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Christ in the Passover

Christ in the Feast of Pentecost

Christ in the Feast of Tabernacles

CEIL &  
MOISHE ROSEN

CHRIST  
*in the Passover*

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CHICAGO

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## WHY PASSOVER?



When Abraham, the first Hebrew, left Ur to follow God's call, he sacrificed a life of comfort and ease. Ur was no small village. It was one of the oldest, most important cities of Mesopotamia, covering an area of about four square miles by the Euphrates River, which empties into the Persian Gulf. The citizens of Ur, numbering well over half a million, lived in walled safety. They enjoyed the advantages of the highest culture and civilization of their time. The outstanding architecture of their temples, which they built in honor of their numerous deities, was a source of great pride.

From the comfort, advantages, and sophistication of Ur, Jehovah called Abraham and his family to a seminomadic way of life. They were not nomads in spirit, for they were headed for the Promised Land, but they did not yet possess it. They

wandered with the seasons, seeking pasture for their flocks, and they also tilled the ground. Tents were their only shelter from the scorching sun and cruel desert wind. But they believed that one day the land really would be theirs, evidenced by their burying those who died along the way in permanent caves.

Then a great drought and famine drove Jacob, a grandson of Abraham, to leave Canaan for the promise of food in Egypt. Once again the seed of Abraham dismantled their tents. Packing all that they had left, they headed south with their wives, their little ones, and their flocks. Because Jacob's son Joseph had found favor with the current pharaoh, they were welcomed as honored guests and given the land of Goshen as their dwelling place (Genesis 47:6). Goshen was a fertile area along the delta of the Nile River, lying in the northeast portion of an area between what is now Cairo to the southeast and Alexandria to the northwest. Here the Hebrews felt respected and secure.

*EGYPT IS OUR HOME—  
WHY BOTHER ABOUT CANAAN?*

**B**ecause of the devastating drought that drove Jacob to seek refuge in Egypt, many of the Egyptians eventually ran out of food too. Some sold their cattle, their land, and finally themselves to Pharaoh in exchange for room and board. Because the pharaohs of that time were of Semitic descent, they favored the seed of Abraham, who also were Semites. For the first time since Abraham left Ur, the Hebrews enjoyed a feeling of permanence. They lived a quiet, secure life in Goshen. The Nile overflowed its banks once a year, bringing life-giving water to the earth. There was lush, abundant pasture for the flocks and rich soil to grow their food.

Here the Hebrews watched their children grow tall and brown in the sun. At night they slept in safety behind the thick walls of their adobe homes. No longer did they wake to the distressed bleating of hungry flocks. Their Egyptian neighbors were people of high morals and advanced culture. Not only did they produce literature and music, but they also knew mathematics and some of the healing arts, and many were skilled architects. They accepted the Hebrews as equals and even bestowed high honors on some of them. Life was pleasant indeed.

Under these circumstances the descendants of Abraham prospered for hundreds of years. Exodus 1:9 indicates they multiplied so fast that a later pharaoh grew concerned that there were more Hebrews than Egyptians in the land. The children of Israel were so comfortable and secure that it was easy to forget that Egypt was not the land God had promised to their fathers. Maybe some of them even forgot God Himself.

They were no longer following God's directives. The covenant Jehovah had made with Abraham was two-sided. On God's part, He promised them land (Genesis 15:18). On Abraham's part, he and his seed were to go where they were told and bear the physical marks of the covenant—circumcision (Genesis 17:10). The Hebrews forgot to seek the Promised Land and forgot to circumcise while they were in Egypt (Joshua 5:5). They would need to be redeemed, to be “deemed again” the people of the covenant, the people of God.

O LORD, FORGIVE OUR COMPLACENCY—  
GET US OUT OF HERE!

**F**or more than four hundred years the Israelites lived at the edge of a volcano without knowing it. The volcano that was Egypt erupted and its flames threatened to consume

them, for there arose a new pharaoh who “did not know about Joseph” (Exodus 1:8). Fearing the strength and power of the vast multitude of Hebrew foreigners, he turned against them and made them his slaves. The children of Israel continued to live in Goshen, but the land no longer belonged to them. Now they belonged to the land, to Egypt, and to the pharaoh. They had to serve him with backbreaking labor, sweating in the fields, building his treasured cities, without compensation or even dignity. There were no strikes or unions to file a complaint. Pharaoh appointed foremen to give his slaves more work than they could do. If a man dropped from exhaustion, the taskmasters left him to die and quickly whipped another into line to take his place.


Under this regime, the children of Israel toiled and suffered, but still they grew in number. Enraged, Pharaoh ordered the Hebrews’ male babies murdered in an attempt to wipe out the entire nation. Then the Israelites remembered the God of their fathers. They knew they needed to be delivered, not only from Pharaoh but also from Egypt. They cried out to God in their bondage and distress, and He heard their anguished pleas. Now that they were ready for His help, He remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. Deliverance was near.

Jehovah could have slain the wicked pharaoh in an instant and brought about a new, more favorable order in Egypt. But that would not have been enough. The sons of Jacob had to leave Egypt in order to serve God. Old things, old attitudes, old affections had to pass away. The nation of Israel also needed a new beginning. Thus the redemption at Passover prepared the sons of Jacob for another covenant to be made at Mount Sinai, which would reestablish and reaffirm them as the nation of God.

The Passover redemption from Egypt changed Israel’s

reckoning of time.<sup>1</sup> God commanded the Hebrews to count the month of the deliverance from Egypt as the first month of the year. He was basically saying, “This event is so historic that you are to rearrange your calendar because of it.” They were to start counting their history from the month of *Nisan*. (Similarly, we mark our history BC and AD, basing our calendar on what happened at Calvary.) The great nation that God had promised to Abraham was about to become a reality.





*Israel's redemption began that night behind  
the safety of blood-sprinkled doors . . .*

## THE ORIGINAL PASSOVER



In order to redeem His people from Egypt, Jehovah chose a man who was, in many ways, as much an Egyptian as he was a Hebrew. Moses was born an Israelite, but he grew to manhood in the palace of Pharaoh's daughter. He was raised by his Hebrew mother, but he learned worldly wisdom from Egyptian schoolmasters. God chose him to deliver Israel, to show to all that "the Lord makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel" (Exodus 11:7).

As a young man, Moses fled Egypt in disgrace under penalty of death. When God called him to lead Israel out of bondage, he had been away from Egypt's culture and sophistication for forty years. He had long given up his princely robes for the rough garb of a shepherd. He would stand before the successor to the pharaoh who had sought his life. His eyes blazed

with the fire of the living God, whom he had encountered in the wilderness. His hands, calloused by the shepherd's crook, wielded a staff that was an instrument of God's power. His lips were the mouthpiece of the Lord as he confronted Pharaoh with his words: "Let my people go!"

When Pharaoh refused, the Lord demonstrated His might by bringing down judgment on Egypt's false gods. Through Moses, He turned the water into blood, showing He was greater than the Nile, which the Egyptians worshiped as the sustainer of life. He darkened the sky, proclaiming His superiority over the sun god, Ra. He made pests of the frogs, which Egyptians had respected as controllers of the undesirable insects that followed the annual overflow of the great river.

While the Lord poured out plague after plague, Pharaoh's heart was still hard. God ruined the Egyptians' crops with hail and locusts, killed their cattle with disease, and afflicted the people with painful boils, loathsome vermin, and thick darkness. And when the cup of iniquity was full, Pharaoh hardened his heart even further. Through Moses, God addressed Pharaoh: "Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you, 'Let my son go, so he may worship me.' But you refused to let him go; so I will kill your firstborn son" (Exodus 4:22–23; cf. 11:4–8). Now He determined to break the iron will of Egypt with one last plague. The specter of death was to fly by night over the land, interrupting the line of inheritance, bringing tragedy to every home where Jehovah was not feared and obeyed.

Although their redemption was at the door, the Israelites were not automatically exempt from this last plague. God tempered His final judgment on Egypt with mercy and perfect provision—the substitution of a life for a life. The Lord said:

On the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household. . . . Take care of them until the fourteenth day of the month . . . slaughter them at twilight . . . take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses. . . . I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn . . . The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt. (Exodus 12:3, 6–7, 12–13)

The verb “pass over” has a deeper meaning here than the idea of stepping or leaping over something to avoid contact. It is not the common Hebrew verb, *a-bhar*, or *gabhar*, which is frequently used in that sense. The word used here is *pasah*, from which comes the noun *pesah*, which is translated Passover. These words have no connection with any other Hebrew word, but they do resemble the Egyptian word *pesh*, which means “to spread wings over.” Arthur W. Pink, in his book *Gleanings in Exodus*, sheds further light on this:

The word is used . . . in this sense in Isa. 31:5: “As birds flying, so will the Lord of Hosts defend Jerusalem; defending also He will deliver it; and passing over (*pasoach*, participle of *pasach*) He will preserve it.” The word has, consequently, the very meaning of the Egyptian term for “spreading the wings over and protecting”; and *pesach*, the Lord’s Passover, means such sheltering and protection as is found under the outstretched wings of the Almighty. Does this not give a new fullness to those words, “O Jerusalem! Jerusalem! . . . How often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen does gather her brood under her wings?” (Luke 13:34). . . . And this term *pesach*

is applied (1) to the ceremony . . . and (2) to the lamb . . . the slain lamb, the sheltering behind its blood and eating of its flesh, constituted the *pesach*, the protection of God's chosen people beneath the sheltering wings of the Almighty. . . . It was not merely that the Lord passed by the houses of Israelites, but that He stood on guard protecting each blood-sprinkled door! ["The Lord . . . will not suffer the destroyer to come in" (Exodus 12:23.)]<sup>2</sup>

God includes everyone in the death sentence in Exodus 11:5: "Every firstborn son in Egypt will die." God must do the just thing because He is God, but He balances His righteousness with His loving mercy. He decrees judgment for all sin and all sinners; then He provides a way of escape, a *kiporah*, or covering. While rain falls on everyone, those who have an umbrella do not get wet. For those who seek His way to satisfy the demands of His Law, God provides the blood of the lamb as a covering.

Israel's redemption began that night behind the safety of blood-sprinkled doors. It was a night of horror and grief for anyone who had foolishly disregarded God's command. It was a long night of vigil mixed with hope for the obedient. Perhaps wails of anguish could be heard from outside as the grim reaper of death went from house to house. Perhaps there was only thick, ominous silence. The people knew that terror and death lay outside that door, which they dared not open until morning.

It was a night of judgment, but the substitutionary death of the Passover lamb brought forgiveness to God's people. It washed away 430 years of Egypt's contamination. The blood of the lamb protected them from the wrath of the Almighty. Its roasted flesh nourished their bodies with strength for the perilous journey ahead. They ate in haste, loins girded, staff

in hand, shoes on their feet, prepared to leave at any moment at God's command. In that awe-filled night of waiting, they experienced Jehovah's loving protection even in the midst of His fierce judgment. They gained a trust that was deep enough to see them through another black night soon to come. They would stand at the edge of the churning waves of the Red Sea with the entire host of angry Egyptians at their backs, and they would trust the words of Moses: "Stand firm and you will see the deliverance [of] the LORD" (Exodus 14:13).

The Lord often works on behalf of His people when things look darkest. In the words of the psalmist, "weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning" (Psalm 30:5). And so the morning came, and with it joy and freedom.

Out of His mercy, and because He would keep His covenant, the Lord rescued Israel. The seed of Abraham must not forget their commitment to the Holy One of Israel, and they must not forget His promises. They must remember that He brought them out of Egypt with a strong hand and with His outstretched arm.<sup>3</sup>

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of Pentecost*

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## WHAT'S IN A NAME?



Names are important to God and so they should be to us. God, and sometimes people, frequently name individuals as well as places in accordance with their destiny, or to point out some aspect of their character. For example, God changed Abram's name to Abraham (Genesis 17:5) to reflect God's promise to make him the "father of many nations." Similarly, Abraham's wife Sarai was renamed Sarah ("princess"), undoubtedly to reflect her character as a "mother of nations" (Genesis 17:15–16).

Sometimes God gives a name that is not the name used in daily life; in 2 Samuel 12:24–25 the son of David and Bathsheba is named Solomon, the name by which he is known throughout the Bible; yet verse 25 says, "Because the LORD loved him, he sent word through Nathan the prophet to

name him Jedidiah”—which means “beloved of the LORD.” Likewise with places: when Jacob encountered God, “he called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz” (Genesis 28:19; “Bethel” means “house of God”).

Even so, the feasts of the Lord have meaningful names. The Bible often uses more than one designation to describe what happens during the holiday, as well as the themes and underlying significance of the celebration. In this chapter we will examine six names for the Feast of Pentecost, and the themes suggested by those names.

## 1. *HAG HA-SHAVUOT*

**H**ave you ever noticed that one of the most challenging hours of the week comes just before you leave your home to attend a worship service? We rush about trying to get ready. Minor conflicts can become major crises and everything seems to take longer than expected. Imagine if getting ready for the worship service involved preparing for a journey that would take you far from home. Now imagine that not only you and your immediate family, but all your neighbors and friends are planning to journey with you, in a giant caravan of people heading off to worship. Preparation and planning would certainly set that worship service apart from the ordinary ones throughout the year. Such was the case with the Feast of Pentecost, which is best known in the Bible by its Hebrew name, *Hag ha-Shavuot*, or the Festival of Weeks.

(Note: If you mention this holiday to a Jewish friend, drop the “Hag ha” and use the name “Shavuot,” which is how Jewish people refer to the holiday. Equally common among European Jews is the Yiddish pronunciation, “Shavuos.”)

“And you shall observe the Feast of Weeks, of the first-fruits of wheat harvest” (Exodus 34:22 NKJV). The Hebrew word *hag*, in English “feast” or “festival,” is related to the Arabic word *haj*, a familiar word in the practice of Islam. *Hag* implies a pilgrimage.<sup>1</sup> Pentecost was one of three festivals that required such a pilgrimage: “Three times in the year all your men shall appear before the Lord, the LORD God of Israel” (Exodus 34:23 NKJV).

The Hebrew word *shavuot* means “periods of sevens” or “weeks.”<sup>2</sup> Yet the Feast of Weeks is not celebrated for weeks—or even one week. It is actually a one-day festival.

The name of the holiday does not describe the actual manner in which we celebrate it, as the Feast of Tabernacles does, nor does it point to the historical origin of the feast, as does Passover. Rather *Hag ha-Shavuot* is a chronological reference, pointing to the amount of time between Passover and this holiday.

God commanded the Israelites to count seven weeks from the day after Passover until the day when we are to celebrate this holiday, *Hag ha-Shavuot*. That is why the Bible calls it the Feast of Weeks.

“And you shall count for yourselves from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering: seven Sabbaths shall be completed. Count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath; then you shall offer a new grain offering to the LORD” (Leviticus 23:15–16 NKJV; see also Deuteronomy 16:9).

The sense of anticipation or expectation connected to this holiday cannot be overstated. The holiday arrives as the climax of a season marked by a countdown beginning the day after Passover and lasting for seven weeks. This countdown emphasizes the theme of godly anticipation unique to this holiday. We don’t count the days leading up to Passover

nor do we count the days leading up to the Feast of Tabernacles. Pentecost, or the Feast of Weeks, is the only festival for which God commanded such a countdown.

Have you ever talked to a bride-to-be who is counting the days and hours until her wedding? Or to a student who is counting the days until summer vacation—perhaps even graduation? All the activities of life begin to organize themselves around this special time, and as anticipation for the event grows, people begin counting the days. That is the quality of expectation God built into this particular holiday as He required the children of Israel to count the days leading up to it. The famous rabbi Maimonides likened this exercise to someone who is waiting for their closest friend, counting the days and yes, even the hours.<sup>3</sup>

So as we think of the Feast of Weeks, we recognize that God intended for us to anticipate this celebration, to count, to expect—and that is one of the themes that will continue to unfold throughout our study of this festival.

## 2. HAG HA-BIKKURIM

A second name for the holiday is *Hag ha-Bikkurim*. You'll remember that "Hag" means festival or pilgrimage and "ha bikkurim" is Hebrew for the firstfruits.

"Also on the day of the firstfruits, when you present a new grain offering to the LORD at your Feast of Weeks, you shall have a holy convocation. You shall do no customary work" (Numbers 28:26 NKJV).

The Hebrew word *bikkurim* is related to the root word *bekhor*, which means firstborn. The idea of firstfruits is connected to the principle of the firstborn in Scripture. The Bible tells us that the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animals belong to God:

Consecrate to Me all the firstborn, whatever opens the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and beast; it is Mine. (Exodus 13:2 NKJV)

The Jewish tradition of *pidyon ha-ben*, the redemption of the firstborn, is based on God's claim in the above Scripture. In Numbers 3:40–51, we see that following the Exodus, God required a census and a price paid for every firstborn male of the children of Israel. This was a very practical way to demonstrate His claim to His people, helping them understand what they owed Him, and what He was willing to accept, by grace, instead. Even as Mary and Joseph brought the baby Jesus to dedicate Him in the Temple in Jerusalem (Luke 2:22), so we see throughout the Scriptures the firstborn were especially to be dedicated to God.

In the same way as God claims the firstborn, He tells His people that the firstfruits of the ground also belong to Him. Thus this festival of *Hag ha-Bikkurim*, Festival of Firstfruits, speaks to us of the importance of dedicating our first and our best to the glory of God.

Scripture promises a direct connection between our dedication and God's provision. "Honor the LORD with your possessions, and with the firstfruits of all your increase; so your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will overflow with new wine" (Proverbs 3:9–10 NKJV).

This passage and principle should not be used to raise false hopes that prosperity is attainable in proportion to what we give. It would be foolish to calculate one's giving based on what one expects to receive in return. Giving that is motivated by what one will receive is not giving at all. The key to this verse is to honor the Lord. When we recognize that all we have belongs to God, we honor Him. When we dedicate ourselves and the firstfruits of what He provides for His use,

we honor Him. When we trust that giving our firstfruits for His special use will not leave us destitute, we honor the Lord. This leads to His blessing. He blesses us because we acknowledge that we and all we have are rightfully His, and He blesses us because in giving back firstfruits, we demonstrate our trust that He intends to continue to provide for us. This is instructive for all of God's children. Honoring the Lord with our firstfruits is part of the dedication and trust He expects and deserves.

### 3. HAG HA-KATZIR

A third name for the Feast of Pentecost is *Hag ha-Katzir*, which simply means the festival of the harvest. This is likely the earliest name given. We find it in Exodus 23:

Three times a year you shall celebrate a feast to Me. You shall observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread; for seven days you are to eat unleavened bread, as I commanded you, at the appointed time in the month Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt. And none shall appear before Me empty-handed. Also you shall observe the Feast of the Harvest of the firstfruits of your labors from what you sow in the field; also the Feast of the Ingathering at the end of the year when you gather in the fruit of your labors from the field. (Exodus 23:14–16 NASB)

Most of us are far removed from an agrarian society such as the Israelites experienced during Bible times. Almost everything we eat has been at least partially prepared by someone else. But in ancient Israel the cycle of sowing and reaping was absolutely central to the existence of the Jewish people; it was part of the day-in, day-out rhythm of life. The

Feast of Pentecost was an important juncture in that cycle of harvest. It commemorated the ending of the barley harvest and the beginning of the wheat harvest in the land. The emphases of the harvest festival are the themes of God's provision and our gratitude to Him for His covenant faithfulness.

This gratitude and the joy that comes with it are central to another harvest festival, the Feast of Tabernacles.<sup>4</sup> In both harvest festivals God commanded the children of Israel to rejoice.

Leviticus 23:40 (NKJV) refers to the Feast of Tabernacles: "And you shall 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."

Deuteronomy 26:10–11 (NKJV) refers to the Feast of Firstfruits: ". . . and now, behold, I have brought the firstfruits of the land which you, O LORD, have given me.' Then you shall set it before the LORD your God, and worship before the LORD your God. So you shall rejoice in every good thing which the LORD your God has given to you and your house, you and the Levite and the stranger who is among you."

Don't you love these commands to rejoice? The apostle Paul echoes and expands on them in Philippians 4:4: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice!"

It may seem odd that God would have to command His people to be joyful. But which one of us does not get weighed down by the cares and the troubles and the woes of this world? We sometimes forget the things for which we ought to be grateful, and gratitude and joy go hand in hand. So God comes to us in His Word and through festivals like this and says, "Stop. Stop your preoccupation with the cares of life, stop with all the worries that weigh you down, stop and

be happy about what you have, and for God's sake, have a good time!" A lot of people think of religion in general and Christianity especially as being a sour, dour, unhappy way to live. People have told us, "I don't want to follow Jesus because I'll have to stop having fun." If only they could understand God's heart for His people. He commands us to rejoice.

What is more, this rejoicing is a community event. It is not something that we're supposed to experience alone but with all of God's people. And we are supposed to remember where we came from. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and do this. Remember that once you were strangers and aliens and so, God tells Israel, find some strangers, some aliens, and share some joy with them. This is what it means to rejoice. Showing grace to others who are in need reflects how you understand and appreciate God's grace in your own life.

Jewish tradition later added the reading of the book of Ruth as a ritual to celebrate this festival (see chapter 4). First, the events of the book take place during the barley harvest, making it a seasonal story, appropriate for the festival. More than that, Ruth was a stranger and an alien who received much kindness and grace from Boaz, a wealthy Israelite. Boaz, in accordance with Leviticus 19:10; 23:22, did not harvest the very full extent of his field in order to provide for Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi. Boaz was faithfully following God in this season of firstfruits. He showed gratitude to God by being gracious to others. Even so, our attitude toward others should reflect awareness of all God has done for us.



#### 4. Z'MAN MATTAN TORATENU

**Z'***man Mattan Toratenu* means the season of the giving of our Law. This fourth name is not found in the Bible but was given by the rabbis. Exodus 19 provides a clue as to why the rabbis added this name to the Festival of Weeks.

In the third month after the sons of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. (Exodus 19:1 NASB)

The chapter goes on to describe the giving of the Law. The third month of the Hebrew calendar is called Sivan, and the Feast of Weeks falls on the sixth of Sivan. The rabbis concluded that this historical event happened in conjunction with the celebration of this feast we now call Pentecost. While the Bible doesn't give us the specific date when the Law was given, it is not at all unreasonable to believe the giving of the Law converged with this feast. We will return to discuss this point in greater detail when we come to the celebration of Pentecost as recorded in Acts 2. For now it is sufficient to say that in the Jewish community the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai has become integrally connected to the celebration of this harvest festival. This adds another theme to our study: the relationship between law and grace.

It is traditional, therefore, not only to read the book of Ruth but also the story of the giving of the Law in Exodus 19 and 20, including the recitation of the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments.

## 5. ATZERET

A further rabbinic title given to the festival is *Atzeret*, which has been translated “withdrawal,” “conclusion,” and “convocation.” *Atzeret* is the most common word the rabbis use to refer to this festival, but in the Bible it is not actually used of this holiday at all. However, Scripture does use *atzeret* to refer to the last day of Passover and the eighth day of the Feast of Tabernacles. It is most commonly understood to mean a concluding convocation. Unlike Passover and Tabernacles, Pentecost is a one-day holiday, and as on the other two holidays, the Israelites were to withdraw from their regular work (see Leviticus 23:21; Numbers 28:26). The sages of Judaism used *atzeret* to refer to the one-day celebration because they didn’t want to limit the celebration of the giving of the Law to just one day. They insisted that the Torah should be celebrated every day of the year, with a special concluding celebration at Pentecost. Therefore, in the Talmud, *atzeret* is the preferred name.

## 6. PENTECOST

The last name for this festival is best known among Christians. *Pentecost* is actually a Greek word meaning fiftieth. “Count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath; then you shall offer a new grain offering to the LORD” (Leviticus 23:16 NKJV). This name for the festival, like the Feast of Weeks, once again emphasizes the idea of counting. Whether we count seven weeks or forty-nine days after Passover, we arrive at the same fiftieth day.

*Pentecost* is used in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, and so it became the common reference to this festival in both the Jewish and Christian communities.

There can be no doubt that the Feast of Pentecost was important to the early church, chiefly because the early church was a Jewish church. In Acts 20:16, Luke tells us Paul was hurrying to get back to Jerusalem, if possible, by the Day of Pentecost. In 1 Corinthians 16:8 Paul tells the Corinthians, “I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost,” and so twice we see Paul making reference to his own schedule in keeping with this counting up to the Feast of Weeks.

Of course the greater significance for the church came as a result of what happened to the disciples on this feast day as it followed on the heels of Christ’s resurrection and ascension.

“And when the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place” (Acts 2:1 NASB).

There is no way to overstate the historic significance of what occurred in that room in Jerusalem. It forever changed this festival, making it a key date on the Christian calendar by adding an astounding new theme: the work of the Holy Spirit in the church, specifically in the arena of missions and evangelism. We will cover this in detail in chapters 6, 8, and 9.

Just as the Festival of Passover, with all its historic meaning, also pointed forward to the death and resurrection of Jesus, so the Feast of Pentecost pointed forward to another pivotal event in the history of the church. To truly appreciate what happened in that room, we should explore the rich background of the Old Testament festival in all of its fullness.

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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

**A**gricultural 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

The 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

The 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

**T**he 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.