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## WHAT'S IN A NAME?



When you pop a couple of slices of bread into the toaster or brown up hamburger buns on the grill, do you ever stop to thank God for the grain that was milled and delivered to a bakery as flour?

Many of us who live in urban settings have largely lost our touch with the land that grows the food we put on our table—not even our Thanksgiving festivities at church include a collection of farm produce in front as an object lesson of God's provision (unless you happen to be in a farming community). God set up the Feast of Tabernacles so that Israel, among other things, would be reminded annually of His provision of a harvest that supplied the food for the rest of the year. That's one reason the Feast of Tabernacles still has real significance for believers in the twenty-first century as a reminder of His goodness.

Names often carry meaning. The Feast of Tabernacles actually has four names in Scripture—each adding to our understanding of this pivotal holiday.

THE FIRST NAME:  
*HAG HA-ASIF*—THE FEAST OF INGATHERING

Three times you shall keep a feast to Me in the year: “You shall keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread . . . and the Feast of Harvest . . . **and the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year**, when you have gathered in the fruit of your labors from the field. Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the LORD GOD. (Exodus 23:14–17 NKJV)

**T**his passage reveals the first name given to the festival: in Hebrew, *Hag ha-Asif*—the Feast of Ingathering.

This name points out that the holiday was first and foremost an agricultural festival. Each of the three *aliyah* festivals was linked to the harvest of crops in the land of Israel. The Feast of Unleavened Bread (Passover) was associated with the harvest of firstfruits, a barley harvest (Leviticus 23:10–11). The Feast of Harvest (Pentecost), also called Weeks because it occurred seven weeks after Passover, was associated with the harvest of wheat (Exodus 34:22). The Feast of Ingathering was the final harvest of all the remaining produce of the land.

The Bible does not specifically identify the full range of that produce, but it provides clues: “You shall observe the Feast of Tabernacles seven days, when you have gathered from your threshing floor and from your winepress . . . because the LORD your God will bless you in all your produce . . . ” (Deuteronomy 16:13, 15 NKJV). The reference to the threshing floor indicates the end of the wheat harvest. There are

two wheat harvests in the land of Israel—the Feast of Pentecost is the firstfruits of the wheat harvest, and the Feast of Tabernacles is the latter wheat harvest.

The winepress refers to the grape harvest—along with any other citrus fruits grown in the land. Finally there is the mention of “all produce.” The land would typically yield a variety of fruits at this time, including figs, pomegranates, and dates.

#### AGRICULTURAL FESTIVALS

Agricultural festivals were certainly not unique to Israel. All ancient civilizations developed festivals associated with the agricultural cycles of the lands in which they lived. Without exception, these festivals were filled with religious significance. They expressed the beliefs and superstitions of those ancient cultures but, outside of Israel, the beliefs were false and the practices degenerate. Frequently, as with the customs of Ba’al worship in ancient Canaan, practices included elaborate fertility rites requiring cultic prostitution and grotesque sacrificial rituals to appease the



#### FOODS

*The most important of the grains or cereals were wheat and barley. These were eaten raw, made into porridge, roasted or parched, or ground into flour or meal, and made into cakes or bread (leavened and unleavened). In times of famine, bread was made from beans, lentils, millet and spelt. The pulse family of foods included mainly lentils and coarse beans such as our kidney bean. Other vegetables, most of which were eaten either raw or cooked, were squash, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, garlic, and various herbs.<sup>1</sup>*

“local deities” and ensure future harvests. In short, the surrounding nations used their agricultural festivals to practice pagan rituals and perversions. God knew that Israel would be tempted, upon entering the land, to adopt the practices of these pagan and polytheistic cultures.

The God of Israel wanted His people to have a proper understanding of Him and of the times and seasons of life. Pagan cultures worshiped the creation rather than the Creator (Romans 1:25). God therefore assigned these seasonal festivals to provide a stark contrast to the activities Israel’s neighbors engaged in during these same agricultural cycles. The Canaanites believed in multiple, territorial gods who divided jurisdiction over hills and plains. The Lord’s festivals reminded His people that one God created all things and rules over all things. The festivals remind God’s people that He provides rain in its season and a harvest in its season, and that He cannot be bribed or placated with human sacrifice or elaborate sexual ritual.

Unfortunately, many in Israel would be swayed by the surrounding cultures and engage in Ba’al worship. But for those who would seek truth, God provided these biblical observances as corrective instruction before His people even entered the land.

### *GOD IS THE ORIGINAL ENVIRONMENTALIST*

**T**his distortion of the human spirit that exalts creation over Creator is as prevalent today as it was in Old and New Testament times. It is packaged as progressive thinking and proper concern for the earth. God is the original environmentalist. He knows that a proper respect for Him as Creator produces a proper respect for creation. While much of today’s environmental movement reflects a healthy

respect for the world we live in, many in the movement fail to connect the sacredness of the creation with the reverence that is due to the Creator.

This disconnect, or divorce, plays into the age-old sin of exulting in the creation over the Creator. As a result, neopagan ideology is a growing religious trend in our society. The rise of the Wiccan religion, more commonly known as witchcraft, is a deification of creation. It leads to the same kind of paganism that the Scriptures speak so clearly against—consultation with mediums, seeking the future from soothsayers and sorcerers rather than trusting God for the future (see Deuteronomy 18:10; 2 Kings 17:17; 2 Kings 21:6; 2 Chronicles 33:6). Believers can be deceived and open themselves to great danger by treating modern-day practices like Tarot cards and Ouiji boards as harmless fun.

Those who are earnestly seeking God can still see the outline of His majesty in the beauty of creation. The Psalmist wrote, “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork” (Psalm 19:1 KJV). Paul said, “For since the creation of the world [God’s] invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead” (Romans 1:20 NKJV). God still speaks to us through the warmth of spring day sunshine, in the freshness of the air after a summer storm, or in the majesty and power of the rolling ocean waves. He knows the tendency to worship creation and to try to manipulate the Creator. He graciously provided festivals as reminders of the proper order of things.

### *LINK TO THE LAND*

**T**he agricultural festivals also provided an important link between the people and the land of Israel. God promised

that the people of Israel would exist before Him forever; yet in the same breath, He warned that the people of Israel would not necessarily possess the land of Israel perpetually. In fact, in very strong language, God announced, “And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you” (Leviticus 18:28). Nevertheless, God also promised that though Israel may be dispersed to the four corners of the earth, He would return His people to the land He swore to give them (see Jeremiah 30:3, 10; 46:27).

Wherever the people of Israel might be dispersed, this Festival of Ingathering would remind them of their true homeland. From the far regions of the north, such as Russia or Siberia, to the remote corners of the east, such as India or China; from the far south, such as Ethiopia or South Africa, to the distant west, such as England or America, God established these agricultural festivals to connect the Jewish people to the land He had promised them. The holidays were to remind us of what was occurring in the land that God had sworn to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We were to remember the end of the wheat harvest, the grapes, the figs, and so forth. So the Holy Land was inscribed upon the hearts of the Jewish people through the holy days that God gave to them.

### TO INITIATE THANKSGIVING

There is a further lesson of *Hag ha-Asif*: to initiate thanksgiving in the hearts of the people toward God, who had provided the harvest. Remember the two pillars of His presence and His provision. According to Isaac Abrabanel, the fifteenth-century statesman, philosopher, and Bible commentator, “Each of the three festivals reflects a different aspect of God’s loving kindness for which thanksgiving is in order: 1) Passover for freeing Israel from

Egyptian slavery; 2) *Shavuot* (Pentecost) for granting Israel the Torah; and 3) *Sukkot* (Tabernacles) for the inheritance of the Land of Israel.”<sup>2</sup>

The theme of thanksgiving as expressed in *Sukkot* (pronounced “sue-COAT”) serves as the foundation of the American celebration of Thanksgiving. Since the Pilgrim Fathers knew the Bible, they knew about this festival. It seems reasonable enough that they incorporated their own “Feast of Tabernacles” as they celebrated a time of thanksgiving. They recognized, as God intended, that thankful worship was the end, not the means of the harvest. And so it was with the Feast of Ingathering: God’s provision was to excite Israel’s thankfulness and lead her to fulfill her ultimate purpose as a praise to God.

IN SUMMARY, HAG HA-ASIF  
OR THE FESTIVAL OF INGATHERING  
PROVIDES THE FOLLOWING PERSPECTIVES:

1. A right understanding of the Creator and His creation served to contrast with the pagan celebrations surrounding the same season.
2. The people of Israel were to be forever linked with the land God had promised them.
3. True worship must include thanksgiving as a response to God’s goodness.

THE SECOND NAME:  
HA-HAG—THE FEAST

The second name given to the Feast of Tabernacles is simply *ha-Hag*, or the Feast. If someone who lives in



northern New Jersey tells you that they are going to “The City,” you know exactly which city they mean. They are going to Manhattan, to New York City. Likewise, when people said, “We’re going up to The Feast” there was no doubt about which feast they were attending. The Feast of Tabernacles was bigger than any other festival of the day, just as New York City is bigger than Newark or any other city in New Jersey. The Feast of Tabernacles outshone the other feasts of Israel. It was the Feast of the Year.

Israel’s chronicler in 1 Kings 8:2, 5 refers to the feast without pausing to let us know it is Tabernacles. “All the men of Israel assembled themselves to King Solomon at the feast [*ha-Hag*], in the month Ethanim, the seventh month. . . . And King Solomon and all the congregation of Israel, who were assembled to him, were with him before the ark, sacrificing so many sheep and oxen they could not be counted or numbered” (NASB). So important was Sukkot in King Solomon’s day that we see him using the Feast to dedicate the Temple. Other Bible passages that refer to Tabernacles as *ha-Hag*, the Feast, include Numbers 29:12; Nehemiah 8:14; Isaiah 30:29; and Ezekiel 45:25.

The Talmud—Jewish oral tradition that has been compiled into an extensive Bible commentary—includes an entire tractate, or section, called *Sukkah*, which is devoted to a discussion of this festival as it took place in the first century. Throughout the tractate, the rabbis continually refer to it as “the feast” without specifying the Feast of Tabernacles. So it became synonymous with the Feast of Tabernacles.

The origin of *ha-Hag*’s meaning relates to dancing or parading, walking in a ceremonial procession. Indeed, these sorts of parades and dances characterized Sukkot. There were huge festivities into the night with much dancing. Also a highly structured Levitical parade (more fully described in the

New Testament section of this book) would process on each of the days of the festival, culminating on the seventh day.

The name *ha-Hag* not only signifies the predominance of the festival in Israel's calendar; it clearly identifies it as a pilgrim feast. The *Shalosh Regalim*, the three pilgrim festivals of Israel, always implied journeys to Jerusalem. One could not properly celebrate these festivals anywhere else.

Today we observe the festivals wherever we happen to be. This is a rabbinical accommodation to the Diaspora or dispersion of the Jewish people. But the Scriptures envisioned these festivals in one location: the Temple in Jerusalem. You had to go there to be with Him. This dynamic of pilgrimage, of journeying to be with God was implicit in the concept of *ha-Hag*, of the Feast.

#### BEST ATTENDED

**T**he Feast of Tabernacles or *ha-Hag*, was naturally the best attended of all the major festivals. Passover and Pentecost took place in the spring, when the people were fully occupied in their fields. Only the very devout or the very wealthy would part from their farms and go up in obedience to the Lord to take part in *Pesach* (Passover) or *Shavuot* (Pentecost). But the Feast of Tabernacles came at the end of the agricultural year. It was fall; the final harvest had been gathered. The work was done. The winter was approaching; the people could settle down and rest.

In this way, the festival reflects the principle of Sabbath. When our work is truly done, we should mark our rest with a time of worship. By requiring a pilgrimage as part of the celebration, *ha-Hag* highlights a universal principal concerning worship.

True worship of God always involves a journey. We must

leave the regular routines of life and travel with others to a place set apart for the worship of God. Many today like to believe they have no need to join with other worshipers. They prefer to keep their religion private and personal. Some look to certain television programs or even religious communities on the Internet for their sole form of worship.

Certainly it is not wrong to worship God at home. But the principle of pilgrimage in worship should not be neglected. The author of the New Testament book of Hebrews wrote, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing” (Hebrews 10:25). We need to journey to enjoy community; we need to travel to be in fellowship—to rejoice together in the presence of the Lord. God is found in His tabernacle. He is found in the midst of His people. He is found in the place of worship. And so our journey each week to our home congregation is a pilgrimage we undertake to fulfill this principle today.

*THEREFORE, THE NAME OF THE FESTIVAL  
HA-HAG HELPS US TO UNDERSTAND THAT*

1. The Feast of Tabernacles was once known as the greatest of Israel’s holidays.
2. God desires His people to leave their routines, to journey to worship, and to celebrate Him as a community when their work is done.

THE THIRD NAME: *ZEMAN SIMCHATENU*—  
SEASON OF OUR REJOICING

The third name associated with this holiday is *Zeman Simchatenu*, which means the season of our rejoicing.

This name comes from Jewish tradition, and while it is not specifically found in the Scriptures, it is based on the Scriptures, particularly Deuteronomy 16:13–15 (NKJV):

You shall observe the Feast of Tabernacles seven days, when you have gathered from your threshing floor and from your winepress. And you shall rejoice in your feast, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant and the Levite, the stranger and the fatherless and the widow, who are within your gates. Seven days you shall keep a sacred feast to the LORD your God in the place which the LORD chooses, because the LORD your God will bless you in all your produce and in all the work of your hands, so that you surely rejoice.

A better way to translate that last phrase might be, “You shall have nothing but joy.”

Rejoicing is a major theme for Tabernacles. It is not commanded for the observance of Passover. It’s mentioned once in connection with the observance of Pentecost. But see how many times it is actually mentioned in these few verses? Even those who otherwise might not have cause for rejoicing—widows and orphans and slaves—were commanded to rejoice at this time.

God is not a cosmic sadist, that He would command suffering people to pretend to be joyous. Nor does He command that which He will not enable us to do. Think of it. The experience of joy and celebration in life is often attributed to the birth of children, marriages, and other joyous celebrations. But here we have joy and rejoicing based on a singularly spiritual celebration, one of God’s feasts.

This brings us back to the two themes, or pillars, of God’s provision and presence—both of which should produce joy

in His people. Any farmer can rejoice when the harvest is done, the hard work is over at least for a little while and the barns are full. But God's people should rejoice, not only in the bounty, but in the One who brought it about.

### *A RELATIONSHIP OF JOY*

**T**he God of Israel wanted the primary experience of His people in relation to Him to be nothing but joy. Such a connection stood in stark contrast to the people of the surrounding nations, who related to their gods in servile fear. What a concept—to be in the presence of the Creator of the Universe and to find that this experience brings “nothing but joy”!

This concept flies in the face of most religious tradition today. How often is our worship characterized as nothing but joy? We tend to see reverence and joy as mutually exclusive, when God wants them to go hand in hand. That is what God wanted Israel to experience. In fact, the Almighty found fault with the nation of Israel in Deuteronomy 28:47 because, “You did not serve the LORD your God joyfully and gladly.” In other words, it's not just a lack of service, but the manner of service for which God faulted His people.

The psalmist commands, “Serve the LORD with gladness” (Psalm 100:2 NASB). The apostle Paul says to “rejoice in the Lord always and again I say, rejoice” (Philippians 4:4 NKJV). Perhaps Paul was drawing from his own experience of the Feast of Tabernacles. And surely the Feast of Tabernacles should be a corrective to the dull and dour worship of some believers in Jesus today.

G. K. Chesterton said, “It is really a natural trend for us to lapse into taking oneself gravely because it is the easiest thing to do. For solemnity flows out of men naturally, but joy and laughter is a leap. It is easy to be heavy, hard to be

light.”<sup>3</sup> The rejoicing God commanded is not a matter of frivolity and excess, but of sanctified, profound, and deep joy. It is based upon the firm understanding and acceptance that God is sovereign. He controls the universe. He created all, including the rain and the harvest, and it is His pleasure to provide all that His people need, according to His riches in glory. When we understand and when we believe in such a God, we won’t worry and we won’t fear. We won’t doubt the future, but we will trust and we will experience joy.

*THIS NAME, ZEMAN SIMCHATENU, SEASON OF REJOICING, HELPS US TO UNDERSTAND THAT*

1. God wants us to respond with joy to His provision and His presence in our lives.
2. Our attitude in worship should be one of great reverence and joy.

### THE FOURTH NAME: SUKKOT—TABERNACLES

The final name and the one that is most foundational to understanding this holiday is the name we use most often, *Sukkot*—the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles. In Leviticus 23 God outlined this holiday, commanding, “You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All who are native Israelites shall dwell in booths, that your generations may know that I made the children of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt” (verses 42–43 NKJV).

The word *sukkah* means “booth or tabernacle” (*sukkot* is the plural form), and is used in various ways in Scripture. For example, after Jonah prophesied in Nineveh, he went out

from the city, and “there he made a shelter [*sukkah*] for himself and sat under it in the shade until he could see what would happen in the city” (Jonah 4:5 NASB).

A *sukkah* was a kind of dwelling or shelter that shepherds would make while they watched their flocks. It was a temporary structure that the shepherds would tear down before moving on with their flocks to different pastures.

The *sukkah* was a symbol of wandering and of dependence on God. The children of Israel dwelt in the wilderness for forty years with little to see but sun and sky. There was nowhere else to go to escape the rigors of desert life—and there they dwelt in fragile little shelters each night. God was teaching His people a lesson on humility and the dangers of self-sufficiency.

Remember, God promised to give the children of Israel a land “flowing with milk and honey,” where they would inhabit houses they had not built and drink from wells that they had not dug, and where they would be surrounded by blessing. But in the midst of that blessing, once a year they were to move out of those homes and live in something temporary and fragile. They were to remember their dependence on God, humble themselves, and thank Him for abundant provision. In so doing the people would be reminded of the source of the prosperity they enjoyed. God knew that comfort would tempt His people to forget their need for Him, that trusting in their own strength would eventually lead to idolatry, which would lead to death. Deuteronomy 6:1–19 follows this progression.

### AN IMPORTANT LESSON

**W**e would do well to remember this lesson ourselves. All the blessings we have, all the freedoms we enjoy

are things that God has graciously provided. And it could so easily be otherwise. We could be living in much tougher circumstances. The Feast of Tabernacles with its command to dwell in temporary shelters is a very graphic and physical reminder that we can get cold and the rains may come. The thatched roof of the *sukkah* enables you to see the stars at night, but it may also let in a little rain from time to time. But if a few raindrops remind us of God's provision, of the temporal nature of life, then it's good and it's healthy to remember our dependence on Him.

The Feast of Tabernacles was also a time for Israelites to invite the Levite (who was not allowed to own his own farm) along with the foreigner and the widow to stay with them and partake of God's provision. This practice has carried over to life in contemporary Israel. It's a time for the wealthy to become equal with those who are less well-off and to eat the same meal on the same wooden bench in the same fragile circumstance. It's a time to remember the poor. The wealthy make a great point of inviting the less fortunate and the *yeshiva bochers* (seminary students) who don't earn a living, to come in and take part in the festival. It's considered a big *mitzvah* (good deed) to have somebody poor sit in your *sukkah*.

### REMINDER OF GOD'S PRESENCE

Ultimately, the booth serves as a powerful reminder of God's presence with His people during those wilderness years. Though the people wandered because of their rebellion, God made a place for Himself in the midst of His rebellious people. He gave visible signs of His presence through the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night.



These supernatural manifestations were reassuring, but if that wasn't enough, God gave instructions for the tabernacle—the Tent of Meeting itself. This elaborate place of sacrifice and incense, of priestly worship and of the ark of the covenant was situated in the middle of the Israelite camp. It was a constant reminder of God's holy presence. Unlike the later Temple in Jerusalem, Israel's place of worship in the wilderness was temporary. It could be picked up and moved just like the temporary booths of this festival.

The tabernacle taught Israel that God's presence would be with the people wherever they traveled. We know that God is present everywhere at all times. But this knowledge can seem impersonal—as though God were some kind of a holy vapor that permeates the universe. God wanted His people to see that He doesn't merely exist everywhere, but that He had chosen to be *with* them. His blessing and His presence would lead them. His promised protection would be a constant companion to His people as they welcomed Him into their midst.

*THIS FOURTH AND FINAL NAME  
FOR THE HOLIDAY, SUKKOT OR  
THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES, REMINDS US*

1. That life is fragile and we are dependent upon God as the source of all blessing.
2. God has chosen to dwell in the midst of His people.

The psalmist confidently declared, “For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his tabernacle and set me high upon a rock”

(Psalm 27:5). The Feast of Tabernacles was an annual reminder to the people that God is the Great Shepherd who has chosen to “tabernacle among them,” to protect and bless them wherever they wander and wherever the vagaries of life carried them. What a rich comfort for God’s people in good times and in bad.