

Israelite Festivals and the Christian Church

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May 2005

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I. Introduction

The Israelite economy was not only interested in the holiness of space, the tabernacle and its rituals, but also in the holiness of time. Humans are creatures of time and space and it was God's intention to meet with them in both spheres of their existence, in time and space. It is this concern with time that is addressed through the different festivals mentioned in the Old Testament and particularly through the Sabbath. God met with His people in the sphere of time and that was not limited exclusively to the seventh day Sabbath. Other periods of time were selected by Him for worship, celebration and the rejoicing of His people in His presence. Here we will limit ourselves to the main Israelite's festivals. We will explore their commemorative and typical meanings and conclude with a discussion of its significance for Christian believers.

II. Feasts and their Commemorative and Typical Meanings

A. Feast of the Passover

The Passover was instituted shortly before the Exodus from Egypt took place (Exod 12). It is introduced in the Exodus narrative in connection with the tenth plague. This plague is God's final judgment on Egypt and could have affected the Israelites who dwelt there. When instituted the Passover had the purpose of protecting the Hebrews from the painful effects of the tenth plague. That night all the firstborns in Egypt would die.

During Abib 14 each family was to slaughter a lamb without blemish (12:5, 21). Its bones were not to be broken. The flesh of the victim was eaten during the evening by family members

as a type of peace offering (12:27). It was roasted and eaten with unleavened bread and bitter herbs (v 8) and its blood was placed on the doorposts and lintel of each house (v 22). That blood ritual indicated that in that house a life had been given in place of the life of the firstborn of the family. The Lord would “see the blood” (v 13) and would pass over the house preserving the life of the firstborn of that family.

While in Egypt all the firstborns died, among the Hebrews a sacrificial victim died. Through its blood the firstborns of Israel were redeemed. The idea of expiation or propitiation is not clearly stated but the Hebrews may have interpreted the ritual as having some expiatory force in the sense of preserving intact their relationship with the Lord by escaping from His judgment. Although originally God told the Israelites to offer the sacrifice in their own towns, once they entered Canaan it was to be offered at the central sanctuary (Deut 16:5-6). There the blood was thrown against the altar in the same fashion as the blood of most sacrifices (2 Chron 35:11).

The feast commemorated the Exodus from Egypt and by celebrating it each generation went, in a sense, through the Exodus experience (Exod 12:26; cf Deut 6:21-25). This event was perceived by the Israelites as expressing the pattern of God’s redemptive power. Hence, any redemptive act of God in the future was interpreted typologically in terms of the Exodus event commemorated in the Passover (e.g. Isa 48:20-21).

The New Testament reveals the typological significance of this feast by identifying Jesus with the Passover lamb (John 1:36) who died during the celebration of the Passover feast (19:14) and whose bones were not broken (19:36). It is through his blood that redemption was achieved, freeing humans from the power of the evil forces of this world (Heb 9:12; 2:14-15). In fact, Paul considers Jesus to be the embodiment of the Passover feast itself (1 Cor 5:8).

B. Feast of Unleavened Bread

This feast was closely related to the Passover. It was celebrated from Abib 15-21. For seven days the Israelites were to eat unleavened bread and no leaven was to be found in their

homes (Exod 12:17-20, 34; Lev 23:6-8). The feast pointed back to the time when they left Egypt in haste not having time to prepare leavened bread. The first and last days of the week were ceremonial Sabbaths. This was one of the three pilgrimage feasts during the celebration of which the Israelites left their homes and traveled to the sanctuary (Deut 16:10). The typological significance of this feast is found in the New Testament: Leaven is taken to be a symbol of sin which is not to be present in the Christian who through Christ has become a “new lump” (1 Cor 5:7-8).

C. Ceremony of the Weave Sheaf

Once the Israelites entered Canaan they were to bring to the Lord the firstfruits of the harvest of barley (Lev 23:10-11). This was to be done on Abib 16, during the second day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. It was not properly speaking a feast but a ceremony within a feast. A sheaf of the harvest was waved before the Lord in recognition of the fact that the full harvest belonged to Him and as an expression of gratitude.¹ The presentation of the first fruits is a symbol of the resurrection of Christ on Easter Sunday (Abib 16). He is described as “the first fruits” of the eschatological resurrection of those who belong to him (1 Cor 15:23). In fact, “The slain lamb, the unleavened bread, and the sheaf of first fruits represented the Saviour.”²

D. Feast of Weeks (Pentecost)

This feast is also called Pentecost because it was celebrated 50 days after the ceremony of the first fruits on Abib 16 (Lev 23:15-21). It was part of the agricultural calendar and consisted of bringing the first fruits of the harvest of wheat to the Lord on Sivan 6. The feast was a pilgrimage celebrated at the central sanctuary (Deut 16:10). Sivan 6 was a ceremonial Sabbath during which the people rejoiced before the Lord for His many blessings. “As an

¹ “A sheaf of this grain was waved by the priest before the altar of God, as an acknowledgment that all was His. Not until this ceremony had been performed was the harvest to be gathered” (E. G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 540).

² E. G. White, *Desire of Ages*, p. 77.

expression of gratitude for the grain prepared as food, two loaves baked with leaven were presented before God. The Pentecost occupied but one day, which was devoted to religious service.”³

The feast was also associated with the experience of Israel at Sinai when the covenant was established. According to Exodus 19:1 the Israelites reached Sinai on the third month after the Exodus from Egypt. Pentecost was celebrated during the third month of the year. The celebration of the feast was probably a memorial or a reaffirmation of the covenant between God and Israel (cf. 2 Chr 15:10-13). It was on account of the covenant that the nation of Israel came into existence (Exod 19:5-6).

The New Testament establishes a clear connection between Pentecost and the Christian church. It was during the feast of Pentecost that the disciples received the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the church as such came into existence as the new people of God (Acts 2:1-4). Then the new covenant was established (3:25). But it also pointed to something that took place in the heavenly sanctuary: “The Pentecostal outpouring was Heaven’s communication that the Redeemer’s inauguration was accomplished. According to His promise He had sent the Holy Spirit from heaven to His followers as a token that He had, as priest and king, received all authority in heaven and on earth, and was the Anointed One over His people.”⁴

E. Feast of Trumpets

This is the first of the fall feasts (Lev 23:23-25). It was celebrated during the seventh month (Tišri 1) as a day of solemn rest, a ceremonial Sabbath. Although some believe that this is a new year feast the text does not stress that fact. It is called Feast of Trumpets because the celebration was initiated with a blast of trumpets. In fact, “trumpets” may not be the best translation of the Hebrew term *ṭrû’ah*. This term seems to designate the strong sound of the ram’s horn (*shophar*) rather than the sound of a trumpet (*h^atsotsrah*, “trumpet;” cf. Num 10:10; 29:1).

³ Idem, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 540.

⁴ Idem, *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 38.

The feast is described as a memorial (Lev 23:24) but we are not informed concerning that which it memorializes. It is possible that the purpose of the feast may have been to remind the people that God was the Creator and Judge of the world in preparation for the Day of Atonement ceremonies. This is suggested by some passages in the Psalms where mention is made to the sound of the horn and the making of “joyful noise” before the Lord (cf. Ps 95-100). Some of those Psalms associate that experience with a call to praise God as King, Judge of the world (47:5-7; 98:6-9), and as Creator and preserver of His people (100:1-5).⁵

In the New Testament the feast of trumpets is not explicitly mentioned making it difficult to identify its typological significance. However, the book of Revelation makes reference to seven trumpets that are sounded before the consummation of salvation and that come to an end with a vision of the most holy place in the heavenly temple. “Just as the Feast of Trumpets . . . summoned ancient Israel to prepare for the coming of the day of judgment, Yom Kippur, so the trumpets of Revelation especially highlight the approach of the antitypical Yom Kippur. . . . The trumpets seem to reach backward in salvation history as tokens through the Christian Era that God will ‘remember’ (that is, act on behalf of) His people and as warnings to prepare for the antitypical

⁵ According to E. G. White, the feast was celebrated during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah: “This day was a festival, a day of rejoicing, a holy convocation, a day which the Lord had commanded the people to keep with joy and gladness; and in view of this they were bidden to restrain their grief and to rejoice because of God’s great mercy toward them. ‘This day is holy unto the Lord your God,’ Nehemiah said. ‘Mourn not, nor weep. . . . Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared: for this day is holy unto our Lord: neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the Lord is your strength.’ The earlier part of the day was devoted to religious exercises, and the people spent the remainder of the time in gratefully recounting the blessings of God and in enjoying the bounties that He had provided. Portions were also sent to the poor, who had nothing to prepare. There was great rejoicing because the words of the law had been read and understood” (*Prophets and Kings*, p. 662.)

day of atonement.”⁶ They describe God as Judge of the human race and as sending judgments on impenitent sinners before the final judgment takes place.

F. Day of Atonement

The Day of Atonement was celebrated during Tišri 10, but in contradistinction to the other feasts this was a day of fasting for the people of Israel (Lev 23:29); it was not a festival. It was a ceremonial Sabbath during which no work was to be done (v 28). During this day the high priest performed the yearly service on behalf of the Israelites. That day the sanctuary was cleansed from all the sins, transgressions, and impurities of the people of God (Lev 16:16, 21, 30). It was a day of judgment in Israel.

The Day of Atonement is not related to any particular event in the history of Israel. Rather it pointed to God’s future action of judgment and cleansing. Micah uses terminology and ideology from the Day of Atonement to describe God’s future work on behalf of His eschatological remnant. He describes God as He who forgives “transgressions” (7:18; *peša^c* = “rebellion;” Lev 16:16, 21), “iniquities” (7:19; *awôn* = “offense;” Lev 16:21), and “sins,” (*hatta’î* = “sin;” Lev 16:21, 30). At that time the Lord will dispose of “all their sins” (7:19; Lev 16:21, 30), removing them from His presence and showing His steadfast love to the remnant (7:20).

Daniel’s apocalyptic visions point to a time when the sanctuary will be cleansed just before God establishes his kingdom on earth (8:13-14). This suggests that the Day of Atonement is essentially typical rather than commemorative. It may point to the past only to the extent that it deals with all the sins of the people of Israel committed during the previous years. But the fact that it takes place year after year makes it a type of the future and ultimate cleansing of God’s people in preparation for the messianic kingdom. It is to this typological dimension that Micah and Daniel are pointing.

⁶ Richard M. Davidson, “Sanctuary Topology,” *Symposium on Revelation—Book I*, edited by Frank B. Holbrook (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), p. 123.

G. Feast of Tabernacles

This feast was celebrated during Tišri 15-21. This was the last feast of the agricultural year after the harvest came to an end (Exod 23:16; 34:22). It was a pilgrimage feast when Israel came to worship God at the central sanctuary (Deut 16:15). This was a very joyful feast during which the people expressed their gratitude to God (Lev 23:40; Judg 21:19-21; Deut 16:14). The feast began with a ceremonial Sabbath and concluded with another one on Tišri 22 (Lev 23:36). “This feast acknowledged God’s bounty in the products of the orchard, the olive grove, and the vineyard. It was the crowning festal gathering of the year. The land had yielded its increase, the harvests had been gathered into the granaries, the fruits, the oil, and the wine had been stored, the first fruits had been reserved, and now the people came with their tributes of thanksgiving to God, who had thus richly blessed them.”⁷

During the week the Israelites lived in booths made of palm branches and branches of leafy trees (23:40). The feast was a memorial of the time when God made Israel dwell in tents during their pilgrimage in the wilderness after the Exodus from Egypt (23:42).⁸ This period is described by Hosea as one of great intimacy between God and His people (e.g., 11:1-4; 2:14-15).

The Feast of Tabernacles was also interpreted eschatologically as pointing to a future time when God’s harvest of salvation will come to an end and the nations of the world would come to worship Him. Zechariah describes for us a time when the whole city of Jerusalem will be purified and the nations of the earth will come before God to celebrate the Feast of Booths (14:16-21). The book of Revelation unveils the typological fulfillment of this feast in the great multitude that John saw “standing before the throne

⁷ White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 540.

⁸ “Like the Passover, the Feast of Tabernacles was commemorative. In memory of their pilgrim life in the wilderness the people were now to leave their houses and dwell in booths, or arbors, formed from the green branches ‘of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and the boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook.’ Leviticus 23:40, 42, 43” (White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 540).

[of God] and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands” (7:9). They were praising and thanking God for their salvation. The harvest of salvation had come to an end (14:15-16).⁹

Through the different festivals God was revealing to His people important aspects of His plan of salvation. The spring festivals speak about redemption accomplished; the fall festivals about the consummation of redemption. Their typological significance does not only point to the cross but also to what is taking place now in the heavenly realm and on earth and allows us to anticipate what is about to take place, i.e., the eschatological harvest.

III. OT Festivals and the Christian Church

Should Christians observe the Israelite festivals? This has been a much debated question among Christians but the present prevailing opinion is that they had only a typological significance that was fulfilled in Christ and his work of mediation and judgment. Among Adventist there are some who have concluded that it is necessary to observe the feasts and they have been promoting this practice among church members. In addressing this question, it is necessary to examine the biblical passages in which the subject of the Israelite feasts is discussed in order to determine their nature and purpose. Several Adventist scholars have looked into this subject and the common conclusion they have reached, with the exception of Samuele Bacchiocchi, is that the Bible does not expect Christians to observe the Jewish

⁹ “The Feast of Tabernacles was not only commemorative but typical. It not only pointed back to the wilderness sojourn, but, as the feast of harvest, it celebrated the ingathering of the fruits of the earth, and pointed forward to the great day of final ingathering, when the Lord of the harvest shall send forth His reapers to gather the tares together in bundles for the fire, and to gather the wheat into His garner. At that time the wicked will all be destroyed. They will become “as though they had not been.” Obadiah 16. And every voice in the whole universe will unite in joyful praise to God.

festivals. Let me briefly summarize and evaluate some of the main arguments used to support that conclusion.

A. Festivals and the Sacrificial System

Each of the festivals was characterized by the joy of bringing offerings and sacrifices to the Lord. Leviticus 23 lists the different festivals and then summarizes their main purpose saying,

“These are the Lord’s appointed feasts, which you are to proclaim as sacred assemblies for bringing offerings made to the Lord by fire” (vs. 37). The Hebrew proposition *le* (“for”) is used here to express the idea of purpose. There is no indication in the Bible that during the festivals a spiritual sacrifice could take the place of a material one. The feasts could not be celebrated without offering sacrifices. In any case there is no instruction given in the Bible concerning how to keep the feast without a sacrificial victim. *Those who promote the observance of the festivals have to create their own personal way of celebrating the feasts and in the process create human traditions that are not based on an explicit biblical expression of God’s will.*

Some have claimed that if the association of the feasts with sacrifices is taken as a reason for limiting their celebration to the time before the coming of the Messiah, then, the same must be applied to the Sabbath which was also associated in the OT with sacrifices (Num 28:9-10). This is certainly an invalid argument. The specific purpose given in the text for the celebration of the feasts was to bring offerings to the Lord in the form of sacrifices. This is nowhere stated in the Bible with respect to the Sabbath, whose main purpose was to provide a time of rest in order to have fellowship and communion with the Creator. In fact, when the Sabbath was instituted in the Garden of Eden sacrificing animals was unthinkable. The first explicit reference to the Sabbath in Exod 16 does not mention any sacrifices offered during that day. Sacrifices were associated with the Sabbath only after the covenant was made and the sacrificial system was instituted in Israel. Sacrifices are not an indispensable component of Sabbath observance in the Bible; it could clearly be kept independent of them.

B. Festivals and Centralized Worship

A number of the festivals were to be celebrated at the Temple and not anywhere else in the land of Israel. Three feasts are specifically required to be observed in the Temple, making it necessary for the people to appear before the Lord; namely the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feasts of Weeks, and the Feast of Tabernacles (Deut 16:16). Even Passover, which was originally a family celebration, was also centralized and connected with the Temple: “You must not sacrifice the Passover in any town the Lord your God gives you except in the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name” (16:5). The Bible does not allow for the celebration of those festivals anywhere else. Hosea asked the Israelites who were to be exiled to Assyria: “What will you do on the day of your appointed feasts, on the festival days of the Lord?” (9:5). The implied answer is, “Nothing!” They would not be able to observe those feasts away from the temple in Jerusalem.¹⁰

Ellen G. White comments, “Three times a year the Jews were required to assemble at Jerusalem for religious purposes. Enshrouded in the pillar of cloud, Israel’s invisible Leader had given the directions in regard to these gatherings. During the captivity of the Jews, they could not be observed; but when the people were restored to their own land, the observance of these

¹⁰ In Hosea 2:11 the prophet states, “I will stop all her celebrations: her yearly festivals, her new moons, her Sabbath days—all her appointed feasts” (Hosea 2:11). Here the Sabbath is included together with the feasts. This has been interpreted by some to indicate that if the Israelites could not keep the feasts during the exile neither were they going to be able to keep the Sabbath. This is a misunderstanding because, first, we know that the Israelites kept the Sabbath during the exile but not the feast because the feast required the temple services. Second, this passage is simply indicating that God was bringing to an end the whole corrupted Israelite system of worship. It is not addressing the question of whether or not they will be able to keep those festivities and the Sabbath during the exile. It is in Hosea 9:5 that the issue of keeping the festivals in a foreign land is raised and the answer given is a negative one. It is important to notice that in that in 9:5 the Sabbath is not included.

memorials was once more begun. It was God's design that these anniversaries should call Him to the minds of the people. But with few exceptions, the priests and leaders of the nation had lost sight of this purpose. He who had ordained these national assemblies and understood their significance witnessed their perversion."¹¹ *Any attempt to justify their celebration independent of the Israelite Temple is simply a human determination without any biblical basis and can be described, once more, as a human tradition.*

C. Festivals and the Agricultural Calendar

Most of the festivals were closely tied to the Israelite agricultural calendar. This was clearly the case with respect to the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which was closely connected to the Passover (Lev 23:5-11), the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost; Deut 16:13; Lev 23:15); and the Feast of Tabernacles (Exod 23:16; Deut 16:9; Lev 23:32). The same applied to the Sabbatical years (Exod 23:10). The implication is that it was impossible for the Israelites to celebrate some of these festivals before they entered Canaan. This was particularly the case with the Feasts of Pentecost and Tabernacles (Exod 23:16). *No exceptions to those regulations are mentioned in the Bible, thus indicating that the celebration of those feasts was restricted to those living in the land of Israel.*

After the destruction of the temple in 70 AD the Jews developed a system that enabled them to keeping the festivals without the temple and outside Israel. This was not instituted as a result of a particular revelation from God through which He instructed them how to do it. Those festivals were so important for the Jewish identity that they decided to preserve their memory alive. But the truth is that outside the land of Israel and in the absence of the temple services it was simply impossible to keep

¹¹ *Desire of Ages*, p. 447. There are several passages where the Israelites are told to keep the festivals "wherever you live" (Lev 23:14, 21), giving the impression to some that this is referring to any place in the world. But that is certainly not the case. The Israelites were heading to Canaan and that was the place where they will reside and where they were expected to celebrate the festivals. That was the land the Lord gave them "as a home" (Num 15:2; cf. Ezek 6:6).

the festivals exactly as the Lord instructed the people in the Old Testament. Christians who are interested in keeping the festivals face the problem of providing the biblical evidence that would support the way the festivals should be observed independent of the temple services in lands outside Israel. If they cannot provide the evidence then they are formulating their own non-biblical traditions.

D. Festivals and Ethnic Identity

The religious and ethnic identity of the Israelites was closely associated with the celebration of some of the festivals. Very important in this case is the Passover, which was restricted to Israelites and to those who through circumcision became Israelites (Exod 12:43-40). It may well be that the Judaizers Paul confronted in the Christian churches were requiring Christian gentiles to become Jews (to be circumcised; Acts 15:1) in order for them to be able to celebrate Passover and possibly other festivals and Jewish rituals.

E. Festivals and Sinai

The Bible establishes the fact that the festivals were instituted in Israel at Mount Sinai, as part of the covenant between God and Israel. Some have suggested that Gen 1:14 indicates that God instituted the festivals before Sinai because the passage states, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark the seasons [*mô^cēd*] and days and years." The Hebrew term *mô^cēd*, translated here "seasons," is the technical term used to designate the festivals. For instance, in Lev 23:2 we read, "These are my appointed feasts, the appointed feasts of the Lord;" here the plural *mô^{ca}dîm* is rendered "appointed feasts." But it is unsound to transfer that meaning to Gen 1:14. First, the Hebrew term *mô^cēd* is often used in the sense of "appointed time" and expresses the idea of "season," a particular time of the year when an event takes place like, for instance, when the birds migrate (Jer 8:7; cf. Gen 17:21), or the harvest of grapes is ready (Hosea 2:9). It does not exclusively refer to the festivals. Most critical scholars believe that in Gen 1:14 the term also refers to the cultic festival. That conclusion is based on their conviction

that Genesis was written during the post-exilic period and that Moses did not write it. We disagree with them.

Second, if we want to define the meaning of the term *l'mô'ca dîm* in Gen 1:14 more specifically, we should look for a context in which the creation of the moon and the sun is being discussed and not to its usage in contexts of cultic discussions. We find such context in Ps 104:19, where God's creative purpose and power is described: "He made the moon for the seasons." The Hebrew phrase *l'mô'ca dîm* specifies the purpose or function of the moon and probably refers to the phases of the moon or more correctly to the function of the moon as the celestial body that determines the fixed time called "month." Third, the passage in Gen cannot be used to argue that the festivals were instituted at creation because the passage is not dealing with the regulation of festivals but with the specific functions of the sun and the moon. The thematic and terminological connection between Gen 1:14 and Ps 104:19 indicates that the term *l'mô'ca dîm* is used in Gen to designate the fixed period of time we call "month," a word that is not employed in the passage. In Genesis "a threefold function is assigned to these celestial light bearers: to separate between day and night, to serve as signs of the passage of time, and to illuminate the earth."¹²

F. Festivals and the Sabbath

Some have even suggested that the Sabbath was also considered to be a festival and that, therefore, if the festivals were abolished the Sabbath also would have been abolished. This is obviously incorrect. First, the Sabbath was instituted long before Sinai, even before the entrance of sin into the world; more specifically, during the creation week. It is not a shadow pointing to Christ and his work. Second, Lev 23:2 is a parenthetical statement and not the first feast listed in the chapter. It is true that in 23:1 it is said, "These are my appointed feast. . ." and then the Sabbath commandment is immediately mentioned. But notice that in 23:3, after the reference to the Sabbath, we again find the introductory

¹² Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 127.

phrase, “These are the Lord’s appointed feasts. . .” The biblical writer is making a special effort to indicate that the Sabbath is not part of the feast by going back to that phrase before listing the feast.

Third, the reference to the Sabbath is important because that day is particularly holy. In 23:2 it is stated that during the Sabbath the Israelites were “not to do any work.” Concerning the feasts we read that during the time of the sacred assembly—the ceremonial Sabbaths—the people will “do no regular work” (23:8, 21, 25, 35, 36). This indicates that there was a type of work that they were allowed to do during the festivals that was forbidden during the Sabbath. By the way, during the Day of Atonement the people were not to do any work (23:28).

Finally, Lev 23:37-38 explicitly states that the festivals are not like the Sabbath: “These are the Lord’s appointed feast that you are to proclaim as sacred assemblies to bring offerings made to the Lord. . . In addition to the Sabbaths of the Lord and in addition to your gifts . . .” The Lord did not want the people to consider the Sabbath as one of those feasts and made it clear that they were to be celebrated in addition to the Sabbath. Even the offerings brought during the festivals were also in addition to those brought during the regular services. There is no biblical basis for suggesting that the Sabbath and the feasts belong together.

G. Festivals and Christians

The New Testament makes clear that the sanctuary services of the Old Testament came to an end through the sacrifice of Christ on the cross and through his high priestly ministry in the heavenly sanctuary. The law regulating the Israelite system of worship was “a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves” (Heb 10:1), and found its fulfillment in Christ.¹³ Concerning the feast of Passover Ellen G. White says,

¹³ It is argued by some that since the celebration of the festivals was “a lasting ordinance for the generation to come” (Lev 23:14), they were to remain for ever. The term “for ever” does not necessarily mean that whatever it is referring to will never come to an end (cf. Exod 27:21; Lev 7:36; 10:9; 17:7; Num 10:8; 15:15; 18:23). For instance, the fire that

“On the fourteenth day of the month, at even, the Passover was celebrated, its solemn, impressive ceremonies commemorating the deliverance from bondage in Egypt, and pointing forward to the sacrifice that should deliver from the bondage of sin. *When the Saviour yielded up His life on Calvary, the significance of the Passover ceased, and the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper was instituted as a memorial of the same event of which the Passover had been a type.*”¹⁴ When the type met the antitype the type came to an end. In another place she wrote, “Christ was standing at the point of transition between two economies and their two great festivals. He, the spotless Lamb of God, was about to present Himself as a sin offering, that *He would thus bring to an end the system of types and ceremonies that for four thousand years had pointed to His death.* As He ate the Passover with His disciples, *He instituted in its place the service that was to be the memorial of His great sacrifice. The national festival of the Jews was to pass away forever.* The service which Christ established was to be observed by His followers in all lands and through all ages.”¹⁵ She could have hardly have been clearer on the typological function of Passover and the other types and ceremonies.

We do no longer abide by the cultic Levitical regulations. We have a new high priest who does not belong to the order of Aaron and “when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law” (Heb 7:12). The law mentioned here should not be limited to the one regulating priestly lineage; it is rather the law that could not bring perfection (7:19), the law regulating the sanctuary services.

It could probably be argued that during the apostolic period some Christians may have observed the festivals but there is no biblical evidence to support the conclusion that this was a Christian requirement for membership in the church. There are several passages in the NT that give the impression that Paul celebrated

will burn forever refers to a fire that will burn until it consumes its object and then it will extinguish itself. The feast were to last until the time they found their fulfillment in the work of Jesus.

¹⁴ White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 539.

¹⁵ Idem, *Desire of Ages*, p. 652.

some feasts but that is not clearly stated in those passages (Acts 20:6, 15; 1 Cor 16:8).¹⁶ We should also keep in mind that Paul on one occasion went to the temple in Jerusalem and offered sacrifices (Acts 21:17-26) and even allowed Timothy to be circumcised (Acts 16:1). Yet he was fully aware of the fact that such practices were not required from Christian believers.¹⁷

¹⁶ However, E. G. White comments on Acts, “At Philippi Paul tarried to keep the Passover. Only Luke remained with him, the other members of the company passing on to Troas to await him there. The Philippians were the most loving and truehearted of the apostle’s converts, and during the eight days of the feast he enjoyed peaceful and happy communion with them” (*Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 390, 391). Several comments are in order. (1) It is interesting to observe that Paul’s companions did not stay with him but continued in their mourning. This could suggest that they did not keep the feast. (2) E. G. White does not say that the Philippians kept the feast with Paul but that they enjoyed those days of communion with him. (3) It is important to observe that the text does not provide any information concerning how Paul kept the feast outside Jerusalem. We know little concerning the celebration of the main Jewish festival by the Jews during the dispersion. (4) The fact that neither Paul nor any of the apostles regulated the Christian observance of those feasts indicates that they were not a Christian requirement. Otherwise instruction should have been given. *Since the Bible is silent concerning that issue, any attempt to regulate its observance for modern Christians would be a human imposition without any biblical support.*

It could be useful to say a word concerning Acts 18:21. The King James Version reads, “I must by all means keep this feast that cometh in Jerusalem.” More recent translations omit that sentence. The reason is that “textual evidence favors the omission” of those words (Francis D. Nichols, *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 6 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1956), p. 367.

¹⁷ Some have found in the following statement from E. G. White support for the observance of the Feast of Tabernacles today: “Well would it be for the people of God at the present time to have a Feast of Tabernacles--a joyous commemoration of the blessings of God to them. As the children of Israel celebrated the deliverance that God had wrought for their fathers, and His miraculous preservation of them during their journeyings from Egypt, so should we gratefully call to mind the various ways He has devised for bringing us out from the world, and from the darkness of error, into the precious light of His grace and truth” (*Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 540, 541). But she is not promoting the celebration of the OT festival. She is simply suggesting, giving advice, recommending that we have a Feast of Tabernacle in the sense of coming together to commemorate the many blessings that we have received from the Lord. This will be like a testimony service where church members are given time to thank God publicly for His goodness toward them. To conclude from what she says there that we should observe the Feast of Tabernacles is to misinterpret

The references to the festivals in the New Testament have the primary purpose of dating events. For instance, the arrest of Peter by Herod is dated to the time of the days of unleavened bread (Acts 12:3). The mention of the festival does not intent to show that Herod or Peter was celebrating the feast. Another case is the reference to the “fast” in Acts 27:9. “Fast” in that verse most probably refers to the Day of Atonement. But the passage is not saying that Paul was celebrating that ceremony. It is mentioned in order to date the incident and to provide a reason for the advice that Paul was giving to the sailors. Sailing was dangerous during the last part of the year, specifically after September. By referring to the Day of Atonement, Luke dates the event using the Jewish calendar. What he seems to be saying is that “not only had the dangerous time for sailing begun, the fast (*or* even the Fast) was now past—so it was more dangerous than ever.”¹⁸

There is some evidence to support the conclusion that when gentiles became Christians they accepted the Jewish calendar.¹⁹ The reason was that “other calendrical systems name the days and the months after pagan deities and mark out the seasons by pagan rites. In contrast, the Jews distinguish the seasons by festivals that obviously have no pagan connotations. They recognize the months by new moons and name these months using agricultural terms. They designate the week by Sabbaths; beginning from the Sabbath, they number, instead of name, the days of the week one through six. Jewish, pagan, or not time-keeping system at all are the only options available to Paul and his communities,

her. The Feast of Tabernacles was a harvest festival but in the Christian church the true harvest is the harvest of souls that will take place at the moment of the Second Coming. Then, as pointed out already, the Feast will be celebrated before the throne of God (Rev 7). The celebration will take place after and not before the harvest.

¹⁸ F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1951), p. 455. The fasting mentioned in Acts 13:2-3 has nothing to do with the Day of Atonement.

¹⁹ For evidence see, Troy Martin, “Pagan and Judeo-Christian Time-Keeping Schemes in Gal 4.10 and Col 2.16,” *New Testament Studies* 42 (1996):105-119.

and the evidence indicates they opt for the former.”²⁰ Therefore we should not conclude that the references to feasts in the New Testament necessarily mean that the apostles and the churches were celebrating those feast.

IV. Conclusion

The Israelite festivals were joyful occasions for the Israelites within the theocracy instituted by God at Sinai. They commemorated important salvific events in the history of Israel and at the same time pointed typologically to the future work of salvation that God was to perform on behalf of His people through the Messiah. With the arrival of the Messiah the reality they pointed to is already here and there is no need any longer to look at the symbols and shadows. The only feast that is not yet fulfilled or being fulfilled is the Feast of Tabernacles, but we are already part of the universal harvest that Christ will come to gather at the Second Coming. The Bible indicates that the celebration of the festivals had geographical and temporal limitations and that their religious functions found their fulfillment in Christ.



²⁰ Ibid., p. 108. He mentions 1 Cor 16:2, where Paul refers to the “first day from the Sabbath” and not to the day of the sun. It would be incorrect to conclude that because of the fact that Christians had accepted the Jewish calendar they also accepted or celebrated the Jewish festivals. Martin adds, “Following the destruction of the temple in 70 EC, the Jewish temporal system remains intact even when the Jews are no longer able to offer the prescribed sacrifices” (pp. 110-111)

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