

BIBLICAL Theology

The Purpose of the Jewish Feasts

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The Jewish feasts are special observances ordered by the Lord to be set apart from their regular daily worship (Leviticus 23:1-2). To understand the feasts, it must be noted that the Jews follow both a civil calendar and a religious calendar. The civil calendar that the Jews use today is the Gregorian Calendar, based on a solar cycle.

For their worship though, they use a religious calendar which is based on a 'lunar' cycle. Within this cycle, months are determined by the moon, and years are determined by the sun. A lunar year is 354 days eight hours and 38 seconds long. The year is separated into 12 lunar months of 29 or 30 days with each month determined by the new moon.¹ Since this falls short of the solar year, an additional month is added seven times every 19 year span to synchronize the lunar calendar with the solar calendar.

The Jewish religious year begins with the first new moon after the Vernal Equinox. The first month of this year is Nisan (also known as Abib - Exodus 12:2; 13:4; Leviticus 23:34; 25:9; Numbers 9:11). The names of the months used today in the Jewish calendar were assigned during the Babylonian captivity.

All the feasts, as stated within the Mosaic Law, are either Septenary (those relating to a cycle of Sabbaths) or Yearly (those held annually each year). The Septenary Feasts would include:

- the Weekly Sabbaths (Exodus 20:8-11; 31:12; Leviticus 23:1-3);
- the Seventh New Moon or the Feast of Trumpets (Numbers 28:11-15; 29:1-6);
- the Sabbatic Year (Exodus 23:10-11; Leviticus 25:8-16);
- the Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25:8-16; 27:16-25); and
- the New Moon (Numbers 10:11; 28:11).

The Yearly Feasts would include:

- the Feast of Passover and Unleavened Bread (Exodus 12:1-28; 23:5; Leviticus 23:4-8; Numbers 28:16-25; Deuteronomy 18:1-8);
- the Feast of Week or Pentecost (Exodus 34:22; Leviticus 23:15; Numbers 28:26; Deuteronomy 16:10);
- the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:1-34; Exodus 30:10-30; Numbers 29:7-11); and
- the Feast of Tabernacles (Leviticus 23:34-42; Numbers 29:12; Nehemiah 8:18; John 7:2, 37).

The date of every Mosaic feast was connected in some way with the number seven (i.e. the seventh day, seventh month, seventh year, and the lapse of seven times seven years).² Other feasts were added to the religious calendar such as the Feast of Purim (Esther 9:24-32) and the Feast of Dedication (1 Maccabees 4:52; 2 Maccabees 10:6; John 10:22). While these two feasts were post-exilic, they became ingrained into the national and religious identity of Israel. From their

inception, the feasts formed a fundamental part of Jewish life around the world. Even to this day, Jewish people are bound together by the keeping of the feasts. Understanding the Jewish feasts are fundamental to understanding the New Testament teachings. Scripture teaches that the feasts were given as a memorial of God's grace and holiness, and as signposts of the Messiah's First and Second Advent

The Feast have a Commemorative Purpose.

There are two major words that are translated as 'feast' in the Hebrews Scriptures: מוֹעֵדִי (*mow'ade*) and הַג (hag). The first word, מוֹעֵדִי (*mow'ade*) is 'a set or appointed time'.³ A cursory study of this term in light of Leviticus 23 shows that it is used in reference to all the feasts. According to Leviticus 23:2, these 'appointed times' belong to the Lord. He is the One in Whom they originate, and He it is Who has ordained them. These 'appointed times' were designated as such to provide the people with a means and place of remembrance of God's grace in ages past.

The term מוֹעֵדִי (*mow'ade*) denotes 'an assembly or place of assembly'. Numbers 10:3 uses this term in this sense to describe the assembling of Israel for worship. The Septuagint translates this term by the Greek word συναγωγή (*synagogue*) which means 'place of assembly'.⁴ Jews have met in 'Synagogues' since the exilic period for worship and study.

Before the inauguration of synagogues, the meeting place for the congregation of Israel was the Tabernacle and then the Temple. Exodus 25:22 states that God would 'meet' with the high priest (as a representative of the assembly) at the Mercy Seat. The term translated as 'meet' is מוֹעֵדִי (*mow'ade*). The main idea of this term is that the feasts were God appointed times for calling the people together to meet in holy fellowship with Him.⁵

The second word, הַג (hag) is a 'festival-gathering'.⁶ The purpose of a festival is to reinforce individually and corporately, the memory of special occasions to pass on the recollections to succeeding generations."⁷ A survey of verses, in which this term appears, help to explain the attitude and aspects involved in such a festival. While the 'feasts' were solemn occasions (Nehemiah 8:18; 2 Chronicles 7:9), they were times of rejoicing as well (Deuteronomy 16:14; Ezra 6:22; 2 Chronicles 29:30). All the feasts, except for the Day of Atonement, were joyous occasions. The feast generally involved the singing of songs (Isaiah 30:29; 2 Chronicles 30:31), the giving of an offering (Deuteronomy 16:16), the reading and explanation of Scripture (Nehemiah 8:18), and the offering of a sacrifice (Psalm 118:27; Ezra 3:4).

The word מִקְרָאֵי (*miqrae*) is used in Leviticus to describe the feasts. It means a 'convocation, a calling together'.⁸ The term is used to describe gathering the people together for religious purposes. In Nehemiah 8:8, the same term is translated as 'reading'. In the context, the people are gathered as an assembly on the 'first day of the seventh month' (Nehemiah 8:2) for the reading of the Word of God (i.e. 'the Law'). Notice that it was the seventh month. As noted earlier, the Mosaic Feast were always connected to some form of the number seven. The seventh month included the Feasts of Tabernacles, Atonement and Trumpets. Before the people could partake of the feast, Ezra and the priests "*read... the Law distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused [the people] to understand.*" Remember, the feasts provided the people with a means and place of remembrance of God's grace in ages past. God's Word is the testimony of God's grace! Thus, the reading, rehearsing and realization of God's Word is a key part of keeping the feasts.

In Leviticus 23:2, the Lord declares that the feasts are not just convocations, but 'holy' convocations. The term 'holy' denotes that which is 'set apart for sacred use'. The term 'holy' was

used in reference to the Tabernacle (later the Temple), priest, people and any other object that had been consecrated to the Lord (Leviticus 19:24). The thing on which "holiness adheres... must be treated with care."⁹ Furthermore, something that is said to be holy is something that is to be morally pure or used to practice moral purity.¹⁰ The fact that the 'feasts' are a means of remembering God's grace demands that they be treated as holy. God Himself is holy, that is, He is set apart from sin cannot sin and will not sin (Hebrews 6:18; Malachi 3:16). In Leviticus 11:44, God commanded the Israelites to 'sanctify themselves' to be holy. The reason for such sanctification is followed in 11:45 with the statement, "*For I am the LORD that bringeth you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God.*" God wants them to be sanctified because He is their LORD God! However, notice the phrase, '*that bringeth you up out of the land of Egypt*'. The Feast of Passover is the reminder of that act of God's grace! The Feast of Passover, like all the other feasts, not only reminds them of God's grace, but it is a call to holiness, as well. Leviticus 11:45 ends with the statement, "*Be holy, for I am holy.*"

Two other words used are זִכָּרוֹן (*zikkaron*) and חֻקָּה (*huqqat*). Both of these terms are used in Exodus 12:14 to describe the feast (in particular the feast of Passover). The term זִכָּרוֹן (*zikkaron*) can be simply translated as a 'memorial' or remembrance'.¹¹ זִכָּרוֹן (*zikkaron*) is used relative to the feast to communicate the idea that it is a "commemoration" designed to "remind of something."¹² Here, the feasts are memorials to remind Israel of God's holiness and past grace.

The other term חֻקָּה (*huqqat*) is translated in that text as an 'ordinance'. An 'ordinance' though is something that is "established... [a] right or privilege."¹³ To partake of these holy feasts were certainly the right of every Jew in a right relationship with God. Furthermore, it was their privilege; those who were strangers or hirelings had no right to partake of the feasts.

Finally, these feasts were not just established by God, they were defined by Him. As such, He has the right to determine when they are held, who partakes and how they partake. They are His feasts... they declare His holiness and remind the participants of His past grace. Thus:

- Passover: shows Israel's deliverance from Egypt
- Unleavened Bread: shows Israel's release from bondage & crossing of the Red Sea
- First-fruits: shows Israel's presentation to the Lord of the first-fruit of the barley harvest
- Pentecost: shows Israel's presentation to the Lord of the first-fruit of the wheat harvest
- Trumpets: shows Israel's civil new year and a call to repentance
- Day of Atonement: shows Israel's national day of fasting and sorrow for sin
- Tabernacles: shows Israel's 40 years of wandering and presentation to the Lord of the first-fruit of the fruit harvest

The Feast have a Prophetic Purpose.

Hosea 12:10 states that God has "*spoken by the prophets... and used similitudes, by the ministry of the prophets.*" God used various ways to communicate to people including 'similitudes'. The piel (a Hebrew stem) usage of this term can be translated as speaking in 'parables'.¹⁴ It should also be noted that "the Greek word for parable and its Hebrew counterpart are both broad terms and can be used for anything from a proverb to a full-blown allegory including a riddle, a dark saying, an illustration, a contrast, or a story [emphasis mine]."¹⁵ God uses illustrations or pictures to teach His people. The whole Tabernacle system (i.e. the Tent, the furnishings, the sacrifices and feasts, etc.) were illustrations which God used to teach the Jews, and ultimately the world, of the Messiah's First and Second Advents.

Hebrews 1:1 reaffirms that God has spoken in the past through the prophets. Since all Scripture is given by the inspiration of God (2 Timothy 3:16), it can be assumed that the statement of Hebrews 1:1 regarding the prophets would include by extension visions, dreams and similitudes. The book of Hebrews was written to Jewish believers who were being persecuted and tempted to abandon the faith. It was written with the purpose of encouraging and strengthening them! Along those lines, the writer shows "the value of the Old Testament in understanding the New Testament."¹⁶ In so doing, the writer refers to many Old Testament figures (people, things and ideas) and shows how they not only pointed towards Christ, but that Christ is superior to them because He completes or fulfills them.

In this context, a study of Hebrews 8:1-10:39 shows that the Jewish Feasts were not just historic, but prophetic; signposts pointing to the Messiah. This Messiah is "*a minister of the sanctuary, and of the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, and not man* (Hebrews 8:2). There is a Tabernacle and its Sanctuary (i.e. the Holy of Holies) that pre-incarnate Christ built, not man, and it is in the heavenlies. The purpose of the Tabernacle and its Sanctuary on earth was to "*serve unto the example and shadow of heavenly things*" (Hebrews 8:5). The word 'example' (ὑπόδειγμα - *hupodeigma*) is used for a 'representation or type' of something else.¹⁷ The word 'shadow' (σκιά - *skia*) describes a 'foreshadowing of something perfect'.¹⁸ "A shadow can never reveal its object, but it can provide an outline of reality."¹⁹ Hebrews 10:1 states, "*For the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things...*" Note here that the word 'shadow' (σκιά - *skia*) is contrasted to the word 'image' (εἰκών - *eikon*). Here, 'image' is used of a prototype or model. A prototype does not just resemble the product, it is the pattern for building the product.²⁰ For example, if an individual stands before a mirror he sees his exact image, not a shadow or outline of himself. Hebrews 10:7-18 states that Christ is the 'image' and the Law is the 'shadow'. While the 'shadow' could not save (it simply pointed someone to that need), the 'image' does save.

Similar language is used in Colossians 2:16-17. In the context, Paul discusses the teaching of the Judiazers who taught that the Gentile believers needed to keep the dietary restrictions and feast days of the Jews as a means of salvation (2:16). Paul's point is that these things do not save, though they do point to Christ.

The feast days, specifically referred to in the text, are holy days, new moons and Sabbaths. The term 'holy days' (ἑορτῆς - *heortes*) are those 'annual religious festivals [...] set aside for worshipping God'.²¹ The term 'new moon' (νουμῆιας - *noumenias*) refers to the monthly celebrations that marked the beginning of each month (Numbers 10:10; 28:11). The term 'Sabbath' (σαββάτων - *sabbaton*) is plural in the text and refers not only to the weekly day of rest but the special yearly Sabbaths (Leviticus 23:1-3; 25:1-7).²²

The term in Colossians 2:17, 'which' (ἧ - *ha*) can be translated as 'all such things', and refers to both the dietary restrictions and ceremonial rituals.²³ Paul states that 'all such things' are '*a shadow of things to come*' (σκιά τῶν μελλόντων - *skia ton mellonton*). Thus, the Jewish feasts (i.e. holy days, new moons and Sabbaths) foreshadowed something yet future. The text clarifies Who the feasts foreshadow when it states, '*but the body of Christ*' (δε σῶμα τοῦ χριστός - *soma tou christos*), as the term 'but' (δε - *de*) is a 'contrastive conjunction' and means that the term suggests a relationship between the terms 'shadow' and 'body'.²⁴ The term 'body' does not refer to the physical body of Christ, but is used to convey the sense of reality (as opposed to an illusion), which is further strengthened by using the article τοῦ (tou) before Christ.²⁵ This is called an article

of 'previous reference' and points out the identity of an object previously mentioned.²⁶ Christ is the true reality. The verse can then be translated as, "all such things (i.e. the dietary restrictions and feast days) are a foreshadowing of the reality of Christ, which characterizes His person and work." A person's shadow heralds his arrival and provides a glimpse of the person. In the same way, the Jewish feasts herald the First and Second Advents of Christ, and prophetically give a glimpse of what He has done and is yet to do.

In Hebrews 10:7-10 the author quotes Psalm 40:6-8. The point is to show that the sacrificial system contained in the Law has been set aside and fulfilled in Christ. Note the phrase '*in the volume of the book it is written of me*'. What is written in the Law? The teachings of the sacrifices, offerings and feasts (Leviticus 1:1-17; 3:1-17; 4:1-35; 6:8-13 7:11-34; 16; 23). Both Psalm 40 and Hebrews 10 state that they are written of Christ.

In John 5:39, Christ commanded His disciples to '*search the Scripture... for they testify of Christ*'. The Scriptures in those days were the Old Testament Scriptures. When the risen Christ appeared to the Emmaus road disciples, Scripture states, "*And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself*" (Luke 24:27). When He appeared in the Upper Room later that day, Christ said, "*that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me*" (Luke 24:44). The Old Testament in all its parts, including the Jewish feasts, points to Christ in His First and Second Advent. Thus:

- Passover: signifies the death of Christ
- Unleavened Bread: signifies the sinlessness of Christ and the release of humanity from the bondage of sin
- First-fruits: signifies the resurrection of Christ
- Pentecost: signifies the descent of the Holy Spirit and the beginning of the Church
- Trumpets: signifies the Rapture of the Church
- Atonement: signifies the Tribulation and the Return of the Messiah
- Tabernacles: signifies the Millennial Kingdom of the Messiah

Conclusion

Can these 'illustrations' still be of use today? While the New Testament believer is not under command to keep the various dietary laws and religious festivals (Colossians 2:16), Romans 15:4 states that '*these things are written afore time for our learning*'. Even today, believers have much to glean from the Jewish feasts.

First, the Jewish feasts had a commemorative purpose. They served as reminders of God's holiness and grace in past ages. This has not ceased; their inclusion in Scripture continues to testify of God's holiness and grace. These feasts were not only memorials, but they were ordinances. In much the same way, believers gather around the Lord's Table (the Christian's Passover) as a reminder of God's holiness and grace in past ages. Specifically, Communion points the believer back to the holiness of God. God's holiness condemned humanity as sinners and required the shedding of blood to make atonement for mankind's sin. Communion also points the believer back to the grace of God. God's grace was never more displayed than when He provided His Son as the sacrifice for humanity.

As well, by studying commemorative purpose of the Jewish feast, the believer learns something about his worship of God. These feasts were appointed times when the people gathered together for worship. While the Tabernacle and Temple are gone, believers still meet together at appointed times for worship. Like the feasts of old, these times should be solemn occasions.

The feasts of old were distinct from the other days. Is the Lord's day distinct from the rest of the week or is it just another day? The Jewish feasts were times of rejoicing. Sadly, many worship services today are anything but joyful; indeed, to listen to the sorrowful singing, lack of praises, and shallow preaching, worship today is painful at best!

The feasts were times of fellowship with God that demanded sanctification of the worshipper. Many today, come to worship service to 'fellowship' only with their friends and a call to sanctification has become taboo.

The feasts were times of singing, bringing an offering, and reading and teaching the Scripture. Any worship service, which does not contain these four items, falls short of meeting God's standard. Oh, that the church of God would look to the feasts of old and learn how a holy God is to be approached!

Secondly, the Jewish feasts, also, had a prophetic purpose. They served as a means of pointing to the coming of the Messiah. The feasts of Passover, Unleavened Bread, First-fruits and Pentecost were fulfilled by Christ in His First Advent. The feasts of Trumpets, Atonement and Tabernacles will be fulfilled by Christ at His Second Advent. By studying the feasts, believers see the plan of God that was laid out in eternity past. They are a road map of God's plan for the ages (Colossians 2:17; Hebrews 10:1). Israel's holy days lay out from beginning to end God's plan to make Christ the King.

Endnotes:

¹ Barnes, Charles R. (1924). *The People's Bible Encyclopedia*, (p 1107). Chicago. The People's Publication Society.

² *Ibid.* (p 354).

³ Gesenius, W., & Tregelles, S. P. (2003). *Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures* (p 457). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

⁴ Vine, W. E., Unger, M. F., & White, W. (1996). *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (V 1, p 46). Nashville, TN: T. Nelson.

⁵ Barnes, Charles R. (p 354).

⁶ Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A. (2000). *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (electronic ed.) (p 290). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems.

⁷ Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J. (1988). *Baker encyclopedia of the Bible* (p 783). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House.

⁸ Gesenius, W., & Tregelles, S. P. (p 504).

⁹ Holladay, W. L., Köhler, L., & Köhler, L. (1971). *A concise Hebrew and Aramaic lexicon of the Old Testament*. (p 314). Leiden: Brill.

¹⁰ Swanson, J. (1997). *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains : Hebrew (Old Testament)* (electronic ed.) (DBLH 7731, #1-3). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

¹¹ Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A. (p 272).

¹² Swanson, J. (DBLH 2355, #1).

¹³ Gesenius, W., & Tregelles, S. P. (p 300).

¹⁴ Gesenius, W., & Tregelles, S. P. (p 202).

¹⁵ Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J. (p 1608). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House.

¹⁶ Bachlan, J. (1985). *The Compact Survey of the Bible* (p 261). Minneapolis, Minn: Bethany Press International.

¹⁷ Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The Complete Word Study Dictionary : New Testament* (electronic ed.) (G5262). Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* (G4639).

¹⁹ Lea, T. D. (1999). Vol. 10: Hebrews, James. *Holman New Testament Commentary; Holman Reference* (182). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

²⁰ Zodhiates, S. (G1504).

²¹ Bratcher, R. G., & Nida, E. A. (1993). A Handbook on Paul's Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon. Helps for Translators; UBS handbook series (p 65). New York: United Bible Societies.

²² It should be noted that the term 'Sabbath' (singular) should be translated as 'Sabbaths' (plural). This is because the term 'σαββατων' (sabbaton) is a genitive plural noun. Since the term is plural, it provides for the celebration of more than one 'Sabbath'. In the context of yearly and monthly feasts, the term would best be understood to mean not only the weekly Sabbaths but the special days throughout the year that were treated as Sabbaths.

²³ Bratcher, R. G., & Nida, E. A. (p 66).

²⁴ Heiser, M. S. (2005; 2005). Glossary of Morpho-Syntactic Database Terminology (Logical Contrastive). Logos Bible Software.

²⁵ Bratcher, R. G., & Nida, E. A. (p 66).

²⁶ Dana, H. & Mantey, J. (1955). A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament (p 141). New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc.