


Three times you shall keep a feast to Me in the year...

Chapter One

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

 When you pop a couple of slices of bread into the toaster or brown up hamburger buns on the grill, do you ever stop to thank God for the grain that was milled and delivered to a bakery as flour? As Americans we've largely lost our touch with the land that grows the food we put on our table—not even our Thanksgiving festivities at church include a collection of farm produce in front as an object lesson of God's provision (unless you happen to be in a farming community). God set up the Feast of Tabernacles so that Israel, among other things, would be reminded annually of His provision of a harvest that supplied the food for the rest of the year. That's one reason the Feast of Tabernacles still has real significance for believers in the twenty-first century as a reminder of his goodness.

Names often carry meaning. The Feast of Tabernacles actually has four names in Scripture—each adding to our understanding of this pivotal holiday.

THE FIRST NAME:
HAG HA ASIF—THE FEAST OF INGATHERING

Three times you shall keep a feast to Me in the year: “You shall keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread . . . and the Feast of Harvest . . . **and the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year**, when you have gathered in the fruit of your labors from the field. Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the Lord GOD (Exodus 23:14–17).

This passage reveals the first name given to the festival: in Hebrew, *Hag ha Asif*—the Feast of Ingathering.

This name points out that the holiday was first and foremost an agricultural festival. Each of the three *aliyah* festivals (see introduction) was linked to the harvest of crops in the land of Israel. The Feast of Unleavened Bread (Passover) was associated with the harvest of first fruits, a barley harvest (Leviticus 23:10–11). The Feast of Harvest, also called Weeks (or Pentecost) was associated with the harvest of wheat (Exodus 34:23). The Feast of Ingathering was the final harvest of all the remaining produce of the land.

The Bible does not specifically identify the full range of that produce, but it provides clues: “You shall observe the Feast of Tabernacles seven days, when you have gathered from your threshing floor and from your winepress . . . because the LORD your God will bless you in all your produce . . . ” (Deuteronomy 16:13, 15). The reference to the threshing floor indicates the end of the wheat harvest. Whereas the Feast of Pentecost is the first fruits of the wheat harvest, the

Feast of Tabernacles is the latter wheat harvest. The winepress refers to the grape harvest—along with any other citrus fruits grown in the land. Finally there is the mention of “all produce.” The land would typically yield a variety of fruits at this time, including figs, pomegranates, and dates.

AGRICULTURAL FESTIVALS

Agricultural festivals were certainly not unique to Israel. All ancient civilizations developed festivals associated with the agricultural cycles of the lands in which they lived. Without exception, these festivals were filled with religious significance. They expressed the beliefs and superstitions of those ancient culture but, outside of Israel, the beliefs were false and the practices degenerate. Frequently, as with the customs of Ba’al worship in ancient Canaan, practices included elaborate fertility rites requiring cultic prostitution and grotesque sacrificial rituals to appease the “local deities” and ensure future harvests. In short, the surrounding nations used their agricultural festivals to practice pagan rituals and perversions. God knew that Israel would be



FOODS

The most important of the grains or cereals were wheat and barley. These were eaten raw, made into porridge, roasted or parched, or ground into flour or meal, and made into cakes or bread (leavened and unleavened). In times of famine, bread was made from beans, lentils, millet and spelt. The pulse family of foods included mainly lentils and coarse beans such as our kidney bean. Other vegetables, most of which were eaten either raw or cooked, were squash, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, garlic, and various herbs.¹

tempted, upon entering the land, to adopt the practices of these pagan and polytheistic cultures.

The God of Israel wanted His people to have a proper understanding of Him and of the times and seasons of life. Pagan cultures worshiped the creation rather than the creator (Romans 1:25). God therefore assigned these seasonal festivals to provide a stark contrast to the activities Israel's neighbors engaged in during these same agricultural cycles. The Canaanites believed in multiple, territorial gods who divided jurisdiction over hills and plains. The Lord's festivals reminded His people that one God created all things and rules over all things. The festivals remind God's people that He provides rain in its season and a harvest in its season, and that He cannot be bribed or placated with human sacrifice or elaborate sexual ritual.

Unfortunately, many in Israel would be swayed by the surrounding cultures and engage in Ba'al worship. But for those who would seek truth, God provided these biblical observances as corrective instruction before His people even entered the land.

GOD AS/IS/—THE ORIGINAL ENVIRONMENTALIST

This distortion of the human spirit that exalts creation over Creator is as prevalent today as it was in Old and New Testament times. It is packaged as progressive thinking and proper concern for the earth. God is the original environmentalist. He knows that a proper respect for him as Creator produces a proper respect for creation. While much of today's environmental movement reflects a healthy respect for the world we live in, many in the movement fail to connect the sacredness of the creation with the reverence that is due to the Creator.

This disconnect, or divorce, plays into the age-old sin of exulting in the creation over the Creator. As a result, neo-pagan ideology is a growing religious trend in our society. The rise of the Wiccan religion, more commonly known as witchcraft, is a deification of creation. It leads to the same kind of paganism that the Scriptures speak so clearly against—consultation with mediums, seeking the future from soothsayers and sorcerers rather than trusting God for the future (see Deuteronomy 18:10; 2 Kings 17:17; 2 Kings 21:6; 2 Chronicles 33:6). Believers can be deceived and open themselves to great danger by treating modern day practices like Tarot cards and Ouiji boards as harmless fun.

Those who are earnestly seeking God can still see the outline of His majesty in the beauty of creation. The Psalmist wrote, "The Heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament sheweth his handiwork" (Psalm 19:1 KJV). Paul said, "for since the creation of the world God's invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and godhead" (Romans 1:20). God still speaks to us through the warmth of spring day sunshine, in the freshness of the air after a summer storm, or in the majesty and power of the rolling ocean waves. He knows the tendency to worship creation and to try to manipulate the Creator. He graciously provided festivals as reminders of the proper order of things.

LINK TO THE LAND

The agricultural festivals also provided an important link between the people and the land of Israel. God promised that the people of Israel would exist before Him forever, yet in the same breath, He warned that the people of Israel would not necessarily possess the land of Israel perpetually. In

animal sacrifices. If the temple was integral to the sacrifices, and the sacrifices were integral to the Feast, how was the Feast to be celebrated without the temple?

Think of the great procession of priests and worshipers, making their way from the Temple down to the Pool of Siloam, drawing water and returning with the blowing of shofars and joyous songs at the outpouring of water on the altar in the Temple. What were my people to do, with no temple and no pool of Siloam? Think of the elaborate illumination ceremony, the lighting of these huge menorahs that cast such light that nighttime was as bright as day. Hear the noise of the fun and festivities going on in that Court of the Women and picture the the torch-throwing and juggling.

But now gone were the court and the candelabras where these celebrations had taken place. (dramatic statement; set off)

What's more, as a harvest festival, the Feast of Tabernacles was integrally tied to the Land of Israel. It was a celebration of the final Ingathering, (Ingathering not capped in CWMS; think about) Hag Ha Asif. Israel's agrarian society depended upon the crops she would gather in the final harvest, and the rains that were about to come upon the Land. So the Feast of Tabernacles reflected the life cycle of the nation.

The exile, the scattering of the nation of Israel to all four corners of the earth, tore the *raison d'être*, the harvest cycle, from the Festival. In a sense, the Festival helped to remind the scattered children of Israel of their inexorable connection to the Land that God had given to the fathers--Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Even if they were living in the frozen tundra of northern Siberia, at the Feast of Tabernacles the people could still remember the harvest of figs and grapes and final

1. RUBINSTEIN, JEFFREY L. *THE HISTORY OF SUKKOT IN THE SECOND TEMPLE AND RABBINIC PERIODS*. P. 320.

2. GOLDSTEIN, EFRAIM, SUKKOT IN ISRAEL, JEWS FOR JESUS NEWSLETTER OCTOBER 1998



SUKKOT IN ISRAEL TODAY

In America, it seems as though the entire country gets caught up in the Christmas and New Year's seasons—even those who do not know who Jesus is and are not celebrating His birth. Israel experiences a similar phenomenon with the Festival of Sukkot.

Frankly, the majority of the people in Israel are secular. And yet, Tabernacles is a time when the nation pauses for a period of joy, celebration and thanksgiving. The public schools are closed, as are many business and government offices. While religious men and women are a minority in Israel, their presence is felt at this time of year. The Orthodox population still observes the biblical commandment to build the temporary shelters, or booths, for which the holiday is named. Throughout Israel, you can see thousands of these small and shaky huts built on front yards, parks, roof tops and porches. The main requirement is that the walls be temporary and the roof should be open enough so that you can see at least a star through it. The booths' interiors are decorated according to the energy and imagination of the children.

Observant Jews also bring lulavs and etrogs to the synagogue, and when possible, to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. I once saw a caravan of long distance bicyclists during Sukkot. I knew they were observant by the long spiny branches of the lulav sticking out of several riders' backpacks!

Thousands of secular Israelis flock to Egypt for the holiday. This is an interesting irony, since we read in Zechariah 14:16-18 of a future time when Egyptians will come up to Jerusalem to observe this festival!

Whether they are building booths and attending synagogue services or migrating to the beach to enjoy the sun and the surf, pray that God will use the Feast of Tabernacles to remind Israelis of the transient nature of this life and the need to depend on the everlasting God and His provision of the Living Water.²