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The Forgotten Feast: A History of Tabernacles and Its Importance Today

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The Forgotten Feast:

A History of Tabernacles and Its Importance Today

An Honors Senior Project
By Kirsten J. Korthuis
Dr. Tom Moore Advising
Completed June 7, 2000

HONORS THESIS

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Introduction

There is a holy festival commanded in the Bible yet barely described, a sacred week which most in the world know nothing about, though many Jews and some Christians celebrate it still. It is the longest and the most joyous of the festivals outlined in the Torah, and it was for centuries considered the greatest (Schauss 170). It was called variously “*the* Festival” or “God’s Festival”, for it played a greater role in people’s lives than any other (171). Yet its origins are unclear. Some historians believe it began as a Canaanite fertility festival, and that it was adopted and adapted by the Israelites when they entered Canaan. One Jewish tradition holds that Jacob initiated this festival when he made a special sacrifice to Yahweh. Other scholars believe this holy feast symbolizes a sacred marriage between God and His people or that it is a yearly renewal of His covenant with them. These are just some of the possible sources for this mysterious festival.

Whatever its origin, this feast has seen many changes over the centuries as the politics and religion of its adherents have changed. For example, when the Jews returned to their homeland after the Babylonian exile, their leadership emphasized this feast’s historical aspects in order to give the people a sense that they were a unified nation. A few centuries later, when the Romans had captured Jerusalem, the Sadducees and Pharisees argued bitterly about this festival’s meaning—it, among other things, was a political “hot topic”. While these two Jewish groups fought, at this pivotal point in Western religious history, Jesus used the symbolism of this holy week in his final entry into Jerusalem and created the main reasons used for his crucifixion.

After the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, this festival gradually fell from being the most important to being the least. However, there are three reasons why I

believe this feast may rise in popularity among Jews again. The first has to do with the fact that, as we will see, this festival has had messianic connections for millennia; with the modern reestablishment of the state of Israel and the desire of Zionists for a third Temple to be built, these connections may be renewed. The second is that this particular feast has always been the celebration most connected with nature, and with the rise of environmentalism and the growing desire of urbanites to “rediscover” Mother Earth, it is possible that it will increase in significance. The third reason comes from Rabbi Greenberg, who believes the feast’s importance might have declined because it is full of symbolism, and people have lost their ability to understand this type of language (97). If this is true, as people become more disillusioned with television, capitalism, and the religion science has become, perhaps they will become more interested in returning to their religious roots and in learning and speaking the language of symbolism again. My guess is that the future will see a renewal of interest in this festival.

This important yet nearly forgotten festival is the Feast of Sukkot, or Tabernacles; its history, which spans at least three millennia, is replete with mystery and drama.

The Autumn Feast

The Feast of Sukkot takes place in the autumn. Originally, the Israelites determined its date by the end of the harvest, but after the Exile it was set on the 15th of Tishri, and that is when Jews celebrate it today (“Sukkot”, *EJ* 496). The Feast was always a time of rejoicing, a celebration of the harvest and a thanksgiving for the riches of the vine and field (Schauss 170). As such, it may have been adopted by the Israelites after they entered Canaan and took up an agricultural instead of a pastoral lifestyle (171).

Judges 9:27 says that the Shechemites (a people of north-central Palestine) "...went out into the fields, and gathered grapes from their vineyards and trod them, and made merry. And they went into the house of their god, and ate and drank..." (NKJ version throughout). This god would have been Baal, who was in charge of the weather and the productivity of the land. Judges 21:19-21 states that the Benjaminites captured wives for themselves by kidnapping the girls who went out into the vineyards to dance at "a yearly feast of the Lord in Shiloh". It appears from these two passages that the Canaanites themselves celebrated a festival of harvest before the Israelites ever entered their land, a feasting to Baal (their fertility god) for the produce he had provided ("Sukkot", *EJ* 496).

Above all else, for the Canaanites and the Israelites, the Feast of Sukkot was meant to be a time of feasting and joy. In the Torah and in present days, the festival is sometimes called *Zeman Simkhateinu*, "the Season of our Rejoicing" (Rich 1). There are three main injunctions given in the Torah as to how the Feast is to be celebrated. First, practitioners are to "offer an offering made by fire to the Lord"; second, to "take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of beautiful trees, branches of palm trees, the boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God for seven days"; third, to live in booths for the seven days of the feast (Lev. 23:33-43). The first command is found for all of the festivals, and in this case the sacrifice was made to Yahweh for the bounty of the earth. The number of animals to be sacrificed was unusually high, but this may have been because the people were richest at this time of the year and could afford to be generous (Waskow 49). Rabbis and other scholars, however, have debated the purpose of the last two commands which are unique to this feast, the commands for the so-called "Four Species" and the booths.

New Year's Festivals

It is possible that the Four Species and the booths relate back to New Year's festivals which were celebrated throughout the ancient world. The Israelites celebrated their New Year's on the first of Tishri, just two weeks before the Feast began. Wensinck argues that, like other peoples of the time in Canaan and North Africa (remember that the Israelites spent some time in Egypt), the Israelites were using branches of trees to induce fertility and were living in booths as part of a "taboo of the house" (34). At the New Year's festival of Ennayerfeast, for example, the custom was "to strew green twigs on the flat roofs of the houses, on the stalks and on the floors of the tents, on the day before Ennayer, so that the new year may be green" (34). Perhaps the branches the Israelites used were for a similar purpose.

When discussing the "taboo of the house", Wensinck says that some ancient Semitic and North African groups believed dangerous spirits entered their houses or tents during certain times of the year. Danger always existed when somebody died in a tent, as is shown in Numbers 19, where those who are in the tent are considered unclean for seven days and must go through water purification on the third and seventh days (verses 11-22). (Though it may not be connected, the Feast of Sukkot also lasts seven days and ends with a water libation.) Besides the dead, demons can periodically bring trouble to people's homes. Mesopotamian incantation bowls were inscribed with the names of demons, in the hope of averting danger from them. Moabite bedouins smear the entrance of their tents with blood to keep the evil spirits out, which calls to mind the Passover blood put on doorposts to keep the angel of death from entering the homes of the Israelites. In extreme

cases, tribes are known to have burned their homes periodically to extricate the evil (35). This type of evil was most likely to come at times of transition. One of these times was at plantings and harvests, when God would decide the outcome of the seeds being planted or whether or not He would be sending rain. The Israelites, according to Wensinck's view, lived in separate, temporary buildings during the most dangerous time of the year, the time of the harvest, also their New Year's, when everything was in flux (37). Because of the risk from malignant powers, they would have been very reticent to enter their regular house during this week, and would have preferred their temporary booths, which were, in a sense, consecrated to God (31).

Mowinckel also connected the Feast of Sukkot with ancient Egyptian and Babylonian New Year's practices, but he believed the festival to be an Enthronement ceremony, which would be linked to those for the New Year's festivals of the Canaanites and Babylonians ("Sukkot", *EJ* 497). He pointed out that Psalms (47, 93, 96-99) were read at the Feast which declared *yahweh malak*, "Yahweh is king" or "Yahweh has become king", and that this statement "corresponds precisely to a formula used at the enthronement of an earthly king," such as that of Jehu in II Kings 9:13 (Ringgren 191). In Egypt and Babylonia, gods could be worshipped as earthly kings during festivals, so Mowinckel believes that the Israelites likewise symbolically placed Yahweh on His earthly throne once a year, at the Feast of Sukkot (191). Psalms 24 discusses a procession where Yahweh enters the Temple after being declared the "King of glory"; the Ark of the Covenant would probably have been involved in the procession, since it alone could hold God's glory (191-192).

There could be a connection between this procession and a motif in Canaanite religion where Baal, the main fertility god, returns from death annually to be enthroned as king, supplying the needs of the next year's agriculture. The Ugaritic texts show that the people cried "Aliyan Baal lives" when they celebrated his return from death to be their king, just as Psalms 18:47 contains the triumphal shout "Yahweh lives" (196). The phrase "Yahweh has become king" would come next in a procession which would lead God to His throne. The author of the "Sukkot" article in the Encyclopedia Judaica disagrees with this interpretation, however, and says that *Yahweh malak* can only mean "Yahweh rules as king," and therefore it is just a statement of fact, not part of an enthronement ceremony at all. This author also does not think it likely that the ark would have been removed from the Temple for an annual procession of this sort (498).

The Renewal of Vows

Weiser and von Rad believe that the Feast of Booths may have been an annual covenant festival, where Yahweh and Israel renewed the pact made between them (Ringgren 192). This is supported by Deuteronomy 31:10-13, which has Moses commanding the people to gather every seven years at the Feast of Tabernacles to hear the reading of the law. Joshua 24 has such an occurrence, where the people gather together and agree to put away other gods to serve Yahweh alone, and the covenant is renewed (192-193). These scholars believe that the Feast was a time for Israelites to remember how Yahweh had saved them in the past and to then renew their agreement with Him, realizing that in this way they could gain further salvation (194).

Some have seen this covenant festival as a kind of “renewal of vows”, as in a marriage. The sacred marriage is found in both the Babylonian New Year’s festival of *akitu* and in the Ras Shamra texts of the Canaanites (196). The Song of Songs could be part of a genre composed also of Sumerian, Babylonian, and Ugaritic songs, where a sacred marriage occurs. It does not seem likely that this song is simply one written by Solomon to one of his many wives; it probably has greater, religious significance.

Ringgren writes that the Song of Songs “can hardly be understood as anything other than a garbled collection of songs for use at the sacred marriage . . . The fact that the bride retains the initiative excludes any interpretation of the text as secular marriage poetry” (197). Ringgren here must be assuming that the women of Solomon’s time were not the ones who would be instigating the lovemaking, and therefore the Song could not have been written from Solomon’s actual experience, but called for metaphorical interpretation.

In this song, the union of the bride and groom takes place in a garden or bower in spring, which is reminiscent of the activities of the Canaanite priestesses, who engaged in ritualized sexual intercourse under trees, in sacred groves, in order to ensure the fertility of the land. The Israelites may have taken this local motif and reinterpreted it allegorically as the sacred marriage between Yahweh and His people, the divine deity and the royal nation (197-198).

The Prophets support this in that they employ the marriage motif to explain the relationship between Yahweh and Israel (198). Hosea looks to a future time when God will allow His people to call Him “My Husband” instead of “My Master”, when a marriage covenant will be created and He will be with them forevermore (2:16-20). Jeremiah is told to go to the people and tell them that God remembers the love the Israelites once had

for their betrothal to Him (2:2). Isaiah portrays God as a happy bridegroom rejoicing over His bride, Jerusalem (62:4-5). While there is no female deity in the monotheistic religion of the Israelites, the sacred marriage motif found in local religious practices may have entered in through the belief that Yahweh wanted to “marry” His people, and may have been celebrated at the Feast of Tabernacles, where the “vows” were renewed. The Dead Sea Scrolls include a song (4Q502) which sounds like a marriage ritual and which also has many similarities to the language used in other songs which are known to have been sung at the Feast, but the connection may just be one of coincidence (Falk 24). It is also interesting that traditionally a new cycle of reading the Torah was begun the last day of the Feast of Booths, and the readers were called *hattanim*, the “bridegrooms” of the Law (“Sukkot”, *EJ* 502).

The booths themselves may have been connected to ancient marriages (Ringgren 190). The command in the Torah is to live in booths for seven days (with an eighth day feast immediately following). The ancient Arabs called marriage *saba*, “seven”, because this was how long the marriage celebration lasted. For the Bedouin, eight days were allotted for the bride and groom to be “locked up” in the marriage tent, which was set up far from the other tents, before anyone was supposed to see them. Their friends would leave food outside the tent door (Morgenstern 107). The fellahin of Palestine do not allow the bride and groom to do any work for the first seven days after their marriage. The bride cannot leave the house, nor can she bathe during this week; at the end of the week, both bride and groom receive new names and a new status in the community (107). Both this group and the ancient Israelites prohibited the groom from leaving his bride for the first week after their marriage (108, 110). Members of some Semitic tribes of

northern Africa, who could have had contact with the Israelites when they lived in Egypt. place special emphasis on the first and last day of the week, making these special celebrations (as they are for the Feast of Sukkot); the Egyptian Arabs make the eighth day the most special, as the groom is supposed to refrain from consummating the marriage for a week after the wedding, and then there is a special day of rejoicing (110-111). The citizens of the town of Mehardeh have all their weddings on the same day, after the annual harvest is complete--which is exactly when the Feast of Tabernacles occurs (112).

In many Semitic groups, the killing of a sheep is necessary for the wedding ceremony to be official (112). Among the Aeneze, a tribe of bedouins, the bridegroom brings a lamb to the tent of the girl's father and cuts its throat before witnesses. The Egyptian Copts kill a sheep when the bride enters the groom's house, and the Bedouin of the Sinaitic peninsula require that the blood be sprinkled on the bride before she can enter her marriage tent (112). Another Bedouin group sprinkles both the bride and the groom with the blood while reciting "Be redeemed; God has redeemed you" Still another has the groom say the same words after smearing his bride with the blood. In some cases, the blood is also used to mark the door of the room where the marriage will be consummated (113).

The symbolism of the lamb's blood is more reminiscent of Passover than Sukkot. It is possible that the Israelites believed the marriage between Yahweh and Israel occurs at Sukkot, but is made possible because of the lamb's blood which was spilled at Passover, when God redeemed His people and brought them out of Egypt. The marriage for many Semitic groups is not complete, or even valid, without the blood of the lamb; from a Jewish viewpoint, Yahweh cannot be one with His people without sacrifice; from a

Christian viewpoint, God cannot have union with His people without the blood of *the* Lamb. In any case, the blood was seen to be “the final seal of the marriage contract, the act which, from both the legal and the religious standpoints, gives the bride over into the power of the groom” (114). The sacrifice redeems the bride and removes her from the condition of taboo, allowing her to enact her marriage responsibilities (114).

Jacob and the Feast

The Jews, of course, have different traditions about how and why the Feast of Sukkot started, which make it a festival completely unique unto themselves. One of the oldest of these traditions is that Jacob, when he set up an altar in Bethel to praise God for His blessings in Genesis 35:14, was doing so on the first of Tishri, and that he then offered sacrifices from the fifteenth through the twenty-second of the month (Ginzberg 317; Falk 197-198). In this way some Jews see Jacob as the originator of the Feast, when he gave God his thanks for the land of Canaan which God promised him. The book of Jubilees, also called the “Little Genesis”, gives further support to this claim. The book, which was found in 1844 in the Ethiopic translation, probably derived from the original Aramaic or Hebrew, covers the same period of history as Genesis 1:1 through Exodus 14:31, adding details such as the names of Jacob’s son’s wives. The book claims that the feasts of the Torah were already in place at the time of creation, and were part of a secret oral law which was entrusted to faithful patriarchs such as Abraham long before they were written by Moses in the Torah (Sandmel 90-91). Verses 31:3-32 and 32:4-29 of Jubilees support Jacob celebrating an early form of the Feast of Sukkot.

Solomon's Dedication

Solomon chose to consecrate the First Temple to Yahweh during the Feast of Sukkot. 1 Kings 8 shows Solomon gathering the elders and leaders of Israel in Jerusalem, and transferring the Ark from the tent of meeting which had contained it in the desert to his new Temple. After asking God to keep His promise that a son of David will always sit on the throne, Solomon asks, "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built!" (8:27). Perhaps, Waskow suggests, Solomon was drawing an analogy between the fragile sukkot which the people dwelt in once a year and the house he had built, which could not truly contain God and which could be destroyed (49). We know that Ecclesiastes was read during the Feast--its message of "vanity of vanities, all is vanity" could be further proof that Solomon, who wrote the book, had this kind of a message in mind when he chose the Feast of Sukkot to dedicate his Temple (Raphael 24). If the sukkot already reminded the people of the "vanity" and fragility of life, perhaps a most important lesson at the time of year when they had the most wealth, Solomon could have been reminding the people that his temple, though beautiful, was not God--the building, even though it was made of stone, was still a man-made construction and could be destroyed, while Yahweh is eternal.

The Peasants and the Prophets

At the time of Solomon, Sukkot is the festival given the most attention by the Biblical account, and it appears to have been the most popular (Schauss 171). Though it was commanded for Jewish males to make a pilgrimage on all three main festivals (Pesach,

Shavuot, and Sukkot), it was easiest, and perhaps only possible, for peasants to celebrate Sukkot. The crops would have then been gathered and stored away, and the peasant could rejoicingly attend one of the great sanctuaries to give Yahweh thanks. For, unlike during the post-exilic period,

In the days of the Jewish kingdom it was not necessary to go to Jerusalem when one wanted to make a pilgrimage to a great sanctuary. In many other cities temples were erected, perhaps not as gorgeous but much older than the Temple in Jerusalem, and the autumn festival was observed with grandeur at all of these temples. 172

The peasants had a choice of temples to visit, and were most able to do so at this time of the year, which helped to make the Feast of Sukkot the most popular of the festivals.

The prophets tell us that the celebrating could get out of hand at any one, or all, of these temples. Amos, having visited the temple of Beth-El at the Feast, condemned the sanctuary and the rituals of the festival because of the revelry he witnessed there. Hosea, shortly after Amos, protested against the heavy drinking and orgiastic element of the festival. Isaiah said that even at the Temple in Jerusalem, all the people, priests and prophets included, were drunk in the sanctuary. He also mentions a sacred procession, hymn-singing, and pipe-playing of a large and happy crowd (173). The Prophets were concerned that the people were using the festival as a time to be like the pagans around them, and as the peasants celebrated the riches of the vine and field, this may have been quite a legitimate complaint. The people seem to have been determined to make this an extra-special occasion of drinking and fun (174). “The Jews of that time were, on the whole, a joyous and festive people, and were very fond of wine and song. But at no season of the year did they drink and sing as much as they did during the autumn festival”

(171-172). The Prophets believed that the people were more festive, and less religious, than the festival called for.

The Post-Exilic Period

The Babylonian exile changed everything. The Jews who returned from Babylon were interested in what went wrong, why it seemed that Yahweh had deserted them, and how they could ensure that it never happened again. The nature-worship of the Canaanites, which had found voice in some aspects of the Jewish festivals, had already been attacked when the kingdom was divided. “[The festivals] were separated further and further from the soil, from nature and the agricultural seasons of the year, and instead of village revels they were promoted to exalted national religious observances” (174). Under Josiah, the local temples were destroyed and the Temple of Jerusalem was declared the only legitimate place to celebrate the pilgrimage festivals. After the exile, the Jews connected the festivals more with their history and national importance and tried to rid them of any connection with nature. So they focused on the dwelling in booths to reenact the time of the Exodus when Israelites lived as pilgrims in temporary tents (174-175).

Nehemiah was probably most involved in changing the nature of the Feast of Sukkot and giving it new significance. He had been the cupbearer and adviser to King Artaxerxes (ca. 450-398 BCE), but he left this position to rebuild Jerusalem (Hayford 599; Jaffee 50). According to Nehemiah’s account, the people rediscovered the command to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles, and as a result, they cut down the “olive branches, branches of oil trees, myrtle branches, palm branches, and branches of leafy trees, to make booths, as written” (Neh 9:14-15). They then made booths, either on their roofs, in their

courtyards, or in the court of the Temple, the open square of the Water Gate, or the open square of the Gate of Ephraim. Nehemiah says that the dwelling in the booths had not been done since the day of Joshua, when the Israelites first entered the Promised Land. Ezra, the chief priest of the time, then read from the Torah every day of the Feast (9:16-18). From this point on, dwelling in booths was the most important symbolic act of the Feast ("Sukkot", *EJ* 496), and the festival could only be properly kept at the Second Temple.

The return from Babylon brought about a renewal of religiosity and dedication to the Torah. At this time, Pesach (Passover) took over as the most important Jewish festival, probably because it was the one which so directly referred to the escape from Egypt and slavery, and the Jews had just endured a similar plight in Babylon (Schauss 175). Sukkot was also supposed to refer back to the time of the Exodus, when the Israelites had to live in tents, but the solemnity of the message did not last long and Sukkot, though no longer the most important feast, soon returned to its former state of being the most joyful (175).

New ways of celebrating were created. It was in the time of the Second Temple that the water libation and various torch ceremonies came to be among the central aspects of Sukkot (Waskow 51). Pouring a libation of water on the altar occurred first thing in the morning each day of the feast which was not a Sabbath, while the torch dance was the very last ceremony at night, and continued until dawn (Schauss 181). Waskow believes that the water ceremony may be one way the Jews had to prove that Baal was no longer a part of their system--they were requesting rain from Yahweh, instead of depending on Baal, the god of fertility and of weather, to provide it (53). The Baalist orgies and

worship of the sun were also replaced with “proper” singing and dancing, and ceremonies of light--only the most religious of men were allowed to participate in the torch dance. The joy was not gone—“dancing, torches, juggling, flutes, the burning of priests’ old underclothes--all contributed to the ecstasy”--but now all was done to worship Yahweh and His power (52). The gigantic candlesticks (which were lit using the “cast off breeches and girdles of the priests”) and dancers who juggled torches in the Court of Women reminded God that the people needed the sun’s warmth, and the pouring of water from the pool of Siloam reminded Him that they needed rain as well (53; Moore 46). Levites stood on the fifteen steps leading from the court of Israel to that of the women and played harps, lutes, and cymbals, filling the city with their songs (Moore 46). Thus the religious and the celebratory were joined. It is claimed in the Talmud that whoever has not seen the *Simhat Bet ha-Sho’evah* (“the rejoicing of the place of water-drawing”) has never in his life witnessed real joy (“Sukkot”, *EJ* 500).

Sadducees and Pharisees

Not everybody was satisfied with this method of celebrating the Feast of Sukkot. The Sadducees, who became prominent in the Temple bureaucracy under the Hasmoneans and Herodians, two “dynasties” ruling from 152 BCE to 6 CE (Jaffee 139), were against these practices because they were not found in the Bible. They did not find any legitimacy in the water libation, and they did not approve of the people taking the Four Species and using them in a procession instead of building the booths with them (“Sukkot”, *EJ* 499). The Pharisees, who often represented the more common people and who believed in the value of the Oral Tradition alongside the Torah, became the Sadducees’ clearest

opponents (Jaffee 79). The Pharisees saw a necessity for continually reinterpreting and adapting the Torah for the present culture, while the Sadducees only accepted that which was written in the Law (Learsi 142). Schauss writes that listening to debates between these two groups was probably one of the highlights of the Jews' pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Feast (183).

Perhaps the most memorable clash between these groups occurred at the Feast under Alexander Jannaeus' reign (103-76 BCE). In the beginning, this Maccabean ruler had attempted to pacify both factions, but later he openly sided with the Sadducees. This was after the Pharisees refused to accept his rule as legitimate, because he was not a descendant of David, and because he was a man of war, and as such, should not be high priest (Learsi 142). One year, around the year 95 BCE (Edersheim 220), after achieving military successes, Alexander decided to show publicly his disdain for the people and their traditions, and he did so during the water libation ceremony at the Feast. He poured the water on his feet instead of on the altar. Waskow explains the import of this action:

His dumping the water on his feet showed his contempt for the common people in both their daily life and their religious outlook. At one level, he scorned the offering that every Israelite, no matter how poor, could bring--the water--while treating the wine offering of the rich with respect. At another level, he scorned the orally transmitted tradition of the water pouring which the priestly caste of Sadducees did not endorse because it was not explicitly mentioned in the written Torah. The folk tradition that it should be done, passed on by word of mouth, was honored as oral Torah by the Pharisees who had wide support among the people 51

The people, in response, immediately pelted him with the objects in their hands, the etrog fruit and palm branches. Alexander then had his mercenaries kill six thousand of the people celebrating the Feast in the court of the Temple (Learsi 142-143). Since that time,

the people have demanded that the high priest raise his hand high when pouring the water on the altar so that they could be assured that the water was not hitting the ground (Schauss 182).

The Romans and Messiah

Not long after this incident, in 63 BCE, the Roman general Pompey entered Jerusalem in order to solve a dynastic struggle between two Hasmonean brothers. One of the brothers, Hyrcanus II, ended up being king, but he was very much under Roman influence. From this time, the politics of Israel--named Judaea, and then Palestine, by the Romans--were subordinate to the politics of the Empire (Jaffee 41). The Sadducees and Pharisees could still argue all they wanted, but the real power lay in the hands of Gentiles.

In this soil, messianic hopes flourished, especially at the Feast of Tabernacles. The Feast at this time was still an occasion for rejoicing, but Jews walking down the streets of Jerusalem seeing stern-faced Roman soldiers watching their every move probably could not help but to remember the words of the prophet Zechariah: “And it shall come to pass that everyone who is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Tabernacles.” Furthermore, for those nations which refuse, there will be no rain (14:16-17). This passage was read at every Feast, along with a section of Ezekiel describing the last great battle which was to come, when God will destroy Israel’s enemies and the people will be safe in a world which recognizes Yahweh as their true God (38:18-39:16). Waskow states, “The Prophetic readings for Sukkot point toward the universal messianic transformation of the world, and thus represent in words of Torah the messianic vision

that was embodied in the special Sukkot sacrifices while the Temple stood” (61-62).

These special Sukkot sacrifices were 70 bulls, probably symbolizing the 70 nations which Jews recognized in the world at this time. “Thus during Sukkot the people of Israel became priests on behalf of all the peoples, interceding for them all with the God of all . . . “ (54). The kingship of Yahweh, God of all people, was in these ways linked to the Feast (Ringgren 200), and some worshippers looked for deliverance from the Romans through a prophesied Messiah, or Savior.

The Jews had definite expectations of who this Messiah would be and what he would accomplish. Top on their priority list was the destruction of the power of Rome and the return of Israel as an independent, chosen nation. The Messiah who would do this would be a descendant of David and would assume the throne, bringing the Jews in the Diaspora back to Israel. And he would judge the world and a time of universal peace and prosperity would ensue. All of this was the ultimate reason for celebrating the annual festivals, that is, to remember the purpose for Mankind. And the Feast of Sukkot especially embodied these futuristic, messianic hopes (Sandmel 208). The people wanted a king. Zechariah 9:9-10 told them one would be coming:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Behold, your King is coming to you;
He is just and having salvation,
Lowly and riding on a donkey, .
A colt, the foal of a donkey . . .
He shall speak peace to the nations;
His dominion shall be ‘from sea to sea,
And from the River to the ends of the earth.’

Another passage in scripture, 1 Kings 1:32-40, gave an outline to the events which they probably expected would accompany their future King. Here, King David set up a

precedent when he explained how Solomon was to take over his throne: after acclamation, there is a ceremonial entry into the city by the future king who, as in Zechariah 9:9, rides in on a mule surrounded by a celebrating, rejoicing crowd (Catchpole 319).

The “Triumphal Entry” Theme

The theme of the “triumphal entry” of the king was used widely by political figures of the last three and a half centuries BCE. Catchpole lists twelve times a political leader during this time period drew upon at least some of the standard imagery in his claim to authenticity. Alexander the Great was one of these, when he was escorted into Jerusalem after a ceremony recognizing his legitimacy, and was then brought to the Temple “where he [was] involved in cultic activity” (319). Apollonius was brought into Jerusalem amidst torches and shouts, for what was reported to be a striking welcome. When Judas Maccabaeus entered Jerusalem after military triumphs, the people sang psalms and celebrated, leading him to the place where he made sacrifices. Simon Maccabaeus entered Gaza and then Jerusalem, throwing out those practicing idolatry and cleansing the places of worship from this impurity. I Maccabees 13:51, referring to the citadel of Jerusalem, says, “the Jews entered it with praise and palm branches, and with harps and cymbals and stringed instruments, and with hymns and songs . . .” Antigonus, the son of Hyrcanus, after returning to Jerusalem from a campaign, is criticized for then going to the Temple because this was “out of keeping with the behaviour of a private person . . . his actions had the indications of one who imagined himself a king” (Catchpole 320 quoting Josephus *AJ* 13:306). Herod and the people welcomed Marcus Agrippa with acclamations before

he entered Jerusalem and offered a sacrifice. As a final example, Archelaus, having been appointed a provisional king by Herod, went to the Temple in procession and offered sacrifice there (320-321).

These examples show that the Jewish people living under Roman authority were accustomed to stories, either from Scripture or recent history, of their leaders' entering their capital city as a symbolic and also political gesture. It is also evident that these people were hoping for another great leader, perhaps the greatest yet, a descendant of David, to come and rescue their city and nation from the oppression they felt. Because the specific psalms they sang talked of an enthronement (whether of God or an earthly king), because the booths they were living in perhaps reminded them of the marriage between themselves and Yahweh, because one of the two greatest kings of all their history dedicated the greatest of their buildings at this time, and because their prophets Ezekiel and Zechariah foretold a time when their enemies would be destroyed and all nations would come at the Feast of Tabernacles to Jerusalem to celebrate, this festival was connected to messianic hopes and the expectation of a future king.

Jesus and the Feast

Around 30 CE, under a no-nonsense Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate, Jesus entered Jerusalem. According to the Gospels, he did so on a donkey, in a procession, amidst cries heralding him as the son of David and future king. Robes and branches were laid down before him. Nobody who was Jewish would have mistaken the significance of this act, which was prophesied in Zechariah 9. Jesus called for a colt because he wanted to declare that he was to be King. Carrington, attempting to explain why Jesus' actions

appear so ritualized and why the crowd seems to know just how to respond, suggests that this act might have been part of a folk-custom or ritual:

Perhaps someone always rode into Jerusalem at the festival on an unbroken colt, and so became the king of the festival? . . . It would explain everything: the bystanders, the acclamations, the festive chants of the crowd, the ride through Jerusalem, and the toleration of the whole thing by the authorities; it would be a time-honoured popular custom. 231

The acclamation of the crowd which is given in the synoptic Gospels is directly out of Psalms (118:26): “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord”. This Psalm was sung at every Feast; it was a processional psalm which the people sang until they reached the temple courts (231). Jesus begins the “enthronement process” when he enters into Jerusalem on the prophesied colt; he then allows the crowd to hail him as king. “The actions of others are here silently endorsed by Jesus and seen as the correct inference from his own actions. The claims of others that he is a messianic figure are nothing less than his own claim to such a status” (Catchpole 323). If it is true that the crowd annually brought a “king” into Jerusalem, Jesus was apparently chosen by the people to be king this year. Many must have been hoping he was the promised Messiah.

Jesus’ first action in Jerusalem was to cleanse the Temple, similar to the action of Simon Maccabaeus before him. This is the act of a would-be king who is preparing his throne (Sanders 31). In David’s time, the care and maintenance of the sanctuary (whether a tent or the Temple) was the job of the king (Winter 201). In Matthew and Mark, he then cursed a fig tree (Matt 21:1-22; Mark 11:1-25; Luke 19:28-48). In all three of the synoptic gospels, Jesus next attacked the Jewish leaders. When they questioned his authority, he said he would only tell them from where his authority came if they either would denounce or uphold John the Baptist. The account says that they were too afraid

of the crowd, which would have contained many supporters of John, to assert that John the Baptist was false. He then told them that, because they did not believe John, tax collectors and prostitutes would enter the kingdom of God ahead of them. He next gave the Parable of the Wicked Tenants, where the tenants kill the servants of the landowner and finally his son, in order to get the inheritance for themselves. As the landowner in the parable would naturally kill the tenants and replace them, he tells them the kingdom will be taken away from them because they have rejected God's son, the cornerstone. Jesus asked, "Have you never read in the scriptures: 'the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone . . . ?'" (Matt 21:23-46; Mark 11:27-12:12; Luke 20:1-19). This had to be an ironic question, because this sentence comes from Psalms 118, and it was read and sung repeatedly at every festival during the year (Carrington 257). Since *ben* means "son" and *eben* means "stone", and since it could sound like either when being sung, it is also possible that Jesus intended them to understand both meanings (256). In all of these parables, Jesus set himself up as the rightful heir to the throne, and warned the leaders of Jerusalem that they were not going to be a part of the coming kingdom.

Jesus then likened the coming kingdom to a wedding banquet which a king has prepared for his son. The initial guests refused to come into the banquet when summoned, so the king invited the people on the street, both the good and the bad. "The beloved son, the Davidic king, the bridegroom of Israel, comes to his inheritance, where he ought to be received with songs and dances; he is rejected and slain, and his corpse is thrown over the wall" (Carrington 255). Jesus was in the Temple courts, confronting Israel's religious leaders, and was telling them that they were rejecting the Messiah. With all the evidence that the Feast of Tabernacles integrated symbols from local enthronement festivals and

marriage ceremonies, this parable must have been loaded with meaning. Jesus was probably saying that the leaders of Jerusalem were not accepting their rightful king, though they had enacted the enthronement ceremony every year of their lives, and that they were going to miss the wedding because they refused to acknowledge the groom (Matt 22:1-14; Luke 14:16-24).

The leaders are now furious, according to the Gospels, and are determined to find a way to kill Jesus. The Pharisees attempt to trap him into speaking against the Roman government by asking whether or not taxes should be paid. Jesus then says the famous line, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matt 22:15-22; Mark 12:13-17; Luke 20:20-26). Jesus here said nothing for which the Romans could fault him, but according to most scholars, if the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem truly occurred as recorded, the damage had already been done. "As recounted in the Gospels, the event has the appearance of an unmistakable messianic demonstration. As such it would have been open defiance of imperial authority--a proclamation of the will to national liberation from Roman rule" (Winter 197). And the Romans would have responded.

This is where dating Jesus' entry becomes complicated. Based on his past record, Pilate would not have put up with such a demonstration (196). He was known to destroy political movements as quickly as possible. If Jesus entered Jerusalem at the Feast of Tabernacles, why was he not killed until Passover (six months later)? If Carrington is correct and the entry was part of a folk-custom, then the authorities would have had no excuse to react so strongly. Maybe the religious leaders chose to wait six months so that the crowd's enthusiasm would wear off. Or perhaps the entry was actually right before

Passover, as the synoptic Gospels suggest, but Jesus chose to use Tabernacles imagery. Winter suggests that the reason Jewish authorities were the ones who brought Jesus to Pilate could have been that they understood the message Jesus was giving better, as they knew the religious background of the symbols he used. Perhaps, the fact that they had celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles all their lives allowed them to comprehend that Jesus, even though he was entering at a different time of the year, was still claiming kingship and messiahship (196). Jesus would be crucified as “king of the Jews”, and that title fit both the claim Jesus made, implicit and explicit, in his entry into Jerusalem, and the political charge of sedition made against him by the Roman procurator (Sanders 306). However, it does not clear up the question of when exactly Jesus made his powerful statement.

There is some evidence demonstrating that the authors of the synoptic gospels might have altered the timing of his entry to make it accord better with the message they were giving. The most obvious argument for Jesus’ entry occurring at the Feast of Sukkot is that this is when it happens in the gospel of John (12:12). In John 7:37, on the last day of the Feast, Jesus tells those who thirst to come to him, which was connected to the water libation which occurred on the seventh day of Tabernacles (“Sukkot”, *EJ* 498). Jesus was probably drawing from the prophecy of Isaiah 12:3: “Therefore with joy you will draw water / From the wells of salvation” (Moore 45). Furthermore, all the Gospels except Luke have branches being placed before Jesus; in Mark, they have already been cut, and in John, they are palm branches. Palm branches do not grow at Jerusalem’s altitude, so if they were the species really used, they would have been brought in already, perhaps for the Feast (Winter 199). All three of the synoptic Gospels have Jesus and his disciples staying at the Mount of Olives, where they would have been staying if it had been

the Feast of Sukkot, as most of the booths were set up there during that time in history (Carrington 272). There is also Jesus' cursing of the fig tree because it is not bearing fruit. The tree would not be expected to produce fruit if it were the spring, so perhaps it is easier to believe that Mark added "for it was not the season for figs" (11:13) to explain why the tree would be unfruitful at this time than it is to believe that Jesus cursed a tree for failing to do something which would be impossible. Obviously, the timing of Jesus' entry is unclear; what is clear is that he used Tabernacles symbolism and ritual to declare to the people that he was to be King.

After the Second Temple—the Talmud

Forty years after Jesus was crucified as "king of the Jews", the Second Temple was destroyed by the Romans, and the Feast of Sukkot once again saw change. "Sukkos lost much of its brilliance after the destruction of the second Temple, but it remained the most joyous of Jewish festivals" (Schauss 186). People now celebrated in their homes or in their synagogues. The sacrifices and water libation were gone, but the booths and the Four Species remained as important symbols of this Feast (Waskow 54). Torah replaced Temple as the focal point of the people, especially since the Torah had proven more lasting than the building. For example, instead of marching around the altar, the people now circled around a Torah-scroll in a procession (Schauss 186). The connection to nature, which was already tenuous, was now broken. "Jews celebrated not because of the grapes and other crops, but because of the Torah. The booth and the *lulov* were given new interpretations and became no more than religious symbols" (187).

There was also a major change in the religious leadership of the people when the Temple was destroyed. The Sadducees, whose power lay in their access to the Temple, no longer had a significant role, while the Pharisees became prominent. The Pharisees relied heavily on the Oral Tradition for their ideas on how the Feast should be observed, and in fact, believed observance was impossible without adding definitions and ordinances (Steinsaltz 121). The Rabbis, the spiritual and philosophical descendants of the Pharisees, continued in that belief:

The content of much of the Rabbinic literature is devoted to the elimination of uncertainties and vaguenesses; the end result was the fullest specification by the Rabbis of *what* should be done, and *how*, in fullest obedience to the divine requirement to observe the sacred occasions exactly when they were supposed to occur. Sandmel 212

These oral laws, which aided people in how to apply the Torah to daily life, were written down by the Pharisees/Rabbis soon after the Temple was destroyed. This task was completed at the end of the 200s CE, and the work was called the *Mishnah*, or “instruction” (Mishkin 19).

As far as the Feast of Sukkot is concerned, the Mishnah gave regulations for the booths, the Four Species, and what was to be recited, when, and how. The Torah gave no dimensions for the booths, but the Mishnah said it must be between ten handbreadths and twenty cubits (ten yards) high, must have at least three walls, and must not permit more light than there is shade (Sukkah 1:1). Where it is made, the materials used, its shape, and how it is constructed are also regulated (1:2-11). Most important, the roof covering must be natural material which was detached from the soil, clean and long-lasting. Finally, who must participate in dwelling in the sukkot and how this participation is measured are discussed (2:1, 5-9). The Mishnah then moves on to the Four Species requirement.

The Torah was not specific on two of the four species of plant which were required, so the Mishnah informs the Jew that tradition has made the first fruit mentioned in scripture into the etrog, a citrus tree which grows in the area of Israel, and has decided that leafy trees refer to the myrtle. The Mishnah further states that only certain varieties are acceptable, and that they must be in near perfect condition. They can not be dried up, stolen, from an apostate town, or, in the case of the branches, have broken-off tips or split leaves (Sukkah 3:1-7). The size, shape, color, location, and general appearance of the plant are also important.

This tradition has not only determined what species should be used and how these plants should look, but also what to do with them. Two thousand years ago, the Sadducees and Pharisees were debating this point. The Sadducees believed that the fruit and branches should be used to construct the booths (as in Neh 8:15), while the Pharisees believed that the species should be bound together and used in a procession (Sandmel 215). It seems that both employments were used in the time of the Herods, but after the Temple was destroyed, only the latter was considered important. The Mishnah, predictably, only speaks of the use the Pharisees preferred, saying that the lulav (the species bound together) ought to be shaken at specific points in the singing of Psalms 118 (3:9). Before its destruction, this was done in the Temple all seven days of the festival, while those in the provinces only did it the first day; however, after 70 CE, the lulav was shaken everywhere for all seven days, in remembrance (3:12). Today, it is customary to face east while shaking the lulav in the six directions, three times each (Ahavat Israel 4).

After the Talmud—the Kabbalists

The writing of the Mishnah helped to make some ordinances concrete, but as comprehensive as it was, it did not answer every question which would be asked in the ensuing years. Rabbis still made their own interpretations, and do so today. Referring to how the Four Species have been determined, Adin Steinsaltz explains the process by which these types of decisions have generally been made in post-Talmudic times:

The sages have several ways of solving these and other problems. They rely first and foremost on ancient tradition and on those sections of the Torah that deal directly or indirectly with this question. They then analyze the issue in accordance with the fixed talmudic forms of debate and try to adapt the general definitions in this sphere to those employed in religious and civil law. They thus arrive at a general consensus as to the main points of the law, although there is always room for differences of opinions on details. 121-122

Rabbis of post-Talmudic times have still had their foundation in the Torah, but they also have had the Talmud and their own consensus to help guide them on details which are not clear.

The Kabbalists, Rabbis in the Middle Ages who focused on mystical aspects of Judaism, theoretically used this process when they asked what the Four Species might symbolize and why the lulav was taken at all. One of these, Hinnukh, believed that holding the species was necessary to keep the people's minds on the purpose of the Feast; if their hands were occupied with symbolic vegetation, they would be less likely to turn it into an orgiastic event like the local pagan harvest celebrations. The Torah instructs rejoicing, but not breaking God's laws (Chill 293). Hizzekuni believes that the species were chosen because they represent both the believers and the unbelievers who unite together to carry out God's will. The etrog and palm bear fruit, symbolizing the believers, while the myrtle and willow do not (293).

Bahya ben Asher discusses seven of the traditional interpretations given by Rabbis for the symbolism: 1) The etrog symbolizes Abraham because he is a beautiful and fruitful tree; the palm is Isaac because the Hebrew word for this plant comes from the root “to bind”, and Isaac was bound as a sacrifice; the myrtle is Jacob because it has many leaves as he had many offspring; and the willow is Joseph because it dries up quickly, and he died before his brothers. 2) The etrog is the heart, the palm the spine, the myrtle the eyes, and the willow is the lips; these four organs are the major causes of man’s sins, and atonement for these sins is sought at the Feast. 3) The etrog, which tastes and smells good, represents the righteous who have both scholarship and also perform good deeds; the lulav has good fruit but no smell (scholarship but no good deeds); the myrtle smells good but does not produce fruit (good deeds, no scholarship); and the willow has neither. But God wants all people to work together for His sake. 4) The Four Species are the four kingdoms which this interpreter believed had fought and suppressed Israel: Babylonia, Persia, Greece, and Rome. If these can be survived, anything can. 5) The Four Species are moist and fresh all year, as the Torah should be vibrant and alive for each person. 6) The etrog and lulav produce fruit, while the myrtle is bitter and the willow droops. God gives His people blessings, but they should also expect bitterness and to be humble before Him. 7) All Four Species require a lot of water, and the Feast of Sukkot is a celebration where people pray for rain which is necessary for life (293-294).

There appears to be little consensus among the Rabbis concerning why these four plant species were originally chosen. A more contemporary idea about the symbolism says that the myrtle and etrog, having pleasant smells, represent the things in nature which do not need “finishing touches by man”, such as air, light, and beauty. The palm is especially

beneficial to people, giving them fruit, but people have to work for the profit. The willow must be fully converted by people to prove useful, and only then can provide clothing, home, and furnishings. This viewpoint stresses that God has created nature with gifts, but only some are “free”, while others take work before they are useful (Segal-webpage #11).

The Kabbalists of the Middle Ages also considered the sukkot and their symbolism. Ibn Ezra said that the word itself could mean either “booths” or “Clouds of Glory”; he believed the former was meant, and that Jews are supposed to dwell in them in the autumn because that is when the Israelites lived in booths during the Exodus because of the cold weather (Chill 295-296). Rashbam believed the people were supposed to live in booths to experience an extreme in standards of living, purposely becoming “poor” after the harvest season of plenty. This shows God that one acknowledges life as precarious and Him as the One who brings all the goodness of life. Ba'al ha-Turim thought that people were to live in booths because it was unusual to live in a booth near the beginning of winter; as an act out of the ordinary, it would therefore demand special attention (296). Recanati believes that the sukkot refer more to “Clouds of Glory”. Tradition states that the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night first appeared to Israel on the 15th of Tishri (Edersheim 227). The festival is soon after the Day of Atonement because God placed His protection on the Israelites once they had purified themselves from Egypt. Jews, too, must purify themselves and then place themselves in tabernacles under God’s protective clouds (296).

Modern Interpretations

Rabbis continue to puzzle over the Feast of Sukkot today. Rabbi Irving Greenberg says that the Exodus is celebrated twice a year by Jews, at Passover and at Tabernacles, but for different reasons each time. “On Passover, Jews restage the great *event* of liberation. Sukkot celebrates the *way* of liberation--the march across a barren desert to freedom and the Promised Land” (96). He says that Passover is like a courtship, while Sukkot symbolizes the time after the wedding, when the couple faces the hardships of the daily struggle of life. “It is more taxing and more heroic to wrestle with everyday obstacles without highs or diversions. True maturity means learning to appreciate the finite rewards of every day along the way” (97). Greenberg believes that Sukkot is about a deeper, harder Exodus, within which the Israelites matured and were prepared for the Promised Land.

Greenberg also states that Sukkot is very rich in symbolic language, and that this may be the reason it is one of the most neglected of the Jewish festivals today--perhaps, he says, “contemporary society has robbed us of the capacity to hear symbolic language” (97). The booth, for instance, reenacts the faith of the Israelites when they left the safety of man-made walls in Egypt to trust in God’s protection. Jews who live in the booths for a week are admitting their vulnerability and stating symbolically that their trust is in God’s divine shelter (99).

Human beings instinctively strive to build solid walls of security. People shut out life; they heap up treasures and power and status symbols in the hope of excluding death and disaster and even the unexpected. This search for ‘solid’ security all too often leads to idolatry . . . The sukkah urges people to give up this pseudo-safety. 100

People should admit to their vulnerability in life, accept that their houses are temporary and be willing to abandon them at any moment. This allows for a deeper life, Greenberg believes, because “Renunciation is the secret of mastery” (100). If you can give something up, it has no power over you.

The mobility represented by the temporary booths is in itself symbolic. “Mobility undercuts idolatry. Wandering weakens fixed categories . . . The variety of experiences and settings makes the local gods relative” (102). As the Israelites moved through the wilderness and were confronted by local deities, they affirmed that their God was everywhere; He may be working with them especially, but He “loves all of humanity at the same time” (102). God is above the world, and His protective shield, which can travel with the faithful, is more important than fixed houses. Dwelling in the booths once a year reminds Jews that “they are in, yet not totally of, the society and culture they inhabit” (103). They are, to use a well-known expression, “pilgrims in a strange land”. When the people stop wandering, whether literally or symbolically, they fix themselves too much to one place, get comfortable, adopt the local customs, and perhaps forget their God.

Jews should be willing to renounce worldly goods and to reject permanence, if necessary, but the Feast also commands that its adherents be joyful. Greenberg believes that Jews today have lost at least some of their ability to be joyful, and that this is not only sad, but simply wrong. “Most Jews still think that fasting is more righteous than feasting. Yet the Talmud suggests that in the world to come a person will have to stand judgment for every legitimate pleasure in this life that was renounced” (111). Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement, is the most celebrated of the Jewish holy days today, and this festival focuses on asceticism and self-criticism. Commemorating this day and not the Feast of

Sukkot leaves the worshipper out of balance. Greenberg quotes Ecclesiastes 3:4--there is "a time to cry and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance" (111). The Feast came after the harvest was gathered, and the bounty of the earth was to be enjoyed. The point was that these gifts were good, but it was necessary to remember that they were from God, and were not to be worshipped (112). The material goods, while wonderful, are temporary; God is forever.

The booths and the command to be joyful, especially, have lost much of their meaning for today's Jew because the symbolism of these aspects of the Feast has been clouded by time, or perhaps is thought to be no longer relevant. But if these are brought back to life and more fully understood, Greenberg says that not only will the Exodus be more thoroughly celebrated, but the Feast will help the Jew understand God's plan of redemption for all of humanity, the "Exodus way through human history to a universal Promised Land" (98-99). For God is the God of all people, and His "Clouds of Glory" encompass the entire earth. Living in booths reminds Jews that all of humanity is on a spiritual Exodus, that this world, like the booth, is temporary, and that the goal is liberation. If He is trusted and worshipped, God will bring humans to their Promised Land.

Rabbi Yehuda Shaviv expands on this idea that the Feast is to be celebrated now by Jews but has significance for all people. He says it is part of two cycles: the pilgrimage festivals, which include also Passover and Weeks, and the Tishri festivals, which include also Trumpets and Atonement (1-2). As a member of the former group, Sukkot is a Jewish festival, reflecting back on a Jewish past, using Jewish symbolism. In this scheme, Passover is Israel's festival of freedom, Weeks is when the Torah was given to the

Israelite people, and Tabernacles is a reminder that God protected His people in the wilderness for forty years (2). But as a member of the Tishri cycle, it is a universal holiday--the 70 bulls sacrificed represent the 70 nations of the world, Zechariah says that it will one day be celebrated by all people, and all the Tishri festivals look to a future time when the whole world will be judged. Rosh Hashana, or Trumpets, is the time when the people of the world will pass before God as sheep, Yom Kippur is the day when atonement must be made, and, according to tradition, the seventh day of Sukkot “represents the final sealing of judgment which was passed on Rosh Hashana” (2).

Shaviv believes the two main commands of the Feast, living in booths and taking up the Four Species, also demonstrate the separate Jewish and universal aspects of the Feast. The sukkot represent the “Clouds of Glory” which God gave to Israel to protect them from the other nations of the world. This emphasizes their uniqueness and separateness. But the Four Species “which are waved in all directions, represent the move outwards, in the direction of the nations of the world” (3). The Temple, in which the 70 sacrifices were made, was meant to be a place of worship for all people. Shaviv argues that the Temple itself was a type of sukka, and that those in the Temple courts during the Feast did not have to set up separate booths, but could eat and sleep there and still be observing the booth requirement (4). In summary, Shaviv maintains that the booths, which the Israelites lived in during the Exodus, symbolize the separateness of Israel and God’s special protection for His people, while the Four Species, which were required only after Israel entered the Promised Land, symbolize the fact that Israel was meant to be a nation which shone as a light unto the world, and was to set the example which some day all people of the earth would follow (5).

An article produced by the Tanach Study Center argues that the purpose for celebrating the Feast of Sukkot is “NOT to remember the Exodus itself, RATHER to remember our existence in the desert” (2). The Feast is a time to recall why it was necessary for the Israelites to wander for forty years--the “entire desert experience served as a ‘training’ period . . . in order to transform Bnei Yisrael from a nation of slaves into a nation capable of establishing God’s model nation in the Promised Land” (2). Dwelling in booths reminded the people of their dependence on God, and taught them to trust Him instead of themselves--an important lesson to learn before they entered Canaan and faced that land’s deities and the different challenges of the agrarian lifestyle (3). When following an agrarian calendar and focusing on the weather patterns, it would be all too easy to begin to worship the natural forces, as the Canaanites did, instead of Yahweh. To help protect against this possible idolatrous behavior, the Feast of Sukkot was observed. At the time of the year when they were most wealthy, the people were to leave their comfortable homes and dwell in temporary shelters, and in this way they would remember that God is the one who provides. God is above nature, not a force within it; perhaps the Feast lasts for seven days to remind the people of the Creation, to remind them therefore that God is ultimately in charge (3-4).

In our present world, where so many are disconnected from nature, some Jews, instead of seeing Sukkot as a time to separate themselves from the forces of nature, find significance in the festival by attempting to reconnect with God’s natural world. Nancy Reuben Greenfield writes that it is difficult to appreciate the joy of nature in this world, when people do all they can to avoid or control it. People are upset when they have to use

an umbrella when they get out of their cars at the grocery store, where they “reap their crop”.

That’s the beauty of the Jewish holiday Sukkot. It reminds us of our dependence on God’s gift of Creation. Of the earth. The land and the seas. The light bearers of the sky we know as the sun and moon. The birds and animals and insects. And us: the humans God invited to share this planet and God’s universe. 1

Living in booths puts people outside, at the mercy of the elements, in a structure made completely from the materials of nature. Despite the technology of our time and the progress which has been made, Jews are annually reminded of the fragility of life and their own vulnerability. “In a world that is increasingly removed from nature, celebrating festivals like Sukkot gives us a grounding in the natural world, in God’s world”

(Abramowitz 1-2).

Ellen Bernstein, in a very contemporary interpretation, focuses on the “natural” aspect of Sukkot more than on any other of its characteristics.

Sukkot is undeniably the earth’s holiday and the time to remember that the true meaning of home is ‘earth.’ Sukkot--as harvest holiday--first teaches that life is intimately tied to the cycle of nature. The holiday assumes that we are ecologists, that we know the species and habitat of our home, and that we participate in the life of our ecosystem. 133

She adds that the sukka could even be used as a symbol for an environmental organization, as the booth teaches those who live in it that earth is their true home, and that only God above can give them true protection. The sukka teaches also that the simple pleasures in life are those which bring the most joy (134). And joy, Bernstein says, is sadly lacking in most of our lives--why not celebrate Sukkot with the same commitment that is given to Yom Kippur, a day of examining failings? (136).

Conclusion

Though Bernstein did not mention it, I wonder to what extent Hanukkah (“Rededication”) has replaced the Feast of Tabernacles as the annual festival of joy. It, too, is an eight-day celebration and a time of feasting. It was set up by Judas Maccabaeus in 165 BCE after worship was allowed in the Temple again. 2 Maccabees 10:6-8 says that the festival is patterned after the Feast of Tabernacles, and the people were to carry branches at this time as well (Moore 49). Josephus said that it was also called “Lights”—some of the light ceremonies of the Feast may have been performed at Hanukkah as well. Psalms 113-118 (the Hallel) were recited at Hanukkah just as they were at the Feast (Moore 50). Despite these similarities, I do not believe Hanukkah could possibly truly replace the Feast because of the rich symbolism in the latter and the fact that the Feast of Tabernacles is a commanded holy festival with connections to Israel’s distant past, a purpose for adherents today, and a hope for deliverance in the future. Hanukkah may contain the joy, but it does not contain the depth and rich history of the Feast of Sukkot.

The Feast of Tabernacles looks forward to a final harvest, when all people will have been judged (on the Day of Atonement) and all nations will be under God; in this sense, it could still be considered a “festival of ingathering”. The Prophets promise that when all people are one day “gathered in”, pain and suffering will cease. Part of the service used for the Feast today in many synagogues calls on God to remember His promise to send the Messiah, the child of David, “for deliverance and good, for grace and loving-kindness and compassion, for life and for peace, this day of the Festival of Huts, the season of our joy” (Waskow 56). If this is the purpose of the Feast of Sukkot, then for those who believe in it and in its message, it is essential that it never be forgotten.

The Feast should be celebrated. It can remind worshippers of their marriage covenant with God, and it brings a hope of future salvation. Perhaps celebration of the Feast will become more important as Jews settle more completely in Israel and set their minds to building a third Temple. Some Zionists claim that the Messiah they have been awaiting can only appear after this occurs. The message of the Feast can remind Jews that God has not abandoned them and that He will send a Messiah. Christians, in the meantime, can remember Christ's promise that he would return and rule all peoples. From a Christian perspective, looking at the Biblical festival seasons as a whole, this is the only one which has not yet been fulfilled (Passover being Christ's sacrifice, Pentecost bringing the gift of the Holy Spirit, and Tabernacles looking forward to Christ's return). Both Jews and Christians can turn to the Feast as an annual reminder that the Messiah will come and will bring about a great, and final, harvest.

It is this part of the harvest imagery, pointing to the global harvest ahead, that I believe is supposed to be emphasized when celebrating the Feast, not, as some modern interpreters believe, a communion with Mother Earth. If people start to agree with Bernstein that the Feast "first teaches that life is intimately tied to the cycle of nature" (133), there is the danger that these people will unknowingly celebrate it as a revival of pagan practices. A line should be drawn between worshipping the God who is above His creation, and worshipping the creation itself. With the resurgence of paganism and (legitimate) environmental concerns, it would be perhaps easy to focus more on nature than on God. Historically, this has been a danger of celebrating the Feast in the past, and it could be a concern in the present and future as well.

In summary, since its inception, the Feast of Tabernacles has given extra meaning to the lives of those who have celebrated it. It was probably originally the time of harvest ingathering, when the Israelites celebrated the produce of the land. In the time before the Babylonian exile, it may also have been an enthronement festival or it may have represented the marriage ceremony between Yahweh and His people. After the Exile, the religious leaders of Israel focused on its historical aspect, bolstering the idea of the nation of Israel and attempting to rid the land and the festival of their pagan associations. At the time of the second Temple, when political forces often clashed, the Feast was not left unscathed by the various groups: the Sadducees and Pharisees used the Feast as a weapon against each other, while the Romans kept a wary eye on those attending this pilgrimage festival. Jesus undoubtedly used the symbolism of the Feast in his entry into Jerusalem, and for that, he was executed as “the king of the Jews”. When the second Temple was destroyed, the Rabbis attempted to explain the Feast in philosophical and often abstract terms, giving reasons for why the Feast was significant enough to be celebrated still. Today, the symbolism of the Feast of Sukkot is all but forgotten, but some see in it an important purpose--it can help its observers to worship God more fully, to remember His promise of deliverance, and maybe even to appreciate (but not worship) nature enough to save it.

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