

The Festival of Tabernacles

The Birth of Christ

This is the seventh feast on the seventh month and it was to last for seven days. The number *seven* is the biblical number for completion. This is the grand finale of the Lord's feasts. It was considered the most joyous feast and is mentioned more in Scripture than any other feast (see John 7:2). This feast is known by at least two names in Scripture: *Sukkot* (Tabernacles or Booths) and *The Feast of Ingathering* (Exodus 23:16).

This feast was celebrated with great joy for God's past goodness (in the wilderness sojourn) and to commemorate God's present goodness (with harvest completed). This feast fell in the autumn of the year (the 15th day of Tishri), which corresponds to our late September to mid-October. It occurred only five days after the Day of Atonement and the first day of Tabernacles and the eighth day (the day after Tabernacles ended) were considered "high holy days" or Sabbaths (in addition to the regular weekly Sabbath).

THREE THINGS HAPPENED DURING THIS FEAST

1. The people were to live in booths and rejoice with branches (Leviticus 23:33-44)
2. There were to be many daily sacrificial offerings (Numbers 29:12-39)
3. In a sabbatical year, the Law was to be publicly read during Tabernacles

This Festival was viewed with great awe by the people of Israel because it was during this time that Solomon dedicated the new Temple and God's glory fell. It occurred at the changing of seasons and marked the beginning of the rainy season (thus water became a very important part of the celebration of Tabernacles, as we will see in our study).

I. THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES IN THE DAYS OF THE TEMPLE

Jewish pilgrims flocked to Jerusalem. Upon arrival they built booths of leafy palms and sticks (branches). All were built within a Sabbath day's journey from the Temple (half a mile). At night twinkling campfires could be seen all around Jerusalem.

Each morning of Tabernacles (15th Tishri – 21st Tishri) a water offering was offered as a visual prayer for rain. Shortly after dawn, the high priest was accompanied by a procession of worshippers to the Pool of Siloam. He carried a golden pitcher which he filled with water and brought back to the Temple Mount. At the same time people gathered willows and brought them through the South Gate of the city and laid them as a canopy of drooping branches over the altar in the Temple courtyard. When the High Priest reached the Southern Gate (known as the Water Gate because of this ceremony), three silver trumpets sounded outside the temple and the priests shouted: "**Therefore with joy will you draw water from the wells of salvation**" (Isaiah 12:3).

When the High Priest reached the altar, he ascended the ramp and raised the golden pitcher. He poured out the water and simultaneously a drink offering of wine was poured out. The silver trumpets blasted again three times as the Levitical choir sang the Hallel (Psalm 113-118) as the congregation joined in waving palm branches, singing, "**Save now, I pray, Oh Lord, send now thy prosperity**" (118:25).

II. THE FULFILLMENT OF THE FEAST IN THE PERSON OF THE MESSIAH

Psalm 118 was viewed by the Jews as a Messianic Psalm and thus this feast had a Messianic emphasis. When Jesus entered Jerusalem on “Palm Sunday,” the people shouted “Hosanna” (Hebrew for “save now,” Psalm 118:25) and laid their branches before Him, viewing Him as the Messianic King come to deliver (“save”) the Jews (Read Matthew 21:8-9).

The water ceremony in the days of Christ predated Jesus by at least 100 years. Many believe it has its roots in Isaiah 12:3. Regardless, water played a key role in the Feast of Tabernacles by the time of Jesus. There was the ceremony of water pouring and there was the celebration of water by the Jews! The first occurred in the morning and the latter in the evening. The celebration occurred in the evening under a blaze of light in anticipation of the ceremony of water the next morning.

Nothing in Israel compared to the light celebration of water. “He that hath not seen the celebration hath never seen joy in his life” (Sukkah 5:1). On this occasion, right after sunset, four towering menorahs (lamp stands), each with four branches of oil lamps were lit in the courtyard. Their wicks were made from worn out linen garments of the priests. Large pitchers of olive oil were poured into the menorah to keep the light burning. The moon was full (the middle of the month), the campfires were lit, and the Sanhedrin performed torch dances throughout the night. All the city was ablaze with brilliant light. Soon after the celebration began, a group of Levites stood at the top of the 15 steps of the Court of Women and, accompanied by flutes, harps and stringed instruments, sang the Psalms of Degrees (Psalms 120-134) and with each new Psalm descended one step. It was a brilliant display of joy and light.

This celebration took place beginning the second night of Tabernacles and occurred each night until the end of Tabernacles. The Apostle John says that it was the day after the Festival (the eighth day) when Jesus came to the Temple and taught saying: “I am the light of the world. He who follows me shall not walk in darkness” (8:12).

On the seventh day of the Festival of Tabernacles (the day before John 8:12), the Ceremony of Water took on great importance. On the other six days the priest made one circuit around the altar and the trumpets blasted three times. On this final day the priest made seven circuits around the altar and the trumpets gave 3 sets of 7 blasts as the people waved palm branches and sang the Hosanna. It was on this day that Jesus declared in a loud voice an incredible truth (John 7:37-44).

III. THE FULFILLMENT OF THE FEAST IN THE PEOPLE OF THE MESSIAH

The Sukkot was a temporary dwelling place. It was a commemoration of God’s faithfulness to care for His people when He brought them out of Egypt. So too, when God saves His children, He brings us out of the bondage of sin, but He does not immediately take us home. We live in “tabernacles” (II Peter 1:13-14). When God saves, He has His children live in “booths” to learn of His faithfulness. “Did you ever regret the burnt-offering, the sacrifices or the rites of the Jews? Did you ever pine for the feasts? No, the substance is come, the shadow is gone,” Charles Spurgeon.

Jesus Christ, the Living Water, was born into this world during the Feast of Tabernacles. There are some facts that prove that Jesus was born on the first day of Sukkot. First, December 25th is not the actual date of Jesus’ birth; that date is simply tradition. December 25th was not

recognized as the date of Messiah's birth until the fourth century when Constantine Christianized all of the pagan holidays.

To understand the date of Jesus' birth, we must correctly establish the date of John the Baptist's birth. Luke 1:26 indicates that there were exactly **six months** difference between the conception of John and the conception of Jesus. If their conceptions were six months apart, then their births would also be six months apart. So let's see if we can figure out when John was born. Luke 1:5,8 state that John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, belonged to the priestly division of Abijah and was serving in the Temple when he received the news that Elisabeth would be with child.

I Chronicles 24:10 says that Zechariah's priestly division, Abijah, was the eighth division to serve at the Temple. The Mishnah (Oral Torah) states that each division had to serve twice in one year (but not consecutively), with the first division starting on the first week of Nisan. Each division served a one-week period and all priestly divisions had to serve during the three pilgrim Festivals.

The following is the order of the priestly divisions in relation to the Feasts:

- 1st week of Nisan, 1st priestly division of Jehoiarib serves
- 2nd week of Nisan, 2nd priestly division of Jedaiah serves
- 3rd week of Nisan, Passover/Feast of Unleavened Bread, all priests serve
- 4th week of Nisan, 3rd priestly division of Harim serves
- 1st week of Iyar, 4th priestly division of Seorin serves
- 2nd week of Iyar, 5th priestly division of Malkijah serves
- 3rd week of Iyar, 6th priestly division of Mijamin serves
- 4th week of Iyar, 7th priestly division of Jakkoz serves
- 1st week of Sivan, 8th priestly division of Abijah serves
- 2nd week of Sivan, Shavuot, all priests serve (including the division of Abijah)

Zechariah serves during the first week of Sivan and then is required to serve the following week for Shavuot. During Shavuot, the priests would draw lots to see who would get the honor of going into the Holy Place to burn incense on the altar. Only once during a priest's lifetime could his lot be drawn for this service. Zechariah's lot was drawn (Luke 1:9), and it was his time to offer the incense. Zechariah would enter the Holy Place, offer incense, and then would return back outside to give the blessing over the worshippers. As Zechariah is offering incense, to his surprise, an angel of the Lord appears to him and informs him that his prayers have been answered, and that his wife will be with child. Zechariah doubted the angel's announcement, and so lost his ability to speak (Luke 1:21-22).

After Zechariah's service was completed, he returned home; and Elisabeth, his wife, conceived. John the Baptist was conceived some time after Shavuot. If John the Baptist was conceived sometime after Shavuot, then he would have been born in the month of Nisan. I would like to propose that John was born on Nisan 15, the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread and Passover, based on these facts. First, Malachi 4:5-6 indicates that Elijah must come prior to the arrival of the Day of the Lord. In Matthew 11:11-14, Messiah says that John the Baptist is the Elijah who was to come. John came as the forerunner to Christ's ministry; John prepared the hearts and minds of people for Christ. John was the Elijah to come as prophesied by Malachi. When were the Jewish people expecting Elijah? At every Passover Seder a place is set for Elijah,

and a child will open the door to see if Elijah has come. If John the Baptist is the Elijah to come, and he was conceived sometime after Shavuot, then I believe that John was born on Passover (Nisan 15).

Remember that Messiah was born six months after John the Baptist. If John was born on Nisan 15, then Messiah would have to be born on Tishri 15. I believe Messiah was born on the first day of the Feast of Tabernacles. John says, "*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.*" The Greek word for "dwelt" or "dwelling" is *skenoo* and means "to occupy" (as a mansion) or (spec.) "to reside" (as God did in the Tabernacle of old, giving protection and communion).

The sukkah is a perfect picture of Christ. The sukkah is not an attractive structure, just as there wasn't anything of Christ that would attract us to Him (Isaiah 53:2). If Christ's life and ministry revolved around the Feasts of the Lord, then even His birth had to be in conjunction with a feast. The Feast of Tabernacles fits perfectly with Messiah's birth. The Saviour of the world was born in a lowly sukkah on the first day of the Feast of Tabernacles.

If Messiah was born on Tishri 15, then His circumcision would have taken place on the eighth day of Sukkot. The Jews have a tradition associated with the eighth day called "*Simchat Torah*" and means "Rejoicing in the Torah." Luke 2:21-38 says that on the eighth day they brought the baby Messiah up to the Temple to circumcise him and to name Him, and when Simeon and Anna saw Israel's Savior, they rejoiced over him. These two righteous people were rejoicing over the Living Torah of God. Every aspect of Messiah's birth, including the day of His circumcision, is a picture designed to teach us more about Him.

As we have stated earlier, the Feast of Tabernacles is called "the season of our joy" and "the feast of the nations." With this in mind, notice what Luke writes:

Luke 2:10 (NKJV) Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people."

Here the birth of Christ is announced as a time of great joy [Sukkot is called the "season of our joy"], which shall be to all people [Sukkot is called "the feast of the nations"]. So, we can see from this that the terminology the angel used to announce the birth of Jesus were themes and messages associated with the Feast of Tabernacles.

In Luke 2:12, the baby Jesus was wrapped in swaddling clothes and placed in a manger. The swaddling clothes were also used as wicks to light the 16 vats of oil within the court of the women during the festival of Sukkot. So, swaddling cloths are associated with the festival of Sukkot.

During the Feast of Tabernacles, God required that all male Jews come to Jerusalem (Deuteronomy 16:16). For this reason, the city would be overcrowded with people, and would explain why Mary and Joseph could not find lodging in and around Jerusalem (Luke 2:7); Bethlehem, the place where Jesus was born, is only about four miles from Jerusalem.