

THANKSGIVING OLD TESTAMENT STYLE:

DEUTERONOMY 26 by Reverend Jack Custer, S.T.D.

The Puritan colonists of New England, who rejected all the holy days on the Church's calendar, did keep two special days. Days of Fasting were proclaimed by their leaders in response to calamities, and Days of Thanksgiving were ordered in response to special blessings from God. Both of these observances have their roots in the Old Testament, and our national holiday of Thanksgiving developed directly out of this biblical custom.

Beyond the turkey, the football games and the shopping frenzy that have become the hallmark of this day, the original meaning and purpose of Thanksgiving can be found in the fifth book of the Old Testament, in the 26th chapter of Deuteronomy. Speaking through Moses to the Israelites on the brink of entering the Promised Land, the Lord God reviews the whole experience of the Exodus and exhorts His people, after forty years of rebellion and hardheartedness in the wilderness, to accept His covenant to be His people, living holy lives on the land He would give them. In chapter 26, Moses looks forward to the day when the Israelites will possess the land, cultivate it, and bring forth abundant produce. Some of this produce is commanded to be set aside in sacrifices of two distinct kinds.

The first fruits of the various crops are offered directly to God. This is an act of thanksgiving but also an act of faith: by giving away the first of my produce (rather than eating it myself), I express my trust in God to provide more for me and for my family.

Secondly, God commands a tithe—ten percent—of the entire crop to be shared with the priests (who depended on offerings to eat), the stranger, the orphan and the widow (Deuteronomy 26:13)

The head of the house, while making this offering, is instructed to recite a prayer that looks back to the times when Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were strangers wandering in the land of Israel and when the Israelites were slaves in Egypt. The prayer acknowledges how God made Abraham's descendants prosper, and how God led His people out of Egypt to "this land, a land flowing with milk and honey." The prayer begins: "My father was a wandering Aramean" and concludes "and now, behold, I have brought the first fruits of the land, which you, Lord, have given me" (Deuteronomy 26: 5-10).

Our Church continues the custom of offering baskets of first fruits in the Temple (Deuteronomy 26: 1-4) on the feast of the Transfiguration (August 6) which coincides with the beginning of the summer fruit harvest. This custom, symbolic in other ways, does not really impact our faith or our finances the way the biblical thanksgiving sacrifice envisioned. The biblical Thanksgiving sacrifice includes three important features that we would do well to rediscover.

