

The Cost of Holiness: Faith, Risk, and the Pilgrimage Feasts

Introduction: When the Rains Come Early

On September 25, 2025, just two days after Rosh Hashanah, Israel experienced its heaviest September rainfall in 93 years. The *yoreh*—the biblical "early rain" that marks the beginning of the agricultural year—arrived with unprecedented force, breaking records that had stood since 1932. Some regions received nearly 100mm (almost 4") of rain in a single day, flooding streets and closing beaches. For modern Israelites, it was an inconvenience requiring traffic adjustments and beach closures. For ancient Israelites preparing to observe the fall pilgrimage feast of Sukkot just two weeks later, such timing could have meant agricultural catastrophe—waterlogged fields impossible to plow, a missed planting window, and a significantly reduced grain harvest the following spring.

This rare meteorological event opens a window into a profound but often overlooked dimension of Torah observance: the concrete, material risks that covenant faithfulness demanded. The pilgrimage feasts were not merely religious celebrations divorced from practical life. They were acts of trust that placed Israelite families in positions of genuine agricultural vulnerability—and they did so by divine design.

A Gap in Leviticus Scholarship: The Missing Theme of Faith

Modern scholarship on Leviticus has produced rich insights into its theology and structure. Jacob Milgrom's magisterial Anchor Bible commentary established holiness as the book's organizing principle, tracing the semantic range of *qodesh* and its implications for Israel's cultic and social life. Mary Douglas's anthropological approach narrowly construes holiness functions as ordering and categorization—maintaining boundaries between clean and unclean, sacred and profane, Israel and the nations. More recently, scholars like Christopher Wright and Walter Brueggemann have emphasized the social justice dimensions of Leviticus, particularly in the Jubilee legislation and provisions for the poor—readings that nevertheless tendentiously reduce Leviticus to a social program while obscuring its fundamentally theological character.

Yet for all this work, one theme remains surprisingly underdeveloped in Leviticus studies: faith. Unlike Genesis, where Abraham's faith becomes paradigmatic, or Deuteronomy, with its extensive rhetoric about trusting God rather than fearing enemies, Leviticus is typically read as prescriptive rather than relational—a handbook of ritual procedures and purity regulations, not a theological meditation on trust. Gordon Wenham's NICOT commentary occasionally notes faith dimensions, but does not develop them systematically. Brevard Childs's canonical approach hints at reading Leviticus within the Pentateuch's larger narrative of trust and testing, but the connection remains largely implicit.

William D. Barrick points in a promising direction in his study of Leviticus 26, noting that "faith is the binding requirement for anyone to have a relationship to the God of Abraham."^[1] This insight, embedded in his discussion of the eschatological significance of Leviticus 26's covenant themes, recognizes that beneath Leviticus's focus on holiness lies a necessary faith foundation. Barrick correctly identifies faith as essential to covenant relationship—a welcome corrective to purely cultic or ethical readings of the book.

To this valuable insight, we may add a full propositional understanding of how faith and holiness relate. We can state it as a simple equation:

Faith + Testing = Holiness

Or more specifically: **Faith + Desert/Testing = Holiness.**

This is not merely a gap but a fundamental misreading of Leviticus's theological structure. Holiness in Leviticus is not the product of ritual precision, ethical achievement, or proper categorization. It is the outcome of a faith relationship tested and proven through repeated experiences of vulnerability and dependence. The wilderness pedagogy was not merely background to Leviticus's legal material; it established the essential pattern by which holiness would be achieved. Israel learned holiness in the desert precisely because the desert stripped away self-sufficiency and made trust in God necessary for survival. Upon entry to Canaan, Leviticus does not abandon this pattern but rather institutionalizes it.

The call to "be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy" (Lev 19:2, 20:7) is therefore not merely an ethical or ritual imperative. It is a call to enter and remain in a testing relationship where obedience regularly requires trusting God's provision and protection even when such trust involves real risk and material vulnerability. The pilgrimage feasts of Leviticus 23 provide a particularly clear example of how this faith-through-testing dynamic operates—and how covenant obedience was designed to regularly place Israelites in positions where continued faithfulness required continued trust.

The Wilderness Pattern: Testing as Pedagogy

To understand the faith requirements embedded in the pilgrimage feasts, we must first recognize how they extend a pattern established in the wilderness. After the dramatic deliverance from Egypt—the plagues, the sea crossing, the destruction of Pharaoh's army—the Israelites might have expected immediate and triumphal entry into Canaan. Instead, God led Israel into the wilderness and commanded them to construct a modest tent structure around a gold-plated wooden box of meager proportions. The cognitive dissonance must have been profound—from the dramatic deliverance from Egypt to the mundane routines of desert survival. Where was the grand temple befitting the God who had humbled Egypt? Where was the immediate possession of the land flowing with milk and honey?

The wilderness period functioned as a crucible of trust. Israel learned to depend on God for daily provision—manna that could not be hoarded, water from rocks, guidance by cloud and fire. Deuteronomy 8:2-3 makes the pedagogical purpose explicit: "And you shall remember the whole way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. And he humbled you and let you

hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord."

The psalmist reflects on this period of divine testing: "For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried" (Ps 66). The test was not merely about belief in God's existence—they had seen his power in Egypt. The test was about trust in God's character and provision even when circumstances made such trust costly or counterintuitive.

The pilgrimage feasts extended this pattern of testing into the settled agricultural life of Canaan. Even after conquest and settlement, Israel would not be allowed to rest in self-sufficient agricultural security. Covenant holiness would continue to require concrete acts of trust that involved genuine risk.

Spring Risk: External Threat and Divine Promise

The first major pilgrimage feast, Passover and the week-long Feast of Unleavened Bread (Nisan 14-21), came at the beginning of the barley harvest. The *omer* offering—the first sheaf of barley presented "on the day after the Sabbath" during the festival week (Lev 23:11)—marked the official permission to begin harvesting. This meant that at Passover time, ripe grain stood ready in the fields while Israelite men journeyed to Jerusalem or to wherever the tabernacle was stationed during the judges period.

The agricultural risks were immediate and concrete. First, there were **human and animal threats**: Spring was prime raiding season in the ancient Near East, and with adult males away at the feast, undefended villages and unharvested fields presented attractive targets for both human raiders and wild animals. Archaeological evidence of fortified granaries and destruction layers confirms that seasonal raiding was a standard feature of ancient agrarian life, while wild boar, gazelles, and livestock could devastate ungarded fields of standing grain within days.

Second, there were **natural risks**: Late spring storms, hail, or unseasonable winds could destroy crops on the verge of harvest in the eastern Mediterranean's volatile transition period between wet and dry seasons. Even without catastrophic weather, grain left standing too long past ripeness could shatter and fall, or begin to deteriorate.

The psychological character of this anxiety was **external**—would others take what was rightfully theirs? The threat came from human malice and natural unpredictability beyond their control. Yet precisely because this was the more probable danger (raiding being common), God addressed it explicitly. Exodus 34:23-24 declares: "Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the LORD God, the God of Israel. For I will cast out nations before you, and enlarge your borders; no one shall covet your land when you go up to appear before the LORD your God three times in the year."

This divine promise is remarkable for its specificity. God does not merely promise general blessing for obedience. He addresses the exact anxiety that would tempt Israelites to disobey—the fear that leaving their land vulnerable would invite loss. The promise functions as a test of faith: Will you trust me to restrain human covetousness while you worship? Will you prioritize covenant relationship over economic security?

Fall Risk: Internal Adequacy and the Planting Window

The fall pilgrimage feast, Sukkot (Feast of Tabernacles/Ingathering, Tishrei 15-21), presented a different kind of risk. By this time, the summer harvest of grapes, olives, and fruits had been "gathered in" (hence the name in Ex 23:16, 34:22)—the timing ensured that families were not traveling while summer crops needed immediate attention. However, Sukkot fell precisely at the beginning of the winter planting season, when the early rains (*yoreh*) would arrive to soften the sun-baked earth for plowing and enable the sowing of barley and wheat for the following spring's harvest.

While the *yoreh* typically arrives in late October or November, popular meteorological analyses suggest that unseasonably early rains can occur with some regularity, occasionally arriving during or shortly after the festival period.^[2] The September 2025 event, while record-breaking in intensity, illustrates that such timing, though not typical, occurs with sufficient frequency to have created genuine agricultural concern in ancient times.

The agricultural consequences of mistiming created three significant challenges. First, missing optimal planting conditions: The first *yoreh* rains soften ground that has been baked hard by five months of rainless summer, creating ideal conditions for plowing and sowing—conditions that may not repeat if the early rains are followed by a dry spell before heavy winter rains begin. Second, reduced yields: Seeds sown late germinate poorly and produce weaker plants, meaning late-planted winter wheat and barley yield significantly less grain than crops planted at the optimal time. In a subsistence agricultural economy, this was a direct threat to family food security for the entire following year. Third, competitive disadvantage: Families who prioritized obedience to the pilgrimage requirement would watch their neighbors—perhaps those who found excuses to skip the journey—plant at the optimal time and reap more abundant harvests.

The psychological character of this anxiety was fundamentally different from the spring risk. The fall concern was internal: Am I capable enough? Am I organized enough? Do I have sufficient resources and capacity to prepare, travel, observe the feast, return, and still get my planting done in time? Will my obedience to God's command result in my family having less food next year than my less observant neighbors? This is the anxiety of adequacy, of self-doubt in the face of competing demands.

Why the asymmetry? Perhaps because the fall risk, while real, was pedagogically different. Spring risk required trusting God to restrain human sin—an intervention in moral causation. Fall risk required trusting God's ordering of creation itself—the regular patterns of seasons that God had established. To demand explicit divine promise for every natural uncertainty would be to fail the very test of faith that the wilderness had been designed to teach: trust in God's provision within the created order, not just in miraculous interventions.

Moreover, one in five years experiencing suboptimal planting conditions due to obedience meant that covenant faithfulness had measurable, recurring economic cost. Absent divine intervention to delay unseasonably early rains, this was not a one-time test but a lifelong pattern. Israelite families would experience, multiple times across a generation, the reality that obeying God sometimes meant watching their harvest come in thinner than their neighbors'. They would live with those consequences—tighter

food budgets, less grain to trade, reduced household prosperity—for the entire year following each late planting.

The Architecture of Faith: External vs. Internal, Probable vs. Remote

Comparing the spring and fall pilgrimage risks reveals something profound about the nature of biblical faith. The two situations map onto fundamentally different types of anxiety, each requiring a distinct expression of trust.

The spring feasts, Passover and Unleavened Bread (Nisan 14-21), presented external threats of plausible probability. With ripe barley standing in fields while men journeyed to Jerusalem, the danger was immediate and concrete. Raiding was a common seasonal pattern in the ancient Near East; archaeological evidence of fortified granaries and destruction layers confirms this was no hypothetical concern. Wild animals could devastate unguarded grain within days. Late spring storms, hail, or unseasonable winds threatened crops on the verge of harvest. The psychological character of this anxiety was fundamentally about victimization: "Will others take what is rightfully mine?" This fear addressed real vulnerability to human malice and natural unpredictability beyond the Israelites' control.

God addressed this danger explicitly. Exodus 34:23-24 declares: "Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the LORD God, the God of Israel. For I will cast out nations before you, and enlarge your borders; no one shall covet your land when you go up to appear before the LORD your God three times in the year." God does not merely promise general blessing for obedience. He soothes the exact anxiety that would tempt Israelites toward disobedience—the fear that leaving their land vulnerable would invite loss. The promise functions as a test of faith: Will you trust me to restrain human covetousness while you worship? Will you prioritize covenant relationship over economic self-sufficiency?

The fall feast, Sukkot (Tishrei 15-21), presented an entirely different risk profile. By this time, the summer harvest had been safely gathered in, but the festival fell precisely at the beginning of the winter planting season when the early rains (*yoreh*) would arrive to soften sun-baked earth for plowing and enable sowing of barley and wheat. While these rains typically arrive in late October or November, they can occasionally arrive during or shortly after the festival period, creating genuine agricultural concern. The September 2025 event, while record-breaking in intensity, illustrates that such timing, though not typical, posed a real risk to ancient Israelite families.

The agricultural consequences were severe. Missing the first *yoreh* rains meant missing optimal planting conditions—moisture levels that might not repeat if early rains were followed by a dry spell before heavy winter rains began. Seeds sown late germinated poorly and produced weaker plants. Late-planted winter wheat and barley yielded significantly less grain than crops planted at optimal time. In a subsistence agricultural economy, this was not merely an inconvenience but a direct threat to family food security for the entire following year. Moreover, families who prioritized obedience to the pilgrimage requirement would watch their neighbors—perhaps those who found excuses to skip the journey—plant at the optimal time and reap more abundant harvests.

The psychological character of this anxiety was fundamentally internal rather than external. The fall concern was about personal adequacy: Am I capable and organized enough? Do I have sufficient resources and capacity to prepare, travel, observe the feast, return, and still get my planting done in time? Will my obedience to God's command result in my family having less food next year than my less observant neighbors? This is the anxiety of self-doubt in the face of competing demands.

Significantly, Scripture offers no explicit promise about agricultural timing comparable to the Exodus 34:24 promise against covetousness. God addresses the real, probable danger of human theft but leaves the natural uncertainty of weather patterns unmitigated by special assurance. Why the asymmetry? Perhaps because the fall risk, while real, was pedagogically different. Spring risk required trusting God to restrain human sin—an intervention in moral causation. Fall risk required trusting God's ordering of creation itself—the regular patterns of seasons that God had established. To demand explicit divine promise for every natural uncertainty would be to fail the very test of faith that the wilderness had been designed to teach: trust in God's provision within the created order, not just in miraculous interventions.

Moreover, experiencing suboptimal planting conditions periodically due to obedience meant that covenant faithfulness had potentially measurable, recurring economic cost. This was not a one-time test but a lifelong pattern. Israelite families would experience, multiple times across a generation, the reality that obeying God sometimes meant watching their harvest come in thinner than their neighbors'. They would live with those consequences—tighter food budgets, less grain to trade, reduced household prosperity—for the entire year following each late planting.

The pedagogical purpose was precisely to teach trust across both domains—moral threats and natural uncertainties, external dangers and internal adequacies, protection in the present and provision for the future. The wilderness manna experience had foreshadowed this multifaceted testing. God gave explicit instructions about gathering—only what was needed each day, except before Sabbath when a double portion would miraculously not spoil (Ex 16). The test required trusting daily provision, believing the Sabbath exception, resisting the urge to hoard, and accepting that obedience to God's command (Sabbath rest) would not result in hunger. The pilgrimage feasts posed the same test in an agricultural key: Would they trust that obedience to the feast calendar—even when it created agricultural risk—would not ultimately result in ruin?

Holiness Through Vulnerability: The Faith-Holiness Nexus

This brings us to the theological heart of the matter: holiness in Leviticus presupposes and requires faith. The repeated imperative "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy" (Lev 19:2, 20:7, 20:26, 21:8) is not merely a call to ritual purity or ethical behavior. It is a call to embody a distinctive way of life that repeatedly requires trusting God enough to accept vulnerability.

Consider other examples from Leviticus where this nexus appears. The Sabbath and Sabbatical laws (Lev 25) require letting land lie fallow every seventh year with no sowing or reaping, trusting God's promise that the sixth year's harvest will suffice for three years—a radical economic test demanding faith that obedience will not result in starvation. The dietary laws (Lev 11) restrict diet to clean animals, creating social separation and limited food options that require trusting God's commands lead to blessing even

when they create disadvantage. The Day of Atonement (Lev 16) requires trusting that the elaborate ritual actually works to restore right relationship with God, with no empirical verification beyond faith in God's declared efficacy. Even the skin disease regulations (Lev 13-14) required accepting economic loss and social isolation, trusting God's wisdom despite significant personal cost.

Milgrom rightly identified holiness as Leviticus's central theme, but holiness is not self-contained. It is the visible manifestation of an underlying trust relationship. Douglas correctly noted that holiness involves boundary-maintenance and ordering, but those boundaries are only maintained when people trust God enough to accept the social and economic costs of distinction.

Faith is the engine that makes holiness possible. Without trust in God's provision, protection, and promises, the costly distinctiveness that holiness requires would be unsustainable. Israelites would inevitably cut corners—skip the pilgrimage feast when harvest timing was tight, plant during the Sabbatical year "just a little" to ensure food security, compromise dietary laws when convenient food was available, pressure priests to shorten the skin disease isolation period when economic pressure mounted.

Theological and Pastoral Applications

This integrated understanding of faith and holiness in Leviticus yields several insights for theological reflection and pastoral practice:

- 1. Holiness is costly in concrete ways.** Contemporary calls to holiness often focus on internal dispositions or withdrawal from obviously immoral behaviors. But biblical holiness regularly required accepting material disadvantage, economic risk, and social distinctiveness. The question is not merely "Is this behavior sinful?" but "Am I willing to trust God enough to obey even when obedience is costly?"
- 2. Faith is tested in the ordinary, not just the spectacular.** The most significant tests of Israel's faith were not the dramatic moments (Red Sea crossing, water from rock) but the routine, recurring obediences that involved real risk. Similarly, Christian discipleship is tested not primarily in extraordinary crises but in the mundane decisions to trust God's wisdom when it conflicts with worldly prudence—decisions about generosity, vocation, time use, lifestyle choices, and priorities.
- 3. Trust is both demonstrated and deepened through obedience.** The wilderness testing revealed "what was in the heart" (Deut 8:2)—it exposed existing levels of faith. But it also cultivated deeper trust through repeated experiences of God's faithfulness. Each spring that raiders did not come, each fall when rain timing proved workable, each Sabbatical year that families did not starve—these became testimonies that encouraged continued obedience. Faith is not merely a prerequisite for holiness; it grows through practicing holiness.
- 4. Risk is not eliminated but reframed.** God's promises did not remove all agricultural uncertainty. Even with divine assurance against covetousness, weather could still damage crops. The fall planting window remained genuinely tight even for the obedient. The life of faith does not promise invulnerability but reframes risk: obedience undertaken in trust, even when it leads to loss, is not failure but faithfulness. The question is not whether we face risk but whether we trust God's character enough to obey even when we cannot control outcomes.

Conclusion: The September Rains and the Life of Faith

The September 2025 rains that broke Israel's 93-year record serve as a contemporary reminder that the uncertainties ancient Israelites faced were not merely theoretical. Weather can and does arrive unseasonably. Economic calculations do sometimes favor compromise over obedience. The temptation to prioritize security over faithfulness is perennial.

Yet the biblical vision insists that holiness—the distinctive, God-reflecting way of life to which Israel was called—cannot be separated from faith. The call to "be holy" is simultaneously a call to trust: trust God's provision when you leave your harvest vulnerable to worship Him, trust God's ordering of creation when you observe His calendar despite agricultural pressure, trust God's long-term faithfulness even when obedience leads to short-term loss.

Leviticus is not merely a priestly handbook or a catalog of purity regulations. It is a theology of covenant relationship lived out in concrete, daily practices that require trusting the "wholly other" God enough to accept real risk. The pilgrimage feasts crystallize this dynamic, but it permeates the entire book. To be holy as YHWH is holy means learning to trust Him as completely as He is trustworthy—and the pedagogy of that learning regularly involves vulnerability undertaken in faith.

The gap in Leviticus scholarship regarding faith is not merely academic. It reflects a tendency to separate holiness (as ritual or ethical achievement) from its relational foundation (trust in the sovereign and self-existing God's character and promises). Recovering the faith-holiness nexus enriches our understanding of Leviticus and offers a more integrated model for contemporary discipleship: holiness is not achieved through meticulous rule-keeping but flows from a trust in God's permanency and stability deep enough to accept the risks of covenant faithfulness.

When the early rains come—whether in Israel's fall planting season or in the seasons of decision facing communities of faith today—the question remains constant: Do we trust God enough to obey even when we cannot control the outcomes?

Notes

[¹]: William D. Barrick, "The Eschatological Significance of Leviticus 26," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 16:1 (Spring 2005): 95. Available at <https://www.galaxie.com/article/tmsj16-1-06>.

[²]: Popular meteorological analyses, such as those appearing in hiking and agricultural blogs discussing Israeli weather patterns, have noted that unseasonably early rains can arrive during or near the fall festival period with some regularity. While precise statistical data from the Israel Meteorological Service on this specific pattern are not readily available in published academic literature, the general climatological pattern of occasional early-season rainfall onset is well-documented in both popular and scientific discussions of Eastern Mediterranean precipitation patterns.