

The Feast of Tabernacles

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Introduction

A full understanding of the Feast of Tabernacles can only be gained by seeing its place amongst the Seven Feasts ordained by God for the Israelites, as these 'seven' present us with the whole Gospel. The number 7 in the Bible signifies God's wholeness or completion.

As New Testament believers in Jesus, why is it important to learn about the Feasts of Israel quoted in Leviticus 23?

1. Biblical Judaism and Christianity are inseparable. Those of us from a Gentile background need to know our roots are founded in Biblical Judaism. It is a heritage into which we were grafted when we became part of the olive tree spoken of by Paul in Romans 11.
2. The Feasts of Israel, like all of Scripture, point to Yeshua, Jesus the Messiah. He is the fulfilment of every aspect of the seven different feast. Jesus himself said: 'Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms' (Luke 24:44).
3. Some of the feasts, like the Feast of Tabernacles, will be celebrated during the true millennium. Those individuals from different nations who have survived the Great Tribulation are commanded to 'go up to worship the Lord at the Feast of Tabernacles' (Zechariah 14:16-18).

The Seven Biblical Feasts

In Leviticus 23 the Israelites were commanded to celebrate seven feasts or festivals. These feasts were proclaimed by the Lord to be a holy convocation, a holy gathering of the people. Each of these Festivals find their fulfilment in Jesus the Messiah and his new covenant.

1. The Feast of Passover (Leviticus 23:5) points to the crucifixion.
2. The Feast of Unleavened Bread (Leviticus 23:6) speaks of the burial of Yeshua and the cancellation of sin.
3. The Feast of First Fruits (Leviticus 23:10) points to the resurrection of Yeshua.
4. The Feast of Weeks (Hebrew – Shavu'ot – Leviticus 23:16) comes 50 days later and was fulfilled at Pentecost.
5. The Feast of Trumpets (Leviticus 23:23) when the Israelites were commanded to gather together during the blowing of the shofar points to the Rapture of the Church.
6. The Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur in Hebrew – Leviticus 23:27-28) when the blood of the lambs that made atonement for the peoples' sins was pointing to the blood of the final sacrifice made for sins by Yeshua the Messiah.
7. The Feast of Tabernacles (Leviticus 23:34), also known as Succoth in Hebrew and the Feast of Booths, celebrated the time when God brought his people out of Egypt and cared

for them in the desert. Those of us who have come out of sin can also rejoice in our deliverance. The Feast of Tabernacles also points to an endtime harvest when the nations are gathered in to worship the Lord.

The Three Major Feasts

Three times a year, the Israelites were commanded to travel up to Jerusalem to celebrate the major feasts – Passover, Shavuot (Festival of Weeks) and Succoth (Feast of Tabernacles). Just before the feasts began, enormous numbers of Jewish people made their way to the Temple, crowding the four major roads that led to Jerusalem and swelling the city's population several times over.

Those who lived nearby were able to take part in all three feasts, whereas those Jews who lived at some distance from the city may have come regularly to the same feast each year.

The Three Names of the Feast

The different names given to Succoth each show a different aspect of the feast and reflect the importance it holds in the Hebrew calendar. The final feast of the annual cycle, it is the most joyous of all the festivals and has come to be known as 'the feast'.

1. The Feast of Tabernacles/Booths
2. The Feast of Ingathering
3. The Season of our Joy

The Feast of Tabernacles/Booths

The Hebrew word for the Feast of Tabernacles is Sukkoth. The singular form of the word is 'sukkah', which means, shelter, booth, or woven. The Feast of Booths is a festival which recalls God's commandment in Leviticus 23:42-43.

A tabernacle also always alludes to a temporary dwelling place, whether that is the Holy Tabernacle that housed the Shekinah until the building of the more permanent Temple, or the desert booths that housed the Israelites until they settled and were able to build stone buildings. Hence the name, Feast of Tabernacles!

As Jewish people from all over the world build their leafy shelters, be it in gardens, on rooftops, on verandas, they are reminded of how the Lord God of Israel watched over their ancestors in the desert. They recall how he provided both physical and spiritual food to sustain the Israelites during their search for the Promised Land, and they are encouraged to trust the Lord for his same provision in their lives. Orthodox Jews will also eat their meals and sleep in their shelters looking up at the same stars that previous generations beheld from their beds.

According to the rabbis, the foliage used to build the shelters would have consisted of the branches of a palm tree, a myrtle tree and willow tree. From Temple times until today, Jewish people fasten these three branches together with a golden thread, to make what is known as a 'lulav', which is then waved as they pray for blessings on the land of Israel. Besides the lulav, every Jew came to the Temple holding an 'etrog' or citrus fruit. The fruit resembles a lemon and is symbolic of the fruit of the Promised Land.

Messianic Fulfilment

As believers in Yeshua, the promised Messiah, we can find refuge under the shadow of his wings (Psalm 91:4). He has become our Tabernacle providing shelter, refuge and protection from the storms of life and the periods when God leads us into the burning desert or the dark valley.

The Feast of Ingathering

In Leviticus 23:34 we read that the feast was to begin on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, which coincided with Israel's final harvest. The Feast of Tabernacles was also known as the Feast of Ingathering because it was a time when the children of Israel were commanded to gather in the Temple of Jerusalem and present their sacrifices and offerings to the Lord. The first harvest took place at Shavuot, 50 days after Passover, and the final harvest when the Israelites were also commanded to take some of their first fruits and present them to the Lord as an offering at the Temple. Both the Feast of Tabernacles and Shavuot are joyous occasions for the harvest has been brought in from the fields and the barns and sheds are full of God's bounteous provision.

Messianic Fulfilment

According to Joel 2:28-29 and Isaiah 44:3 God is going to do some wonderful things in the future. Before the Second Coming of Jesus there is going to be a great harvest of souls, from amongst the Jewish people and also the Gentiles. The Feast of Ingathering speaks of this ingathering of the Gentiles. When Solomon dedicated the Temple (2 Chronicles 7:8-9), it happened over the seven days of Sukkot. During that time Solomon offered sacrifices, possibly 70 bulls as found in Numbers 29. When asked why 70, the great Jewish scholar Rashi, said: 'It was to bring forgiveness for them (the 70 nations of the world), so that rain shall fall over all the earth.' This is why in Jewish tradition, 70 is a symbolic number representing the Gentile nations. Sukkot is unique among the Jewish festivals as it speaks of God's loving provision of forgiveness for the entire world. It also speaks of Israel's role to bless the nations.

This harvest will be the result of the greatest outpouring of God's Holy Spirit since Pentecost, following the resurrection of Yeshua from Jerusalem.

Zechariah 14:6, where all the nations of the world go up to worship the Lord at Jerusalem, is a beautiful picture of God's ultimate purpose and plan through his Son, Yeshua, to reconcile all men to himself.

The Season of our Joy

The Feast of Tabernacles also came to be known as 'The Season of our Joy' for the time of harvest was finally over after many hours of hard labor and now the people were able to rest.

The days of repentance that characterize Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year) and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) have passed for another year. Now, it is time to rejoice! In Nehemiah 8:10 we read how Nehemiah (whose name means, 'Yahweh is my comforter') stood up at the time of Sukkot and said: 'Do not grieve for the joy of the Lord is your strength.'

Messianic Fulfilment

Jesus is the source of true joy and peace in our lives (cf. John 15:11).

As we walk in the light (in ongoing repentance), he will fill our hearts with joy. Yeshua has also sent us the Holy Spirit to be our Comforter for he will build up the ruins of our lives just as Nehemiah rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem.

Our offering to God in these days is referred to in Hebrews 13:15 where the inspired writer encourages the believers to continually offer up to God a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, despite our difficult circumstances.

The Day of the Great Hosanna

There were two outstanding features that characterize the Temple service of the Feast of Tabernacles:

1. Pouring of the water in the Temple, and
2. Illumination of the Temple.

Pouring of the Water in the Temple

During the celebration of the festival some priests would go through the Water Gate (Nehemiah 3:26) of the city and retrieve 'living water' from the Pool of Siloam, as opposed to stagnant water from a cistern. This was brought in a golden pitcher to the High Priest in the Temple, who poured it into a basin at the foot of the altar.

From another pitcher wine was poured into the basin. These mingled and then flowed through pipes back into the Brook of Kidron.

This ritual pouring lasted six days and took place amidst the blasting of trumpets by the priests, while the people waved their palm branches and chanted the Hallel (Psalms 113-118). The word 'Hallel' means 'praise' in Hebrew and it is where we get our Hallelujah from ... Praise the Lord! These Psalms fall at the very center of God's Word. It is believed that Psalm 118, the last of that liturgy, may have been the hymn sung by Jesus and his disciples at the conclusion of the Last Supper (Matthew 26:30) as he prepared to go to the Cross.

The seventh day, called Hoshanah Rabba (The Day of the Great Hosanna) concluded the Feast of Tabernacles.

Significance

1. The pouring of water was a visual interpretation of God's grace in sending rain.
2. It was also prophetic for it was pointing to the time when the Holy Spirit would be poured out not only on Israel but on all believers under the future millennial reign on earth of the Messiah, thereby fulfilling a messianic hope found in Joel 2:28 and Isaiah 44:3.

Messianic Fulfilment

At the time water was being poured from the Pool of Siloam into the altar basin, Yeshua stood in

the Temple and cried out the words we read in John 7:38-39. The messianic claim of Yeshua was clearly understood by all, but not accepted by all (see John 7:43).

The Illumination of the Temple

Another feature of the Feast of Tabernacles was the Illumination of the Temple in Jerusalem. The pilgrims came to the Temple bearing flaming torches; while, in the Temple itself, the great candelabras were lit. These menorah lights signified the Shekinah Glory of God and his presence with his people.

Messianic Fulfilment

Amidst all this splendor, the Lord stood up and proclaimed: 'I am the Light of the World. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'

Without knowledge of the rituals of the Feast of Tabernacles, we miss the significance of these two statements that Yeshua made about himself in the Temple.

The menorah or seven-branched candlestick standing in the Holy Place in the Temple is also important, for it speaks of the seven different attributes of the Holy Spirit mentioned in Isaiah 11, Messiah being 'the shoot' and 'the branch'. The number seven in Scripture speaks of God's completeness or wholeness.

Conclusion

The Feast of Tabernacles is a unique feast in that it will be the only feast to be celebrated during the millennium. All the other feasts will have been fulfilled by then. It is a feast of hope for it speaks about a time when we will dwell in peace with one another and with the Lord.

However, the days leading up to the Second Coming of Yeshua are dark and difficult days, and like the Israelites as they travelled through the desert, we will need to trust the Lord to be our sukkah, our shelter, our tabernacle, in the wilderness. Just as the Lord provided places of rest, an oasis in the desert, so will the Lord Jesus provide for us a respite from the heat of the day. The Israelites also had to walk by faith – imagine celebrating harvest in the desert! I believe that the Lord is calling us to have the type of hope that Abraham had that 'calls things that are not as though they were' (Romans 4:17).

There are probably many people, including myself, who are waiting for the harvest of a particular soul. We need to remember that God is faithful to his Word, and as we cry out to him to pour out his Spirit on dry land, we will see the desert places turning into rivers of living water. We need not grieve for the joy of the Lord is our strength and he will bring us into our Season of Joy and Harvest.