

The Feast of Tabernacles

Our lesson today will focus on the autumnal Feast of Tabernacles¹ which will set the scene for our last week of homework. The historical and cultural details of this particular Feast are fascinating when viewed in a messianic light. John very closely links Jesus to several key events during this week long festival in Jerusalem. Our homework will be primarily focused in John Chapters 7 and 8. If you turn there, the first few verses of Chapter 7 give us some important details.



Read John 7:1-9 and note the following:

- v. 1: the *Jews* are the religious leaders: Pharisees who over saw religious teaching and synagogues; Sadducees who ran the Temple and everything regarding temple worship and sacrifice; and the Sanhedrin, the governing body of Israel made up of Pharisees and Sadducees.
- Vv.3-4: *Jesus' brothers* are pushing Jesus to proclaim himself Messiah in Jerusalem at the Feast of Tabernacles– Again the Moses or David idea of a messiah. The “brothers” are not disciples of Jesus, at least not until after the resurrection.
- v5: The *brothers* did not believe him –They doubt his intentions and don’t understand who he is
- v6: Jesus knows it is not yet time for him to reveal himself as the Messiah – at least not according to their agenda or anyone else’s.
- v.9: Jesus stays in Galilee and doesn’t go with his brothers. But he does go on his own later.

The Feast of Tabernacles was one of the seven Feasts given to Israel by the Lord. It was a joyful and festive occasion. The Jewish males were required to present themselves at the Temple 3 times a year for specific festivals, and were often accompanied by their families. They were required to go in the spring for the Feast of Unleavened Bread (and Passover), In the summer for the Feast of Weeks (also known as Pentecost), and again in the Fall for the Feast of Tabernacles. For each one of these feasts people from all over Israel, and beyond would make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. All of Israel would be on the roads travelling in caravans and family groups into the area of Jerusalem. This particular feast comes in October, after all the late summer crops are harvested and just before the rainy season begins. It is also called the “Feast of Ingathering” because all the crops have been gathered in and preparations are being made for the winter. The feast lasts for seven days, the first and last days are sacred assemblies or Sabbaths. The feast originated as commemoration of God’s provision during the 40 year desert wanderings. For the

¹ Also known as the Feast of Booths

festival the Jews would build shelters, tents, *tabernacles* (this is why it is called the Feast of Tabernacles) and camp in them in and around Jerusalem just as they had in the wanderings. It was a celebration to commemorate God's *past* goodness and provision during the desert wanderings, and his *present* goodness and provision with the completion of the harvest. It was very much a feast of thanksgiving.

These shelters, or booths, would be small, cramped, and dark. They have the spiritual connotation of man being confined in the darkness, blind to the light of truth. It carries the image of being confined and bound by one's sins. Each evening the Israelites would go to the Temple for the festival of lights, a ritual observance in the temple courtyard where the four giant menorahs would stand lit and illuminating the Temple courtyard while the priests and congregation would sing hymns and psalms remembering God's deliverance from Israel, leading them as a pillar of light and symbolically representing the light of truth found only through God. A strong juxtaposition of man's state of darkness and sin when he wanders alone in the "desert of sin" as Israel had for forty years when they disobeyed God refusing to enter into the promise land. More about this festival of lights is explained below.

Leviticus 23 is God's command to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. The people were to live in these booths or tabernacles and rejoice before the Lord with branches. Daily specific offerings were to be given in addition to the daily offerings.



Read Leviticus 23:33-43

During the feast of Tabernacles the people brought their tithes and offerings to the Temple because they were not to appear before the Lord empty-handed (Deuteronomy 16:16). Each day one goat, fourteen lambs, two rams and a number of bullocks (thirteen on the first day, decreasing by one each day) were offered in the Temple. Each of the sacrifices was offered with the appropriate meal offerings of flour and oil and drink offerings of wine. All 24 divisions of priests shared in the sacrificial duties during the week. (Normally the divisions would be on a rotation for serving in the temple under the direction of the High priest who is of the line of Aaron.)



Read Exodus 40: 34-38

This festival had a rich tradition of joyful thanksgiving for the provisions of the Lord and his making known his presence among Israel. Throughout the Wanderings the Lord was present among Israel, first as a pillar of clouds and fire, and second as his glory resided in and on the Tent of Meeting, or the Tabernacle – and much later the Temple. *"Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.... in the sight of all the house of Israel during all their travels".*

This passage from Exodus tells us:

1. Tent and Tabernacle have the same meaning in Hebrew. Tent and Tabernacle should be linked in your mind as we proceed with this study.
2. The Lord dwelled with Israel in and on that Tabernacle. Make no mistake, no humanly conceived construction can contain the Lord, he was not confined to it.
3. The Lord was physically – as well as spiritually – with Israel for all their travels.

It was during this feast several centuries before that the Temple of Solomon was dedicated to the Lord and the Shekinah Glory of the Lord descended from heaven to light the fire on the altar and fill the holy of Holies.



Read 2 Chronicles 5:1-11; 7:1-10

For the people of Israel, the Feast of Tabernacles was their most joyous festival of the year. In addition to celebrating God's provisions for the harvest that been provided, it was also a time when the Jews prayed for the rainy season to begin in order to ensure a good crop in the spring. All of Israel's rain came in the winter months of November through March. If the rains were delayed or failed to come they would be in dire need of water for the coming crops. Closely connected to the thanksgiving festivities of the fall harvest, were prayers and rituals for rain and future harvests. In addition to the daily sacrifices at the Temple during this week long festival, there were three ceremonies of great importance. We will spend a little time on each one. They will make an appearance in this week's homework.

The Water-Libation Ceremony

Every morning of the Feast of Tabernacles a water libation (sacrificial pouring out of a liquid) was offered to the Lord as a visual prayer for rain. Every morning just after dawn the high priest, accompanied by a joyful procession of musicians and worshipers would make their way down to the Pool of Siloam. The high priest carried a golden pitcher (that would hold about a quart of water) and would fill the pitcher from the pool and bring it back to the Temple. While this was going on, another procession would depart from the Temple and go down to a location just south of Jerusalem where willows of the brook grew in great abundance. Willow branches here gathered and brought back to the Temple where they were placed on the sides of the altar so they formed a canopy of branches over the altar.

The High priest returning from the Pool of Siloam would come to the Temple through the south gate, also known as the Water Gate because of this ceremony. As he entered through the gate, 3 blasts of the ram's horn would be heard and the priests all would shout together: "Therefore with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation" (Isaiah 12:3). The high priest would approach the altar in the Inner court of the Temple, ascend up the right side of the ramp. There were two silver basins reserved for drink offerings, one for wine and the other for water libations for this feast. As the High Priest poured the water before the Lord an offering of wine was poured as well into the other silver basin. As this happened 3 more blasts of the ram horn

would indicate the start of the Temple music and the Levite choir would sing the *Hallel* (the praise Psalms 113-118). (Recall from the Leviticus passage the number of musicians and members of Levite choir). At the proper time the congregation would wave palm branches toward the altar and join in sing Psalm 118:25: *"O LORD, save us; O LORD, grant us success."* Psalm 118 was viewed as a messianic psalm and gave the feast and ceremony a messianic emphasis. It was widely believed that Messiah would make himself known to the people of Israel during this week-long Feast. Recall John 7:3-4, *"Jesus' brothers said to him, 'You ought to leave here and go to Judea, so that your disciples may see the miracles you do. No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since you are doing these things, show yourself to the world.'"*

The Hoshana-Rabbah Ceremony

In your homework you will be taking a closer look at what happens in John 7 following this particular ceremony. On the final day of the Feast of Tabernacles, a Sabbath, the water pouring ceremony takes on greater importance. As already discussed the Water Pouring Ceremony took place each morning of the Feast. The *Hoshana-Rabbah* is the same water pouring ceremony, but taken a step further. Being a Sabbath it was considered even more holy than the preceding days and the celebrations of the whole festal week would reach its climax with this day. This final day of celebration was the pinnacle of the feasting and celebrating. Hopes for the coming Messiah would be at their highest. If he didn't come this day, he wouldn't come for another whole year, or so it was believed among the population. As the High Priest entered through the Water Gate to the Temple, instead of three blasts of the *shofar*, there would be three sets of seven blasts. Instead of one circuit around the altar, the priests circled it seven times. As the priests were circling the altar, the crowds would be singing Hosanna (Psalm 118:25) and waving palm branches. It was for this reason that the seventh day's ceremony was called the *Hoshana Rabbah*, or Great Hosanna.

The Temple-Lighting Ceremony

In addition to the Water Pouring Ceremony in the mornings, a light ceremony was also celebrated every evening of the weeklong feast at the Temple. This ceremony was also called "The Rejoicing of the House of Water Drawing". It commenced on the 2nd night of the Feast when a barrier was erected in the Court of Women at the Temple, allowing men and women to enter and participate together. Four enormous menorahs were brought into the center of the Court. Each Menorah had four branches of oil lamps and four ladders leading up to each branch so they could be refilled by the priests carrying large pitchers of olive oil.

The Feast of Tabernacles began in the middle of the month when the moon was full and the skies clear and starlit. The moonlight light would illuminate all the surrounding countryside. The light from the Menorahs would illuminate the Temple and into Jerusalem. All night long the priests would perform torch dances. The Temple and its surroundings would be awash in the light flooding from the Menorahs in the Court. This light was symbolic of the glory of the Lord, the glory of his presence (See Exodus 40 and 2 Chronicles passages from above). After the celebration was well underway, the Levites would gather in the Inner Court - the Court of Israelites. They

would move through Nicanor Gate to stand at the top of the 15 steps that led down to the Court of Women. The Temple would resound with the sound of harps trumpets, flutes, stringed instruments and the voices of the Levites singing the Psalms of Ascent (Psalms 120-134). They would sing the first Psalm on the top step, then step down to the next step and sing the next Psalm until they had descended all the steps and had finished with Psalm 134:

*Praise the LORD, all you servants of the LORD
who minister by night in the house of the LORD.
Lift up your hands in the sanctuary
and praise the LORD.
May the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth,
bless you from Zion.*

This ceremony was performed every night in anticipation of the Water Pouring Ceremony every morning of the Festival. This light ceremony was the highlight of all the yearly festival ceremonies and was greatly anticipated each year. The Light flooding the Temple was reminiscent of the presence of the Lord's Shekinah glory filling the Temple in Solomon's Day and anticipatory of the return of the Shekinah glory with the Messiah.

The prophet Ezekiel records a prophecy of the glory of the Lord filling the temple:

The Glory Returns to the Temple

¹ Then the man brought me to the gate facing east, ² and I saw the glory of the God of Israel coming from the east. His voice was like the roar of rushing waters, and the land was radiant with his glory. ³ The vision I saw was like the vision I had seen when he came to destroy the city and like the visions I had seen by the Kebar River, and I fell facedown. ⁴ The glory of the LORD entered the temple through the gate facing east. ⁵ Then the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple. (Ezek 43:1-5)



Turn now to John 8:12-20

This passage begins on the day after the Feast of Tabernacles. We know this because just prior to this passage we have a significant scene at the end of John 7 that occurs on the last day of the Feast (you will be studying this in your homework this week) and ends with Jesus returning to the Mount of Olives (evidently where he was staying John 8:1). John 8:2 tells us that it is dawn the next day when Jesus returns to teach at the Temple.

Verse 20 tells us: *"He spoke these words while teaching in the temple area near the place where the offerings were put."* This is the Court of Women. Recall that the court of Women has been partitioned so that men and women can enter this court for the festival. It is in this court where candles and lamps are set alight to symbolize the pillar of fire that led Israel through the

desert wanderings. What happened the night before, and each preceding night of this week? The Temple Lighting Ceremony, where every lamp on the Menorah's was lit and the priests were doing torch dances. The temple was flooded with light representing who? God Almighty, Yahweh, the deliverer of Israel.

"When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, 'I am the light of the world.'" (v. 12)

Think about the impact this would have had on those in the courts who had just been there the night before celebrating God's provision in the wilderness, and here Jesus emphatically claims to be the "light of the World". The Bible Knowledge Commentary explains, "The world is in darkness, a symbol of evil, sin, and ignorance (Isa. 9:2; Matt. 4:16; 27:45; John 3:19). 'Light' in the Bible is a symbol of God and His holiness (Acts 9:3; 1 John 1:5). Jesus is *'the Light,'* not merely a light or another light among many lights. He is the only Light, 'the true Light' (John 1:9), for the whole world."

In John 1: 9, John the Baptist, who was not the light, points to the one to come who is the Light. Jesus "went beyond the usual religious assertions of enlightenment and actually claimed to be the luminary itself. Moreover, he claimed to be the light "of the world," a role reserved for Yahweh, the Creator (cf. Gen 1:3), who was regarded as superior to all deities including the sun god of the Gentiles. But that was not all. Jesus picked up the theme of the wilderness wanderings and proclaimed for those who followed him that they would not walk in darkness but have the light of life. To anyone familiar with the exodus story and the celebration of Tabernacles, Jesus was identifying himself clearly with the God who gave Israel this Feast of Tabernacles...Moreover, the thesis of Jesus as light would immediately be understood not only by the Jews of Jesus' context but also by Hellenistic readers of this Gospel because the theme of light was an international symbol/description for the basic reality of the good god."²

Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (v.12)

Those who believes and obeys Jesus' teaching are his followers. His teaching is the light that illuminates the darkness of evil and ignorance; and it is that light that also leads to salvation and eternal life. Jesus says later in John 12:: *"I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness."* John writes in his first epistle, *"If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. ⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin"* (1 John 1:6-7)

Yet no one seized him, because his time had not yet come. (v.20)

² New American Commentary