

Jewish Feasts And Festivals #3

In the last article we examined the new moon observance and several yearly festivals, including the Passover, Pentecost, the Feast of Trumpets and the Day of Atonement. This final article will consider the last three yearly festivals in the Jewish culture.

Feast Of Tabernacles/Feast Of Booths/Feast Of Ingathering/ Sukkoth

The feast of Booths or Tabernacles was the most popular festival among the people. It is mentioned in Exodus 23:16; 34:22; Leviticus 23:33-36; 39-43; Numbers 29:12-40; Deuteronomy 16:13-16; Ezra 3:4 and Zechariah 14:16, 18-19. It began on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, or five days after the Day of Atonement, and lasted for eight days. The first and eighth days included a holy convocation to the Lord and no work was done on those days.

This feast commemorated the wandering of Israel in the wilderness. The Israelites were commanded to live in booths made of palm and willow trees during the festival to commemorate their period of wilderness wandering when they lived in temporary shelters. The feast was also accompanied by extensive animal sacrifices. The feast was also a joyful time of thanksgiving for the harvest they now enjoyed.

The observance of Tabernacles in New Testament times was quite an event. It included a procession of the people carrying palm, willow, citron and myrtle branches, which were waved aloft during the daily singing of the Hallel (Psalms 113-118) as an expression of joy. Each morning of the period of the feast priests brought water from the fountain of Siloam and poured it out as a libation on the altar. On the last day the priests marched around the altar seven times, praying for rain during the ensuing rainy season.

Four large menorahs were also set up around the temple courts and kept burning each night. Dancing and pipe-playing, which accompanied the feast, lasted most of the night. The Levites chanted the Psalms of Ascent (120-134), one for each of the steps between the court of Israel and the court of women. The customs at the feast (John 7:2, 14) provide the background for Jesus' statements, "*If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink*" (John 7:37) and "*I am the light of the world*" (John 8:12). The cycle of Torah readings in the synagogue began at Tabernacles.

Feast Of Dedication/Feast Of Lights/Hanukkah

This feast is mentioned only once in the Bible (John 10:22). This feast has been the most popular of the postbiblical feasts in Judaism. It was developed in the era of the Maccabees and celebrated the cleansing and rededication of the temple after its desecration by Antiochus Epiphanes. The feast of Dedication is observed on the 25th day of the ninth month (Chislev) and lasts for eight days.

The name "Feast of Lights" appears in Josephus (*Ant.* 12.7.7 [325]) and is associated with the ceremonial lighting of eight lamps, an additional one on each day of the feast. This practice is derived from the legend that only one cruse of oil was found when the Jews reoccupied the temple, but it miraculously lasted for seven days so the lamp in the temple was kept burning until a new supply of oil could be consecrated.

Since this feast, commonly now known as Hanukkah, occurs so closely to Christmas, it has acquired a comparable social significance for the Jews including the custom of exchanging gifts and greeting cards.

Feast Of Purim/Feast Of Lots

The feast of Purim is only mentioned in Esther 3:7; 9:24, 26, 28-29, 31-32. This feast commemorates the deliverance of the Jewish people from destruction by an evil schemer named Haman during the days of their captivity by the Babylonians and Persians. It took its name from the Hebrew word *purim*, meaning "lots" because Haman cast lots to determine when he would carry out his plan against the Jews.

The feast of Purim took place on the 14th and 15th days of the twelfth month (Adar), and during its celebration the book of Esther is read as a reminder of their deliverance. Purim, which is a very joyous ceremony, is accompanied with the giving of gifts and great celebration.

As was said in the beginning of this series, any Bible student can gain a greater perspective of the events surrounding the life of Christ and the work of the apostles by studying the Jewish feasts and festivals. The Jews had a rich heritage of celebrations to God which marked the beginning or the end of the agricultural year or commemorated historic events in the Jewish nation. When we contemplate the solemn but joyous and grateful nature in which the Jews celebrated these feasts, perhaps we can learn principles for our own worship to God.

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