

Jewish Feasts And Festivals #2

Last time we introduced our study by examining some background concerning the Jewish calendar and then examined the Sabbath. We now turn our attention to the new moon observance and the seven yearly festivals in Jewish life. The Sabbath and new moon were the only two observances that occurred more than once a year.

New Moon

The new moon was reckoned by actual personal observation, not by astronomical calculation. The Sanhedrin required two or three independent witnesses as to the appearance of the new moon. This was so important that the Sanhedrin permitted the witnesses to travel on the Sabbath and make use of a horse or a mule.

The references in the Bible to the new moon celebration include Numbers 10:10; 28:11-15 and Psalm 81:3. The law specified that two bullocks, one ram, seven lambs and one kid were to be offered in connection with this celebration. Meal mixed with oil accompanied the offerings, and a trumpet blast introduced this feast. The sins committed and not expiated during the previous month were covered by the offerings of the new moon. Thus, sinners received atonement and were reconciled with the Lord.

Passover/Feast Of Unleavened Bread/Pesach

The Passover was the first of the three great festivals of the Jewish people. It referred to the sacrifice of a lamb in Egypt when the people of Israel were slaves. The Jews smeared the blood of the lamb on their doorposts as a signal to God that He should "pass over" their houses when He destroyed all the firstborn of Egypt to persuade Pharaoh to let His people go.

References to the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread include Exodus 12:1-13:16; 23:15; 34:18-20, 25; Leviticus 23:4-14; Numbers 28:16-25; Deuteronomy 16:1-8; Joshua 4:19-23; 5:10-12 and 2 Chronicles 30:2-15. Passover was observed in the spring on the 14th day of the first month, Abib or Nisan, with the service beginning in the evening. It was on the evening of this day that Israel left Egypt. The Passover meal was eaten after nightfall in a family group of at least ten persons, so individuals and small families combined for the celebration. They could not leave Jerusalem during the night of the meal. In addition to roast lamb the meal included unleavened bread and bitter herbs as a reminder of the bitterness in Egypt. It was eaten reclining, a symbol of being free persons.

Passover commemorated the hasty departure from Egypt. Unleavened bread was used in the celebration because this showed that the people had no time to put leaven in their bread as they ate the final meal as slaves in Egypt. Several regulations were given concerning the observance of the Passover, including the cleansing of homes of leaven on the first day of Unleavened Bread, which was a symbol of corruption and evil (Leviticus 2:11). Passover was to be observed "*in the place which he shall choose*" (Deuteronomy 16:16). This implied the sanctuary of the tabernacle or the temple in Jerusalem.

In New Testament times, the Passover became a pilgrim festival. Large numbers gathered in Jerusalem to observe this annual celebration. It was during this time that Jesus and His parents went to Jerusalem and Jesus was left behind (Luke 2:41-52).

Perhaps the most well known reference to the Passover in the New Testament was the crucifixion of Jesus, which occurred in Jerusalem during one of these celebrations. He and His disciples ate the meal together on the eve of His death (John 13:1). Like the blood of the lamb which saved the Jewish people from destruction in Egypt, His blood, as the ultimate Passover sacrifice, redeems us from the power of sin and death (1 Corinthians 5:7).

Pentecost/Feast Of Weeks/Feast Of Harvest/Shavout

References to Pentecost in the Bible include Exodus 23:16; 34:22; Leviticus 23:15-21; Numbers 28:26-31; Deuteronomy 16:9-12 and 2 Chronicles 8:13. This feast was observed on the sixth day of the third month (Sivan) on the 50th day after the offering of the barley sheaf at the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Since Pentecost fell on the 50th day after the Sabbath of the Passover, it was always on the first day of the week. Like Passover, it included a holy convocation with the usual restriction on manual labor.

Numbers 28:26-31 describes the number and nature of offerings and Deuteronomy 16:9-12 describes those who were to be invited to this feast. They included servants, sons and daughters, Levites, the fatherless, the widow and the stranger or foreigner. Israelites were to be reminded of their bondage in Egypt on that day.

Pentecost was also originally a harvest festival, celebrating the conclusion of the spring grain harvest. Grain was planted in Palestine, as in other Mediterranean countries, in the fall, allowed to grow during the winter and harvested in the spring.

Pentecost is forever significant to Christians because it was the day in which the Holy Spirit was poured out and the first gospel sermon was preached by Peter. In that sermon, the terms of God's salvation were first revealed after Christ's death on the cross, thus signifying the beginning of the Lord's church (Acts 2:1-47). Acts records that about 3,000 souls were added to the church on that day.

Feast Of Trumpets/New Year's Day/Rosh Hashanah

This feast commemorated the beginning of the civil or commercial year for the Jews. It was celebrated on the first day of the seventh month (Tishri or Ethanim). This was the beginning of the autumn equinox and was a special day because of the symbolical meaning of the seventh or sabbatical month in which the great feasts of the Day of Atonement and Tabernacles occurred.

Josephus and other Jewish historians believe that the Jews had kept the distinction between the civil and the sacred years since the time of Moses. The festival is mentioned in Leviticus 23:24-25 and Numbers 29:1-6. The Feast of Trumpets was introduced with the blowing of trumpets in Jerusalem all day long, festive burnt offerings and the halt of labor.

Day Of Atonement/Yom Kippur

This was the highest and holiest day of the Jewish year. It was held on the tenth day of the seventh month. The Day of Atonement was not a feast day; it was a solemn, holy fast day accompanied by elaborate ritual (Leviticus 16:1-34; Hebrews 10:1-10). On this day Israel sought atonement for its sins (Leviticus 23:26-32; 16:29; Numbers 29:7) and all men would stand cleansed of their sins before God (Leviticus 16:30). This was the only fasting period required by the Law (Leviticus 16:29; 23:31). The Day of Atonement was a recognition of man's inability to make an atonement for his sins.

The high priest who officiated on this day first sanctified himself by taking a ceremonial bath and putting on white garments (Leviticus 16:4). Then he had to make atonement for himself and other priests by sacrificing a bullock (Numbers 29:8). God dwelt on the mercy seat in the temple, but no person could approach it except through the mediation of the high priest, who offered the blood of sacrifice.

After sacrificing a bullock, the high priest chose a goat for a sin offering and sanctified it. He then sprinkled its blood on and around the mercy seat (Leviticus 16:12, 14-15). Finally the scapegoat, bearing the sins of the people, was sent into the wilderness (Leviticus 16:20-22). This scapegoat symbolized the pardon for sin brought through the sacrifice. Jewish people today

continue to observe Yom Kippur as a holy fast day.

In the next article, we will examine three final Jewish feasts and festivals, including one which is very well known but initiated by the Jews in the period of time between the testaments.

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