



Sukkot: A Promise of Living Water

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Fruit Harvest in Ancient Israel

When summer is gone, the final harvest is ready. Nimble fingers separate grapes from the vines. Some of the harvest is laid out for the sun to sweeten into delicious dried fruit: raisins. Huge quantities of grapes are crushed and their juice is stored in large earthen vats until the proper time for it to be poured into wineskins to complete the fermentation process. All look forward to the abundance of wine, which King David said, "gladdens the heart." (Psalm 104:15)

Each of the family joins in collecting the fruit of the land, the fruit God has provided for his people. Children scramble to fill oversized baskets with figs and dates which will be molded into cakes for a sweet confection to be used in the months ahead. Some dates will be made into a sweet syrup, date honey.

The apple fragrance sets mouths to watering and telltale stains from bright red pomegranates are evidence that some have sampled the fruit to "taste and see that the LORD is good."

Then it is time to harvest the olives. The lush dark green olive trees on the terraced hillsides are black with the ripe fruit. Everyone joins in the exhausting but exhilarating work, stripping the trees of their fruit. Copious volumes of olives are collected and then crushed under the massive rolling stone of the olive press to extract the precious oil for cooking or fuel for the oil lamps or for anointing. The oil will also provide the base for soap as well as for unguent, a healing ointment to spread over one's wounds.

The harvest event spurs the people to rejoice and meditate on God's provision for his people, as they observe the biblical Feast of Booths, or "Hag Sukkot," in this joyous setting.

The festival is explained in Leviticus 23:33-35, 39-43:

The LORD said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites: 'On the fifteenth day of the seventh month the Lord's Feast of Tabernacles begins, and it lasts for seven days. The first day is a sacred assembly; do no regular work. For seven days present offerings made to the LORD by fire, and on the eighth day hold a sacred assembly and present an offering made to the LORD by fire. It is the closing assembly; do no regular work. After you have gathered the crops of the land, celebrate the festival to the LORD for seven days; the first day is a day of rest, and the eighth day is also a day of rest.

'On the first day you are to take choice fruit from the trees, and palm fronds, leafy branches and poplars, and rejoice before the LORD your God for seven days. Celebrate this as a festival to the LORD for seven days each year. This is to be a lasting ordinance for the generations to come; celebrate it in the seventh month. Live in booths for seven days: All native-born Israelites are to live in booths so your descendants will know that I had the Israelites live in booths when I brought them out of Egypt. I am the LORD your God.'"

The book of Numbers, chapter 29, provides a more detailed description of the sacrifices and burnt offerings made during Sukkot. On the first day (in addition to the regular Temple offerings) thirteen bullocks were sacrificed, along with two rams, fourteen male lambs and a goat for sin offering. The



number of bullocks diminished by one each day until a total of 70 had been sacrificed by the seventh day. On the eighth day only one bullock was sacrificed.

According to the Midrash on Psalm 109 verse 4, the seventy bullocks were for the seventy nations thought to make up the world, while the single bullock on the eighth day was said to be for Israel.¹ There is no actual Biblical basis for the interpretation, but it is an interesting speculation and it hints at the ancient rabbis' understanding that God desired to provide atonement not only for Israel, but for all peoples.² This sacrifice was not superficial to the harvest festival; it was the central feature.

What are the Central Elements of the Feast?

Sukkot occurs after the harvest has been completed and before the beginning of the new agricultural year. It includes the well-deserved rest from one's labor and sincere rejoicing in what God has done in providing for his people. Jews are also called upon to remember God's providential care over us after we were redeemed from bondage in Egypt. Jews are to remember his provision for us during the forty years of wilderness wandering. That is why God commanded Israel to observe the festival by leaving our permanent dwellings to live in the more fragile, temporary booths, or "sukkot." God instituted Sukkot as a reminder that dependence upon him was not something that ended when the Promised Land was reached. Thus, even after a good harvest, we need to remember year after year the temporal nature of this life and the fact that we must ultimately rely on God to provide for us.

In the midst of this great celebration of God's provision, this feast of rejoicing in the abundance of God's goodness, this time of rest from one's labors, a specified multitude of sacrifices were offered to atone for sin. This focus on atonement and forgiveness was a reminder of reliance upon God to provide for our spiritual, as well as physical, well-being.³

During the days of the Second Temple, traditions were added to embellish the Feast of Sukkot. The myrtle, willow and palm branches used for the construction of the booths were bound together to form the "lulav," a symbol of thanksgiving and praise to God.⁴ The lulav is held in the right hand and is waived before God on each of the seven days of Sukkot, excepting the Sabbath. The "etrog," or citron, a lemon-like fruit, is held in the left hand. While the etrog is not mentioned in the Bible, our rabbis consider it the "choice fruit from the trees" mentioned in Leviticus 23:40.

The Priests of the Temple Performed Three Main Daily Rites during the Feast

Just before dawn each day, they proceeded to the east gate out of the Temple area. As the sun appeared they turned away from it and faced to the west, toward the Temple. Then they announced: "Our fathers when they were in this place turned their faces toward the east, and they worshipped the sun toward the east; but as for us, our eyes are turned toward the LORD."

¹ See Philip Goodman, *The Sukkot and Simchat Torah Anthology*, p. 43.

² Zechariah 14:16-19, however, does explicitly give a universal interpretation to Sukkot!

³ Note the recurrence of the number seven in the context of the sacrifices. Seven is the key number in the establishment of God's covenantal relationship with his people. See also Glaser, Mitch and Zhava, *The Fall Feasts of Israel*, p. 163 and *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, volume 4, pp. 294-295.

⁴ See Nehemiah 8:15.



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The second rite was performed at night. Four huge menorahs were set up to illuminate the entire Temple area. In actuality they were so large that each of the stems formed a torch. The wicks were made from the worn-out linen garments of the priests. As smaller torches were carried to light the procession, the people danced and played harps, lyres, cymbals and lutes. The Levites chanted the Psalms of Ascent (120-134); one psalm on each of the fifteen steps leading from the court of the Israelites to the court of the women. Imagine what a glorious scene it must have been, with the majesty of the procession and the golden stone walls of the Temple bathed in the glow of the torch-lit night!

The third daily ceremony was the rite of the water libation. On the first morning of Sukkot a procession of priests went down to the pool of Siloam to bring up to the Temple a golden container of water sufficient to last throughout the seven days of the feast. The water was brought up with great ceremony. The shofar was blown and the pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem for the feast waved their lulavs as the priests carried the water around the altar. The great Hallel (Psalms 113-118) was recited. Then the priest on duty poured out the contents of two silver bowls: one held water and the other held wine. This was an act of prayer and an expression of dependence upon God to pour out his blessing of rain upon the earth.

On the last or "great" day of the feast, the water libation rite reached its climax. The priests circled the altar seven times and then poured out the water with great pomp and ceremony. This was Hoshana Rabbah, the great "HOSHIANA" (which translated is "save now").

Sukkot in the New Covenant

We find a significant mention of Hoshana Rabbah in the New Covenant book of John chapter seven verses 37-52. It was on this day, the last and greatest day of the feast (possibly just as the water was being poured out), that Y'shua stood up and boldly proclaimed to the celebrants, "If a man is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." (John 7:37-38)

Imagine the uproar this statement must have caused! The priest had just poured out the water libation as an appeal to the Creator God to provide water for the people, and Y'shua (Jesus), as if to answer the prayer, tells the people to come to him for water. What a radical statement and shocker to the crowd.

Jesus was claiming to be none other than the Creator himself! Some recognized his authority and plainly said, "He is the Messiah." (v. 41) Others were absolutely incensed. Some wanted to seize him and have him stoned for blasphemy, that is, claiming to be God. Yet we read that the Temple guards were unable to lay a hand on him. When the Pharisees and chief priests questioned the guards as to why they could not arrest him, they simply responded, "No one ever spoke the way this man does." (v. 46) The Temple guards were transfixed by his word. They were unable to act against Y'shua when faced with his obvious authority.

The Pharisees responded to those guards as would many people today. "You mean he has deceived you also?" they asked. It was inconceivable to some religious leaders that Y'shua's claims could be true and therefore they themselves could be wrong. Pride prevented them from questioning their own supposed wisdom. The fact that they didn't believe became a settled matter once and for all. They reasoned that since they didn't believe it, it couldn't possibly be true. They held themselves up as the proprietors of



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truth, the only authoritative interpreters of the Torah. The masses, they decided, ignorant and deceived; they knew nothing of the Law.

Does this sound at all familiar? Isn't it really the essence of unbelief? When the issue of Jesus is raised, how often it is still said, "I am too well educated and too intelligent to believe such nonsense. It's for people who are weak and need a crutch, whereas I'm very secure in my unbelief. Besides, if it were true, wouldn't the rabbis, who know a lot more about religion, have discovered it?"

Some Pharisaic leaders said, "The prophet, the Messiah, cannot come from Galilee." Yet, in their blindness, they themselves fulfilled a prophecy which had been written hundreds of years earlier. We find it recorded in the eighth chapter of the book of Isaiah. Shortly before he predicted that a great light would come from Galilee, Isaiah said: "Do not call conspiracy everything that these people call conspiracy; do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it. The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread, and he will be a sanctuary; but for both houses of Israel he will be a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall. And for the people of Jerusalem he will be a trap and a snare." (Isaiah 8:12-14)

Isaiah then proceeded to speak of Galilee, the despised portion of the land of Israel given to Zebulun and Naphtali. The region was located on the main trade route connecting the great powers of Assyria and Babylon with Egypt and North Africa. It therefore became known by the derogatory appellation of "Galilee of the Goyim" because of the pagan corruption which had resulted from contact with these foreigners. And yet, this despised town of Galilee would be honored one day because, said the prophet Isaiah, "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light." (Isaiah 9:2)

A light would come, alight so bright that it would outshine even the glorious illumination of the Temple at Sukkot. Isaiah spoke of the enlarging of the nation and the increase of joy-the joy of the harvest, because "a child is born, to us a son given. And he will be called Pele Yo-etz, El Gibbor, Avi Ad, Sar Shalom (Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace)." (Isaiah 9:6) His rule, we are told, will expand and cover the whole earth and will never cease. He will bring the great harvest of the nations. ⁵

It is no coincidence that Y'shua chose this occasion of Hoshana Rabbah, the last and greatest day of Sukkot, to make the declaration that "If a man is thirsty let him come to me to drink." (John 7:37) Y'shua proclaimed himself to be the Great Provider, the Redeemer of Israel who led the people through the wilderness. He is the great light shining in the darkness, and his body is the great Temple which was raised up after being destroyed as the final sin offering. He provided the final and greatest atonement for his people Israel and for all nations. ⁶

Psalm 118, part of the great "Hallel" which is chanted during this feast, says, "the stone the builders rejected has become the capstone." (v. 22) As the bright light shone from despised Galilee, so the rejected Messiah became the capstone of a new temple.

⁵ See Isaiah 8:11-9:7.

⁶ See John 2:19; 1 Peter 2:4-8.



Living Water

Messiah promised "living water" for all who believe. What is living water? It is cool, fresh spring water. In the land of Israel water is especially precious, and in Jesus' time there were three main ways of obtaining it. You could build a cistern to collect the rain, but if there was not enough rain, as was often the case, you couldn't fill it and the water soon became stale. Or you could dig a well, which was more reliable. However, the most prized source of water was a spring. Spring water was the sweetest and best water of all. It bubbled up from the recesses of the earth and continued to flow even when other streams were dried up.

This is the water Jesus promised, the best water, real spiritual satisfaction. This is the Shekinah promise to those who believe. Most people have not tasted this living water. Like some of the Pharisees and priests of Y'shua's day, people are still wise in their own eyes. But the truly wise can learn a lesson from the wilderness wandering of ancient Israel. Of all those 20 or more years old who came out of Egypt only two entered the Promised Land, Joshua and Caleb. This is an example of the axiom "truth has never been determined by a majority vote." Neither has truth been determined by virtue of the stature of those who believe it. So, how is truth determined? God is the source of truth and he does promise to reveal himself to those who truly want to know.

"You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." (Jeremiah 29:13)

Y'shua makes some strong claims about himself. He says to come to him and he will provide living water to all who thirst. He says that our sincere searching will bring us to him. Are his assertions true? This coming Sukkot, find out for yourself.



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