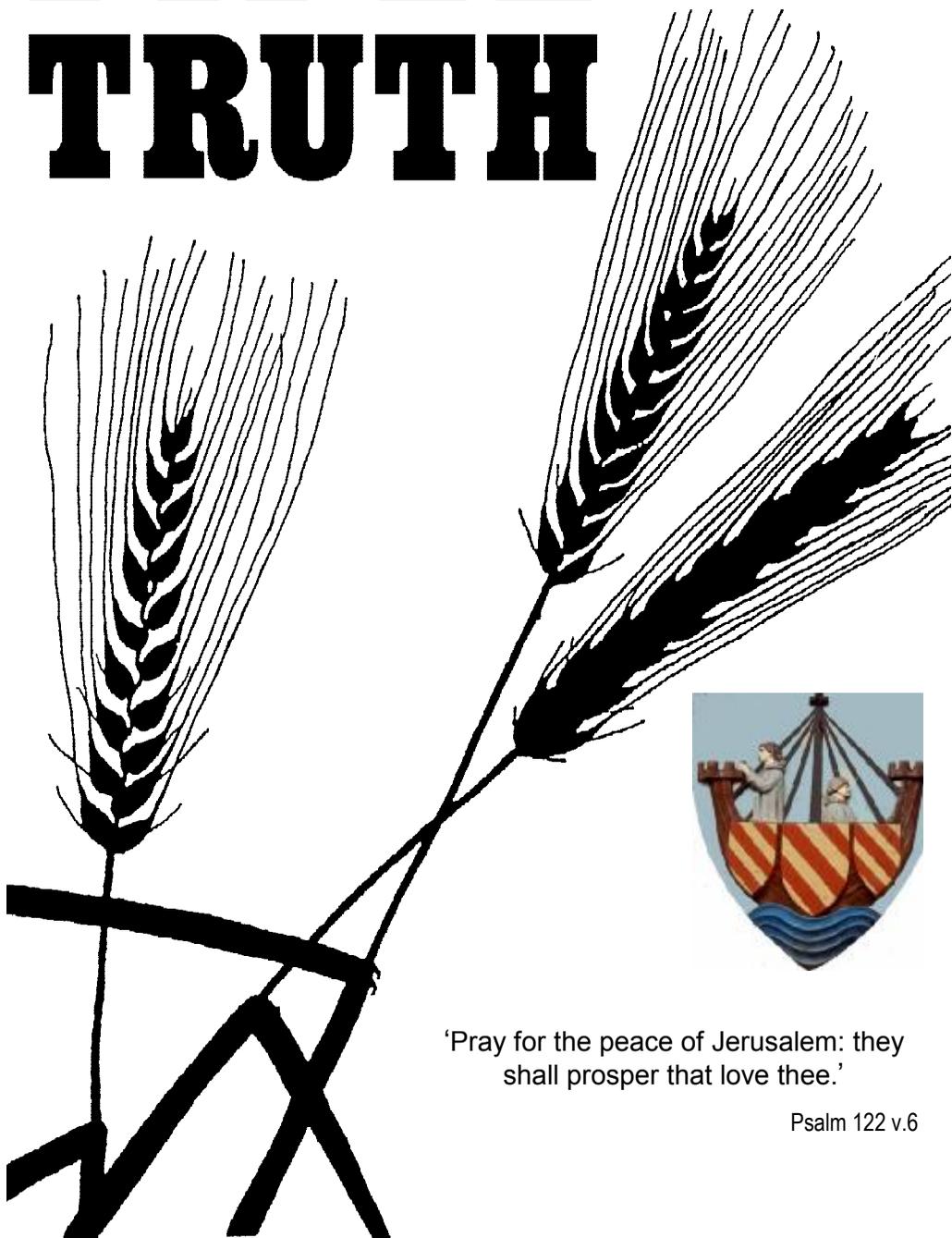


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'Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee.'

Psalms 122 v.6

FEASTS AND FESTIVALS OF ISRAEL

by Lynne Gray

Why were feasts so important for Israel to keep?

Why did God ordain in the Law that certain feasts and festivals were to be held for particular reasons and specific times in the year?

How important are the feasts and festivals as part of Israel's form of worship?

This article looks at the history of these, and the fulfilment of these feasts and festivals today as well as why we still celebrate those that we still do today.

The Israelites had two defining forms of worship in which they participated: the celebration of festivals and the offering of sacrifices. Both these forms of worship involved certain rituals that incorporated both explicit (meaning that it is clearly stated and leaving nothing implied; distinctly expressed; definite) and implicit (meaning that it is suggested or to be understood though not plainly expressed or implied; a form that is naturally involved though not plainly apparent or expressed or inherent) forms of worship.

Explicitly, Israel's pattern of worship consisted of regular public assembly and at these assemblies Israel would perform certain acts that were communal, public, and material. This outward display of devotion to God highlighted the exclusivity of the relationship between God and Israel – God had chosen Israel to be His special people, Israel did not choose to follow God – God was the Chief Engineer of this relationship.

Implicitly, the festivals related to God - acknowledging Him as the creator of everything, acknowledging His responsibility for all blessings as well as acknowledging God as the Redeemer of Israel with the festivals serving as an historical reminder of this deliverance.

The festivals showed Israel's devotion to the One God as well as displaying Israel's assuredness that God was present in their lives, in relationship with them constantly – not a deity only to be invoked in time of trouble or distress - God was an ever-abiding presence with and within Israel.

Israel celebrated a variety of feast times (festivals). Interestingly God instituted seven feast holidays (festivals) and these are mentioned both in the Old and New Testaments where they are called 'the feasts of the Lord' and 'Holy Convocations'.

What does this term 'Holy Convocation' mean? It is that these seven feasts are intended 'holy times' for communion between God and man. They are days designated for God, not holidays designated by man. All seven holidays are listed in chronological sequence in Leviticus chapter twenty-three. The feast days are days given to Israel as a nation because Israel are God's covenant people.

Because the Israelites were an agricultural-based nation their feasts were based around the spring and autumn harvest seasons and were designed to acknowledge and celebrate the blessings that God had given them. They are timed using a luni-solar calendar – 354 day cycle, as opposed to the solar calendar that is used by the western world (known as the Gregorian calendar) that has a 365 day cycle and 366 days in a leap year. The difference between the two calendars is approximately 11 days. For the Jewish calendar to stay in alignment with the solar calendar, Judaism has a 19 year metonic cycle of 235 lunar months with an intercalary lunar month added every 2-3 years for a total of 7 times every 19 years. If this adjustment was not made, then after a few years winter would occur in summer and the harvest would not be ready for the festival.

Feasts and festivals were an important means by which members of Israel established fellowship with each other. Also they highlight Israel's communion with God, where God is the focus. They serve as a reminder of who is in control of the life of Israel as a nation as well as the members of Israel as individuals.

Four out of the seven feasts occur in the northern hemisphere spring, whilst the final three feasts occur in the Autumn. It could be said that the first four feasts relate to Jesus Christ's coming for the first time, and the latter three feasts relate to Jesus Christ's return or Second Coming.

Feast of Passover

‘In the fourteenth day of the first month at even is the LORD’S passover.’

Leviticus ch.23 v.5

Known as the first feast to the Lord, this is the first feast held every year and the feasts that come after Passover all build upon it. It occurs in the northern hemisphere spring on the 14th day of Nisan (March/April) and Passover also commences the start of the religious year for Israel. Although Passover is celebrated every year, there was only one Passover and that occurred approximately 3,500 years ago in Egypt but God commanded that since the time of the Passover this feast was to be kept.

‘For I will pass through the land of Egypt this night, and will smite all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment: I am the LORD. And the blood shall be to you for a token upon the houses where ye are: and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt. And this day shall be unto you for a memorial; and ye shall keep it a feast to the LORD throughout your generations; ye shall keep it a feast by an ordinance for ever.’

Exodus ch.12 vv 12-14

The Passover remembers Israel’s redemption and God’s hand in that redemption.

‘Utterance’ was an important part of the feast and sacrificial system of the Israelites. Utterance as part of the way in which Israel worshipped, occurred in two ways.

- God speaking to Israel, and
- Israel speaking to God.

This was a special and unique relationship that involved dialogue and involvement – it was personal. God spoke to Israel through utterance with the giving of the Commandments and the conditions of the covenant. The Law covers every sphere of life under the rule of God – for the people of Israel, God is a constant, ever-abiding presence, and hourly, by their very lifestyle (the following of the Law), they are reminded of this relationship with their Creator. Through public utterance, i.e. regular assemblies of the people to hear the Law, God’s presence and activity within Israel is constantly

reaffirmed. The festival of Passover is a good example of utterance as a form of worship on the part of the Israelites, for this festival also had the instruction that the children must be educated with regard to the importance and reason for the festival.

‘And thou shalt shew thy son in that day, saying, This is done because of that which the LORD did unto me when I came forth out of Egypt.’

Exodus ch.13 v.8

The family ‘elder’ would recite the story of God’s deliverance of Israel from the Egyptians as a reminder of God’s goodness, God’s presence, God’s love of Israel, God’s guidance and God’s faithfulness. It was important for the succeeding generations to remember, and it was a means of reaffirmation of the special relationship of Israel to God and God to Israel.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread

‘In the fourteenth day of the first month at even is the LORD’S passover. And on the fifteenth day of the same month is the feast of unleavened bread unto the LORD: seven days ye must eat unleavened bread.’

Leviticus ch.23 vv 5-6

The feast began the day after Passover on the 15th of Nisan (a Sunday) and lasted for seven days. Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread are so closely related that the Jewish people today observe them as one holiday. Traditional Jewish women would sprinkle bread crumbs (leaven/yeast) in hard to get at places in every room in their house. They would then get a broom and dustpan and meticulously sweep every corner to gather up the crumbs they had just spread. These crumbs would be swept up and then burnt. The leaven/yeast symbolises error or evil. Fermentation needs yeast to accomplish its job (see Matthew ch.16 vv 6-11, Mark ch.8 v.15 & 1 Corinthians ch.5 v.6). It was symbolic of removing the sin from the household. Jesus died for the sins of all mankind and swept the crumbs from all believers’ hearts so this feast has been fulfilled.

The Feast of Firstfruits

‘Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, When ye be come into the land which I give unto you, and shall reap the harvest thereof, then ye shall bring a sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest unto the priest:’

Leviticus ch.23 v.10

This is the third feast in the Jewish calendar and occurs on the 2nd day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread – 16th of Nisan. This is the time that the barley harvest is traditionally now ripe, the first sheaf or firstfruits of the harvest is cut following a precise formula and ceremony and is given to God.

The Feast of Weeks

‘And ye shall count unto you from the morrow after the sabbath, from the day that ye brought the sheaf of the wave offering; seven sabbaths shall be complete: Even unto the morrow after the seventh sabbath shall ye number fifty days; and ye shall offer a new meat offering unto the LORD.’

Leviticus ch.23 vv 15-16

The fourth feast, which is traditionally known as Shavuot, is called the Feast of Weeks because God told the children of Jacob to count seven weeks from firstfruits and on the day after this observe the 4th feast. It was to occur precisely 50 days after Firstfruits (a Sunday), and it is also referred to as Pentecost (Acts ch.2 v.1) which is Greek for ‘fiftieth’. For this feast the Israelites were to bring not only the first fruits from the wheat harvest, but also two loaves of bread (baked with fine flour and leaven). The two loaves were taken to the Temple but in Christian times the two loaves are seen as representing Jew and Gentile – the universality of the Christian message.

The Feast of Trumpets

‘Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, In the seventh month, in the first day of the month, shall ye have a sabbath, a memorial of blowing of trumpets, an holy convocation. Ye shall do no servile work therein: but ye shall offer an offering made by fire unto the LORD.’

Leviticus ch.23 vv 24-25

This is the first of the Fall feasts and is known by the Jewish people as Rosh Hashanah (literally meaning ‘Head of the Year’). It is observed as the commencement of the Jewish civil year on the 1st day of Tishri (this started in the 2nd century AD), as opposed to the religious year mentioned above. In Judaism this feast is regarded as one of the ‘high holy days’. Israel’s form of religious worship utilised two types of trumpets. One was long and flared and made of silver; the other, known as the Shofar, was a ram’s horn – the ram’s horn was used in the Feast of Trumpets. Why did Israel blow the ram’s horn? It was blown to gather Israel into God’s presence (see Exodus

ch.19 vv 13,17 & 19; Numbers ch.10 v.2). The ram's horn was also blown when Israel was to go to war (see Numbers ch.10 v.9; Judges ch.7; Jeremiah ch.4 vv 19-21; Joshua ch. 6 v.20; Judges ch.7 v.18 & Nehemiah ch.4 v.18). Jewish tradition believes that three books are opened in heaven at the time of the Feast of Trumpets which are,

The Book of Life for the righteous,

The Book of Life for the unrighteous, and

The Book of Life for those in between.

Judaism believes that it is during the time of the Feast of Trumpets that mankind is judged and placed into one of these three Books of Life – if a man is deemed righteous he is written in the first book, if deemed unrighteous he is written in the second book and will not survive the year, and if deemed as in between, his judgment is delayed until the Day of Atonement to give him an opportunity to repent before the Book of Life is closed.

The Day of Atonement

'Also on the tenth day of this seventh month there shall be a day of atonement: it shall be an holy convocation unto you; and ye shall afflict your souls, and offer an offering made by fire unto the LORD.'

Leviticus ch.23 v.27

This is also known as Yom Kippur and occurs nine days after Trumpets on the 10th of Tishri. The nine day period between Trumpets and the Day of Atonement is known in Judaism as 'the days of awe'. The Day of Atonement is a means of providing reconciliation to God for a community that found itself distanced from God and did not have the resources of its own to reconcile the situation.

The Feast of Tabernacles

'... The fifteenth day of this seventh month shall be the feast of tabernacles for seven days unto the LORD.'

Leviticus ch.23 v.34

This is also known as Sukkot or Feast of Booths, the 7th and final feast in the Israelite calendar. The Feast of Tabernacles occurs on the 15th of Tishri and is a seven day feast. Orthodox Jews erect little 'huts' or 'booths' made from bulrushes as a reminder of the temporary housing they had to use during the wanderings through the desert during the Exodus. Samples of the Fall crop are hung about the booths as a reminder of God's faithfulness and provision.

This feast is associated with the provision of water for the success of the crops. Each day of the feast, the High Priest, with a procession following him, would descend from the Temple Mount down to the Pool of Siloam where a pitcher was filled with water. The High Priest would then return via a different route back to the Temple Mount. Once back at the Temple Mount the High Priest would pour the water onto the altar. Apparently in the land of Israel there is no rain for almost 7 months so if God does not provide the early rains in October and November there will be famine because there will be no spring crop.

For three of the seven feasts (Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles) it was required of all Israelite males to travel to the Temple in Jerusalem, attendance was compulsory (see Exodus ch.23 vv 14-19 & Deuteronomy ch.16 vv 16-17).

Two other days are considered holy days by the Israelites: the Sabbath and the Year of Jubilee.

The Sabbath

The injunction for the keeping of the Sabbath as mandatory on the nation of Israel was given in the Ten Commandments (Decalogue).

‘Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates:’

Exodus ch.20 vv 8-10

The Sabbath was another form of worship that had clear instructions given to Israel with regard to the correct way of keeping it. The Sabbath served as a weekly reminder of who Israel was and the weekly readings of the Law would have reminded Israel of their covenant with God and given the Israelites cohesiveness in their communal gathering because they were all gathered with one accord. The Sabbath may also be referred to as a feast day because traditionally, in the western world, Sunday midday meal is usually used as a time for family gatherings and therefore could be seen as a feast on the Sabbath to the Lord, especially if God is the focus of the meal.

Year of Jubilee

‘And ye shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof: it shall be a jubile unto you; and ye shall return every man unto his possession, and ye shall return every man unto his family.’

Leviticus ch. 25 v.10

The Year of Jubilee protected the family unit and property thereby preserving the unity of Israel.

The feasts and festivals that God had ordained for Israel to keep are God’s appointed times for Him to meet with man for spiritual and holy purposes. They all had one thing in common – the worshipper was expected to present himself before God.

The most important aspect of these seven feasts in this age though, is that they depict the entire redemptive career of Jesus Christ (the Messiah) – from Passover (the crucifixion of Jesus) to the climax feast of Tabernacles (the establishment of God’s kingdom with the Second Coming of the Messiah). The feasts give us the sequence and spiritual significance of Jesus Christ’s redemptive activity for mankind.

- **Passover** – Redemption – the Messiah, the Passover lamb has been slain for us.
- **Unleavened Bread** – Sanctification – Jesus was set apart and his body saw not corruption.
- **Feast of Firstfruits** – Preservation – death could not hold Jesus.
- **Feast of Weeks** – Origination – the descent of the Holy Ghost. The breakdown of the middle wall between Jews and Gentiles.

Perhaps this is why it has been suggested that Israel were to keep Pentecost, Christmas and Easter as feast times, which would align perfectly with the Biblical injunction that three times a year Israel was to come before the Lord (Deuteronomy ch.16 vv 16-17). It has been shown that historically feasts and festivals were a form of worship for Israel to remember and celebrate God’s bountiful gifts and protective guidance of Israel. By keeping the feasts the Israelites constantly have in focus all aspects of the Godhead (Trinity), and have a realisation in their daily lives of the influence of the different aspects of the Godhead in their spiritual lives.