

Thanksgiving in Deuteronomy

Introduction:

This is the Sunday before Thanksgiving in the U.S. As you read this lesson (or whatever it is that you do with it), I will be in Lagos, Nigeria, where the Thanksgiving holiday we celebrate is not celebrated the same way it is here. In fact, I will be in class for 6 hours that day, teaching an intensive 2-week course that completes an entire semester's worth of class time in 8 days.

As the editors of Nazarene adult Sunday School materials worked their way through Deuteronomy for us, it seemed quite fitting to have us study a text that's as close to the original sense of Thanksgiving as any text could be. It is quite possible that the first Thanksgiving celebration was patterned after something similar to a "first-fruits" offering. However, the presentation of the "first-fruits" as a religious ceremony appears to be a Yahweh-centered adaptation of pagan ceremonies of a similar nature. Pagan gods were fickle and needed to be persuaded to do what people understood them to do. For their part, the gods were demanding and their cooperation was often expensive. Many of the surrounding cultures had gods who demanded the first of everything (humans, food, animals) as payment for their reluctantly doing what was expected of them. As we read through the selection on "first-fruits," let's look for both the alternate purpose and attitude God has in mind in presenting this offering.

*I. An acceptable grain offering, **Read Deuteronomy 26:1-11***

Given our suspicion that the book of Deuteronomy was written at a later time than "the world within the text" (that is, the situation narrated at the beginning) might assume, it is most likely that the offering to which the text refers was an annual event rather than just a one-time event the first year. I would like for us to look at this text and try to discern what's going on.

QUESTIONS OF OBSERVATION:

1. What appears to be the sense or the reason behind the liturgical statement in v. 3?
2. If you know the history of the patriarchs in Palestine, what does the liturgical statement in vv. 5-10 say about the situation of Israel later in Palestine, and the attitude behind this gift?
3. Speculate on why the Priests and the foreigners will rejoice with the presenting of these offerings?
4. How does the conclusion of this section of the text underscore the difference between Israel's God and the gods of their pagan neighbors?

The second liturgical reading (vv.5-10) is an annual historical reminder that in spite of whatever wealth Abraham and his next two generations of descendants had, they didn't own land. As nomads, they leased grazing rights for their animals, trading them for grains, legumes and fruit to supplement their diet—those things that served as staple foods they couldn't grow.

Israel's situation in the Holy Land after the conquest was that of an agrarian society, with about 90% of the people owning the land and growing their food on it, with 10% of the population not owning land, and could only get food through bartering, service, begging, gleaned, or other. Archaeologists have noted that in the years following the conquest, Israel expanded their holdings by building new towns and plowed new territory, expanding up slopes in the hill country, tilling more land for growing crops for the growing population. Priests and all their Levite relatives, along with foreigners, however, could not own land or grow their own food. Some gleaned (as in the story of Ruth), others started industries involving the daily needs for other items: clothing, shoes, utensils, etc., to use in trade for food. Others offered services needed, even working the fields.

I circled the word "then" at the beginning of v. 11, posing this question to the text: Why will the Levites and Foreigners along with everyone else, rejoice so much? One answer seemed a bit obvious. If 90% of the population bring this portion of their produce to the temple, and would be able to keep the rest, there will be a whole lot of food subsidy to distribute among the other 10% of the population. Nothing in this text indicates that this food is to be thrown away, or burned up. It is to be the cause of rejoicing.

God is not proposing an economic socialism. Land ownership is still private, and there are restrictions as to who can and who can't own land. God is presenting a means of economic justice with a great deal of balance between the "haves" and "have nots," but based on the gratitude of a people who for generations had nothing to their name other than a burial ground. To put it into more contemporary wording, what we see here is an annual income tax paid in commodity rather than cash, by "the haves" in order to provide social security for "the have nots." But everyone rejoices, because God has provided the wherewithal for this to occur. I'm not a farmer, but I've lived in farm communities, and I've recognized the tremendous gratitude of farmers who are able to contribute their share to the lives of others because of God's blessings on their land.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Our society has moved from an agrarian society to an industrial society to a consumerist society. How do you see this as affecting the sense of gratitude of God's provision as a result of the labor of those faithful to him?
2. I'm sure we represent a broad spectrum of views on government subsidies paid through taxation. That aside, what is the role of the faith community in meeting the needs of those who do not have the wherewithal to take care of themselves? (Both testaments of the Bible offer some solutions, recognizing that there are always difficulties, imbalances, and ulterior motives in participating.)
3. How can your Thanksgiving celebration be an outreach to someone in need?

Before going on, I want to comment on verse 2, the point about God choosing a dwelling for his Name. The first central location for worship was at Shechem, at the end of the book of Joshua. At the end of the period of the Judges, and perhaps during some if not all of that time period, the center had moved to Shiloh, just a few miles south of Shechem on the main road through the hill country. Shiloh was eventually abandoned after the fiasco of Eli's sons taking the Ark from Shiloh to the battle field and it being taken by the Philistines. The final center was built by

David in his new city of Jerusalem, the result of his taking the city of Jebus and making it his capital city. In his desire to make Jerusalem the center of both political and religious life, he brought the tabernacle there, and eventually planned the temple which Solomon built there. Traditionally, this verse is understood as speaking about Jerusalem. Even if the voice of Moses were only a literary device, to say Jerusalem would have been terribly anachronistic.

II. A new understanding of tithe. Deuteronomy 26:12-15

Immediately upon completion of the discussion on the offering of the “first-fruits” the text moves into the tithe of the third year, without saying for sure why everyone rejoices. The case of the tithe really is a combination of tax and offering. It’s why some conservative Christians insist on tithing as a serious obligation for maintaining one’s faith. A few might even see tithing as the principal proof of their loyalty to God. There are several differences between the “first-fruits” and the third-year tithe. First, the offering of the “first-fruits” is presented as an expression of deep gratitude for the privilege God has given his people in giving them this land “flowing with milk and honey.” It’s a smaller offering in terms of calculation. The tithe is an for the income of an entire year, expected of everyone as a declaration of their trust in and obedience to God, trusting that he will help them live on the 90% that remains.

Next, the “first-fruits” was presented at the temple, the one center where God’s name was. There were storage facilities there that were cared for in subsidizing those persons who needed it. This third-year tithe (that’s every third year), however, was local. The Levites, living in each of the tribal territories, were responsible for the administration and distribution of this in their specific locality. The word rejoicing has been replaced by the word “satisfied.”

A new category of needy people is included—the fatherless and the widow. These are the people without a voice in society because there is no adult male to care for them or to speak for them. It was the responsibility of the Levites, then to keep records of all the people living in their territory to know who fit into that category and who didn’t. Land could have been leased out, but the renter would keep for himself the produce from it, having included its value in the lease price paid to the lease holder. I tried to raise a math question on this one:

If 90% of the people give 10% of their produce to this group of needy people every three years, how long would the supply last for the 10% of people for whom it was destined?

Evidently, then, not only did the priests at the temple have warehouses to store the offerings of the “first-fruits,” the Levites also had warehouses for storing the third-year tithes for eventual distribution among those who were eligible for it in their surrounding villages.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What would life had been like for the unfortunate in Israel if this policy had been kept up regularly?
2. What would foreigners travelling through Israel say about Yahweh as they experienced this policy in their travels?
3. What should it say to American Christians, with our nation’s wealth, as to how we should handle the extraordinarily large amount of financially needy people in this country?

With this tithe there's another liturgy. This one unique, with balanced lines of 2 positive declarations sandwiching 5 negative statements. An analysis of the negative declarations given in this liturgy recognizes that most of them refer to practices that the pagan neighbors engage in as worship to their gods. The liturgy is, therefore, a declaration of the worshiper's loyalty to the covenant between Israel and Yahweh, and that none of the offering was used for anything other than what it was designed for, and it was offered in purity and holiness.

Conclusion:

This text is clear that the presenting of tithes and the offering of other occasion gifts in thanksgiving to God is not an end in itself. It is always a demonstration of both gratitude for the blessings and grace of God at work in our lives, and an expression of our undivided loyalty to and trust in God. In our day, we have learned that it is better not for the pastor to be responsible for the distribution, but that responsibility is given into the hands of trusted lay persons who will follow the desires of the congregation. We have also discovered that there is a direct link between the faithfulness and generosity of God's people to give and a positive result of their witness in the world outside the church.