

CHURCH *of* GOD

A WORLDWIDE ASSOCIATION, INC.

HOLY DAY OFFERINGS—HOW OFTEN? *Study Paper*

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Should festival offerings be given only “three times” a year—“at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, at the Feast of Weeks, and at the Feast of Tabernacles” (Deuteronomy 16:16)? Does the Church practice of giving offerings seven times (i.e. on the seven annual holy days) *violate* the principle in Deuteronomy 16? Or, is it possible that ancient Israelites gave *more* than three festival offerings?

The full text of Deuteronomy 16:16-17 says: “*Three times a year all your males shall appear before the LORD your God in the place which He chooses: at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, at the Feast of Weeks, and at the Feast of Tabernacles; and they shall not appear before the LORD empty-handed. Every man shall give as he is able, according to the blessing of the LORD your God which He has given you*” (emphasis added throughout).

What is a “time”?

In Deuteronomy 16:16 the Hebrew for *times* (*pa'am*) is commonly translated as such, with other possible meanings of “stroke, beat, foot, step, anvil, occurrence,” et al. (*Brown, Driver and Briggs Hebrew Lexicon*). This word is also found in Exodus 23:17: “Three times [*pa'am*] in the year all your males shall appear before the Lord GOD.”

However, another word for *times* is used in Exodus 23:14, “Three times [*regal*] you shall keep a feast to Me in the year.” Interestingly, this word is rendered as “feet” 155 times in the King James Version, which is over half of its occurrences. It can also mean “foot, leg ... of God ... of ... animals, table” et al. (*ibid.*).

Together, the definitions of these two words, within the context of the above passages, point to a *pilgrimage* on the feet of people and animals, three times a year.

The first “time”—the Feast of Unleavened Bread—covers *seven consecutive days*. Deuteronomy 16:16 describes *when* to “appear” before God, not *how many* offerings to give. It says, “three times a year all your males shall *appear*” not “three *days* a year your males shall *give*.”

But what about Trumpets and Atonement? Does the omission of these festivals in Deuteronomy 16 *prohibit* a pilgrimage and offering for these festivals? From a practical standpoint, roundtrip travels between these one day festivals and the Feast of Tabernacles was likely a hardship for many living far away since they all occurred during the 7th month.

However, the question is whether the omission in Deuteronomy 16 means that Trumpets and Atonement were *forbidden times* for the pilgrimage and giving offerings in Jerusalem?

Notice Ezra 3:1: “And when the seventh month had come, and the children of Israel *were* in the cities, the people gathered together *as one man* to Jerusalem.” The children of Israel departed their outlying cities and came to Jerusalem “when the seventh month had come,” i.e. the Feast of Trumpets. Likewise, later, in Nehemiah 7:73–8:2:

When the seventh month came, the children of Israel *were* in their cities. Now all the people gathered together *as one man* in the open square ... and they told Ezra the scribe

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to bring the Book of the Law of Moses. ... So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly of men and women and all who *could* hear with understanding on the *first day of the seventh month*.

These are recorded as *commendable* acts. Therefore the mentioning of only “three times” did not prevent Israelites from making the pilgrimage to Jerusalem on the Feast of Trumpets. And we don’t know how many opted to stay through the Day of Atonement, rather than making two roundtrips before the Feast of Tabernacles. Likewise, the expression “three times” is not a restriction to just three offerings.

Only during a “feast”?

Another argument for collecting just three offerings revolves around the Hebrew word for *feast*, namely, the “Feast” (*chag*) of Unleavened Bread, the “Feast” (*chag*) of Weeks, and the “Feast” (*chag*) of Tabernacles (Deuteronomy 16:16). This rigid restriction to just three offerings doesn’t allow any exceptions—otherwise this premise would crumble like a house of cards.

Nevertheless, Exodus 34:25 explicitly mentions another feast, “You shall not offer the blood of My sacrifice with leaven, nor shall the sacrifice of the Feast (*chag*) of the Passover be left until morning.” Passover is a *fourth* “Feast” (*chag*), thereby refuting the premise of there being only three feasts (*chaggim*).

Leviticus 23 uses a different word for “feast” (*moed* or *mowed*) that’s better translated as, “appointed feasts” (MKJV), “appointed times” (NET), “designated times” (Complete Jewish Bible), or “set feasts or appointed seasons” (Amplified Bible).

The Hebrew word for “feast” (*chag*) has a New Testament Greek counterpart (*heortē*), according to the *Dictionary of Biblical Languages*. Luke 2:41 says, “His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast (*heortē*) of the Passover.” John 7:2 refers to the “Feast (*heortē*) of Tabernacles” (also John 6:4; 13:1). And 1 Corinthians 5:8 mentions the “feast” (*heortē*) of Unleavened Bread. *Louw-Nida Lexicon* adds the following regarding this Greek word:

“Though various celebrations of the Jewish religious year have traditionally been called ‘feasts,’ it would be wrong to use a term which would suggest gluttony or wasteful abundance of food. The emphasis should be upon the *ceremonial character* of the eating rather than upon the extent of what was eaten. Therefore, it may be better in a number of languages to use terms referring to ‘celebrations’ or ‘festivals,’ since *the festivities of such gatherings* were far more important than the feasting” (Festivals, *heortē*).

There are seven annual “festivals” (the term “celebrations” can misrepresent the importance of these days). And during Atonement the emphasis is on the character of *fasting*. Another definition of *chag* is “festival sacrifice” (*Brown-Driver-Briggs*), which applies to all sacrificial offerings, whether eaten or *not* eaten, e.g. burnt, grain, and sin (Numbers 29:8-11).

An *appointed time* (*mowed*) can also be a feast (*chag*), as noted with Passover (Exodus 34:25). Therefore, why can’t the same be said of the other annual festivals?

Festival Peace Offerings

Deuteronomy 16:16 is not the first reference to festival offerings in this chapter. Verse 10 says, “Then you shall keep the Feast of Weeks to the LORD your God with the tribute of a *freewill offering* from your hand, which you *shall give as the LORD your God blesses you.*”

A freewill offering could be given as a festival offering. Freewill offerings were a type of peace offering, according to *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*:

“There were three kinds of peace offerings: (1) thank offerings in response to an unsolicited special divine blessing; (2) votive (vowed) offerings in pursuit of making a request or pledge to God; and (3) freewill offerings spontaneously presented in worship and praise” (Sacrificial Offerings).

The offerings of Deuteronomy 16 resemble these offerings. Peace offerings were *eaten*. Thanksgiving offerings, for example, were a response to a “divine blessing.” These offerings were “eaten the *same day* it is offered” (Leviticus 7:15). And God’s blessings also moved people to make a pledge to God through vow (or votive) offerings. Or, they spontaneously praise Him with festival offerings. These two offerings (vow and freewill) were to be eaten or burned by the “third day” (vv. 16-17).

The peace offering is also known as the “fellowship offering” (Leviticus 3:1, Lexham English Bible), because it was *shared* meal—the “fat” was burned unto God (Leviticus 3:3), the “flesh” was eaten by the offerer (Leviticus 7:15), and the priesthood ate the “breast and right thigh” (Leviticus 7:34). The *New English Translation* says:

“The *peace offering sacrifice* primarily enacted and practiced communion between God and man (and between the people of God). This is the only kind of offering in which common worshipers partook of the meat of the animal. When there was a series of offerings that included a peace offering (see, e.g., Lev 9:8-21...Lev 3:18-21), the peace offering was always offered last because it expressed the fact that *all was well between God and his worshiper(s)*” (Leviticus 3:1).

These offerings were offered often during the festivals, “every man that hath many eatables and much goods shall bring *many* burnt offerings *and many* peace offerings” (*John Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible*, Deuteronomy 16:17). Notice that every “man” (singular) gave “many” peace offerings. Again, he likely gave these offerings over multiple days, due to the command for these to be eaten or burned in one to three days.

Freewill offerings could also be burnt offerings (Leviticus 3:1), which were not to be eaten. Both types of freewill offerings are mentioned in Ezekiel 46:11-12, “At the festivals and the appointed feast days...when the prince makes a *voluntary burnt offering* or *voluntary peace offering* to the LORD, the gate that faces toward the east shall then be opened for him...”

Or, freewill offerings could be monetary, e.g. Ezra 2:68-69 “*Some* of the heads of the fathers’ *houses*...offered freely for the house of God.... According to their ability, they gave to the

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treasury for the work sixty-one thousand gold drachmas....” Also Ezra 8:28, “...the silver and the gold *are* a freewill offering to the LORD God of your fathers.”

Certain types of festival offerings were reserved for specific feast days, “These are the feasts (*mowed*) of the LORD...to offer an offering made by fire to the LORD...*everything on its day*” (Leviticus 23:37). However, offerings on designated days were given in addition to or, “...besides all your freewill offerings...” (v. 38), which were not restricted to any particular day, nor any number of times, during a seven-day feast.

Summary

God blessed many Israelites to be able to give *more than* three, or even seven offerings a year. Offerings were given and consumed by feast goers *all seven days*, “they ate *throughout* the feast seven days, offering *peace offerings* and making confession to the LORD God of their fathers” (2 Chronicles 30:22).

The amount that God blesses someone to be able to give is *unchanged* by the number of offerings that he gives. Therefore the Church’s practice of giving seven offerings doesn’t increase or decrease how much God has blessed someone to be able to give.

Church leaders customarily made administrative decisions in the absence of an explicit scripture in a given area. “...I have no commandment from the Lord; yet I give judgment as one whom the Lord in His mercy *has made* trustworthy” (1 Corinthians 7:25, also vv. 6, 12, 40).

In our modern day, the Church has made the decision that the application of “they shall not appear before the LORD empty-handed” is appropriate for the seven annual festivals and not just three “times” in a given year. While there is ample evidence that offerings were given on other days during the two longer festivals of Unleavened Bread and Tabernacles, there are seven annual days designated as holy convocations which required assembling before God. It seems appropriate that on these special annual days an offering based on God’s blessing should be given by those who assemble before God.

There is no implicit or explicit biblical restriction on how often someone could give freewill offerings. However, based on the biblical references to the commanded assembly on each of the seven annual holy days the Church of God, a Worldwide Association believes that its practice of collecting offerings on these specific days is appropriate and consistent with biblical principles.