws that were not good and rules by which they could not live: 20:26 When they set aside every first issue of the womb, I defiled them by their very gifts—that I might render them desolate, that they might know that I am YHWH.

In keeping with the negative attitude of the prophets, the later law collections adjust the requirement for child sacrifice, taking one of two approaches. One interpretation is that the child is to be donated to serve at the local altar. The story of Samuel's youth is an example of this. It is also the assumption of the Priestly author in the book of Numbers, who argues that the law became defunct when YHWH commanded the Levites be exchanged for the firstborn in a giant redemption ritual:

> Num 3:40 YHWH said to Moses: Record every first-born male of the Israelite people from the age of one month up, and make a list of their names; 3:41 and take the Levites for Me, YHWH, in place of every first-born among the Israelite people . . .

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35 The story of Jephthah's daughter (Judg 11:39) is about child sacrifice as well, but the narrator does not appear to look upon this with favor.

The other approach was to require that the firstborn son be redeemed. This is then integrated into the general laws of firstborn offerings:

> Exod 13:12 you shall set apart for YHWH every first issue of the womb: every male firstling that your cattle drop shall be YHWH's. 13:13 But every firstling ass you shall redeem with a sheep; if you do not redeem it, you must break its neck. And you must redeem every first-born male among your children.

This alternative conception of firstborn offerings is then incorporated into the Ritual Decalogue, in the section dealing with festivals, as is the *Pesaḥ* offering. I suggest that both the redemption ritual and the *Pesaḥ* offering are ways of dealing with the cancellation of child sacrifice. The redemption ritual has an obvious connection, since the money is in place of the offering, but the *Pesaḥ*, which may have its origin in one of the other reasons surveyed above, has a subtler connection as an apotropaic ritual protecting the house. The blood of the animal victim "fools" the destroyer, coming to kill the son, and the consumption of the animal victim by the entire household bonds them together in safety. Certainly, the staying power of the *pesaḥ seder* ritual as the ultimate expression of Jewish family solidarity has stood the ritual-anthropological test of time.

8. Festivals as Commemorations

Multiple parallel processes seem to have been at work in the reinterpretation of the festivals from what was surveyed above, to what the Bible and later Jewish tradition present as their main themes.

Calendar—We noted already that as the calendar moves from cyclical time to linear time, bipodal festival pairs such as *Ḥōdeš* and *Šabbāt/Kēseʾ*, or *Qāṣîr* and *ʾĀsîp*, lose their meaning or even become problematic. As they could no longer express the yin-yang of moon and season, they needed to be reinterpreted or cancelled. Thus, *Ḥōdeš* became nothing more than a priestly sacrificial rite, in honor of the new month, and *Šabbāt/Kēseʾ* as such disappeared entirely. *Qāṣîr* was split into a simple sheave offering (*ʿomer*) and a festival celebrated at the end of the wheat harvest season, *Šabūʿôt*, even though it still ostensibly brought the first produce (*bîkkûrîm*). *ʾĀsîp* keeps its place, though it becomes known for the branches and booths as opposed to the ingathering. Moreover, it stops being the marker of the new year, at least officially. Even the spin off festival of the horn blasts, which was almost certainly meant to mark the new year on *Ḥōdeš* instead of *Šabbāt/Kēseʾ* is reinterpreted as simply the festival of the seventh month. In this case, though, the subterfuge ultimately fails, since rabbinic Judaism reintroduces this festival as the new year celebration, despite the fact that this contradicts the Pentateuch directly and explicitly.

Communal—It may be that the agricultural achievements celebrated in the *Qāṣîr* and *ʾĀsîp* festivals were once not festivals at all, but rather, offerings required from each individual family. This would make the produce offerings parallel to the system we find for firstborn animals, which are not tied to a festival, but are required to be brought forth immediately. Perhaps this has to do with the coalescing of Israelite and Judahite worship places over time, or perhaps these two approaches existed simultaneously in competing groups. Whatever the case, eventually the produce requirements became part of the festivals and tied to specific dates, whereas the firstborn offerings remain unbound to a specific date, at least officially.

Mnemohistorical—Finally, the greatest conceptual change that the festivals undergo is their integration into Israel's emerging narrative about itself, specifically, the connection to the exodus story (Schmidt [1968] 1983, pp. 117–26). *Pesaḥ* stops being about protecting Israel's babies or firstborn sons, but about how YHWH protected Israel's firstborn sons in Egypt. The same is true about the redemption of the firstborn; YHWH owns all firstborn Israelite males because he saved Israel's firstborn males in Egypt. Even firstborn animals are explained this way, and the exodus story is redacted to include the death of firstborn Egyptian animals. *Maṣṣôt* stops being about protecting the wheat harvest with an apotropaic deprivation ritual and becomes about commemorating Israel's rushed escape from Egypt without bread. Even *Sukkôt*, in the very latest stage of textual revision, is described as commemorating

the booths that the Israelites lived in when dwelling in the wilderness (Lev 23:43), something which does not even appear in any biblical narratives, and may have its origins in the post-exilic period (Weyde 2004, p. 128). The one harvest festival that is not reinterpreted in the Bible, that of *Šabūʿôt*, is interpreted in Second Temple and Rabbinic literature as commemorating the revelation of the Decalogue at Mount Sinai.

Perhaps the most interesting example of historical reinterpretation is that which began not as a festival at all: the ancient law requiring Israelites to rest, and let their workers and slaves rest, every seven days. We noted above how this was first regularized to be every day seven, as part of the new division of time into weeks, and how it took over the term *Šabbāt* from the defunct full-moon festival.

The next step was to interpret this law in light of the exodus, and say that Israel must allow its slaves to rest since they were not given this privilege when they were slaves in Egypt. Eventually, in the Priestly or Holiness version of the Decalogue, and other Priestly or Holiness passages, this was reinterpreted again to commemorate, not the exodus, but the creation of the world. God rests on the seventh day, and thus Israel should imitate God and do the same.

This is the only festival in the Pentateuch that is reinterpreted in light of a Genesis story and not an Exodus story. In fact, the Genesis story was written, or at least heavily revised, to explain the practice, just as many of the exodus details were written to explain the *Pesaḥ*, *Maṣṣôt*, and the firstborn laws.

9. Conclusions

As the Pentateuch's editors were conservative, we can still see the outlines of the original festivals and their meanings. Moreover, the Pentateuch never completely reworked the festival system into the new historical conception, nor did the editors of the other biblical books try to make all of the references cohere with the later Priestly/Holiness system. The next step in this development was taken in the 3rd century BCE by the author of Jubilees, who not only grounds *Šabūʿôt* in the Sinai story, but regrounds all the festivals in Genesis stories as well, giving each both a patriarchal and exodus heritage.[36]

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[36] This, however, was not adopted by Rabbinic Judaism, and thus died out for the most part after the Judean rebellion(s) against Rome, though the tradition continued in the Ethiopian Jewish community, which held on to Jubilees.

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