

Biblical Pilgrimage Festivals & Major Feast Days of Ancient Israel

Three Biblical Pilgrimage Festivals:

- **Hebrew Bible Origins:**

- Three agriculture-related pilgrimage festivals are mandated in **Exodus 23:14-17**: a seven-day springtime festival of **Unleavened Bread**, around the barley harvest; an early summer festival of **Harvest**, when the wheat ripens; and an autumn festival of **Ingathering**, when olives, grapes, and other fruits are harvested (cf. Exod 34:18-23).
- The book of **Leviticus** gives regulations for feast days that are to be celebrated "with a sacred assembly," including the weekly **sabbath** (Lev 23:1-4) and **seven annual feast days**: Passover (7 days, incl. unleavened bread), First fruits, Pentecost or Weeks, the New Year, the Day of Atonement, the first day of Booths, and the eighth day of Booths (Lev 23:5-44)
- These festivals are later *transformed* and combined with commemorations of historical/religious events; originally the people could bring their offerings to any major sanctuary, but later they are required to go to the Jerusalem temple, esp. for *three main pilgrimage festivals* (see **Deut 16:1-17**).

- **Feast of Passover (*Pesach*) and Unleavened Bread (*Mazzo*):**

- The barley-harvest festival was transformed to include the commemoration of the original Exodus, when the Hebrews came out of Egypt, ca. 1300 BCE.
- The *Passover* was originally celebrated in each family's house; an unblemished lamb was slaughtered and eaten, and its blood sprinkled on the doorposts with a branch of the hyssop plant (**Exod 12:1-13, 21-28, 43-49**; cf. John 19:29).
- The lamb was slaughtered on the afternoon of the 14th day of the month of Nisan/Abib (called the "Day of Preparation"), and the Passover meal eaten just after sunset (the beginning of the 15th day, in the Jewish calendar).
- The seven-day feast of *Unleavened Bread* is also related to the Exodus, when the Hebrews did not even have time to let bread rise as they were leaving Egypt (**Exod 12:14-20; 13:3-10**).
- Both festivals combined became a major pilgrimage feast, with the people going to the Jerusalem temple to offer the sacrificial lamb (Lev 23:4-14; Num 9:2-5; 28:16-25; **Deut 16:1-8**).
- In modern Judaism, the entire **Song of Songs** is read in the synagogue services during Pesach.

- **Feast of Weeks (Pentecost or *Shavuot*):**

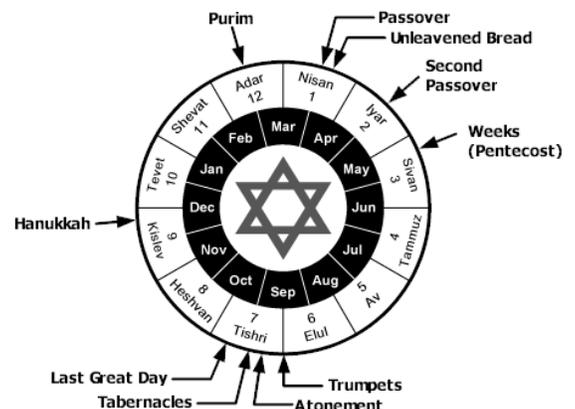
- The older "Wheat-Harvest" festival was later mandated to be held 7 weeks (=50 days in Hebrew counting) after the Passover (Lev 23:15-21; Num 28:26; **Deut 16:9-12; 34:22**).
- Later it also became a commemoration of the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai (Exod 19-20).
- In the NT it is called "Pentecost" since it is held "50 days" after Passover (cf. Acts 2:1; 20:16; 1 Cor 16:8).
- In modern Judaism, the Book of **Ruth** is read in the synagogue services during the Feast of Shavuot.

- **Feast of Booths (Tabernacles or *Sukkoth*):**

- The older "Ingathering" or "Fruit-Harvest" festival became a commemoration of the 40 years that the Hebrew wandered in the desert, living in temporary shelters like tents or "booths" (Lev 23:33-36, 39-43; **Deut 16:13-15**).
- In the Second-Temple period, it was an 8-day festival involving the imagery of water and light; *water* was brought daily from the Pool of Siloam (cf. John 9:1) up to the Temple and poured over the altar; *light* was provided by large lamps that were lit nightly in the temple courtyards.
- The eighth day of Sukkoth, considered the last and greatest day of the feast, included an assembly of all the people (Lev 23:36).
- In modern Judaism, the Book of **Qoheleth** is read during the feast of Sukkoth.

- **New Testament References:**

- The *Synoptic Gospels* have **only one Passover** meal (often mentioned together with the Feast of **Unleavened Bread**), which Jesus celebrates just before his death (Mark 14:12-26; Matt 26:17-29; Luke 22:15-20)
- The *Fourth Gospel* reports **three different Passovers** during Jesus' public ministry (John 2:13-23; 6:4; 11:55--19:14; but never mentions "Unleavened Bread"), as well as the Festival of **Booths** (7:2, 14, 37), and an unspecified feast (5:1) that some scholar think might be **Pentecost**.



Other Feasts and Special Days in the Hebrew Bible:

- **Weekly Sabbath (*Shabbat*):**
 - Resting from work on the seventh day of the week is mandated in the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:8-11; Deut 5:12-15), and reinforced frequently throughout the Hebrew Bible (Exod 23:12; 34:21; Lev 23:3).
 - It is based on the story that God rested from his work after the six "days" of creation (Gen 2:1-3).
 - However, Jews throughout the centuries have debated exactly what constitutes unlawful "work" (cf. Jer 17:10-27) and whether God does not do at least some essential life-sustaining "work" on the sabbath (cf. John 5:9-18; 7:21-23).
- **First of the Month (*Rosh Kodesh*):**
 - The sighting of the new moon each month was a significant event celebrated by a minor festival in biblical times (1 Chron 23:31; 2 Chron 2:4; Ps 81:3; etc.)
 - In modern Judaism, the first of each month is not a major celebration, although some special prayers and readings are done in the synagogues.
 - In some Jewish communities, it is a day free from work for women (but not men), to honor them for their refusal to participate in the worship of the Golden Calf.
- **New Year (*Rosh HaShanah*):**
 - The first day of the seventh month (the month of "Tishri" on the Jewish calendar) is celebrated with "sabbath rest" and a "sacred assembly" (Lev 23:23-25; cf. Num 29:1).
 - On this day, the burnt offerings were reestablished by the priest Ezra after the Babylonian Exile (Ezra 3:6; cf. Neh 8:2).
 - Festivities include the blowing of the *Shofar* (a type of *trumpet* made out of a ram's horn).
 - Note that the Jewish Calendar has *four different days* called "New Year" (just as Westerners have "New School Year" and "New Fiscal Year" dates different from Jan. 1): **Nissan 1** (in March) = new year for counting calendar months; **Elul 1** (in August) = new year for tithing of animals; **Tishri 1** (in September) = new year for years (increase year numbers); **Shevat 15** (in February) = new year for trees (when fruit is ripe enough to eat).
- **Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*):**
 - An annual purification ritual, involving a sacrifice offered for the purification of the temple, the land, and the people (Lev 16:1-34; 23:26-32).
 - The New Testament does not directly mention this feast day, but adapts its imagery to speak of Jesus' death as an atonement for sins (Rom 3:25; Heb 2:17).
- **Feast of Dedication or Feast of Lights (*Hanukkah*):**
 - The Jerusalem temple had been "desecrated" (not "destroyed") by the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes in 167 BC.
 - After the success of their revolt, the Maccabees cleansed and rededicated the Temple and the Altar in 164 BC, and mandated an annual 8-day celebration to commemorate this joyful event (1 Macc 4:36-59).
 - This winter-time feast is not mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, but only in the Deuterocanonical/Apocryphal books of 1 Maccabees and 2 Maccabees.
 - It is also mentioned briefly in John 10:22, but nowhere else in the New Testament.
- **Feast of Lots (*Purim*):**
 - Commemorates Queen Esther's defeat of a plan to slaughter all Persian Jews, ca. 400 BCE, as told in the Book of Esther.
 - In modern Judaism, the entire Book of **Esther** read on the day of Purim. It is a time of great celebration, with noisemakers, costumes, etc. (somewhat equivalent to Western "Carnival" or "Mardi Gras" festivities).
- **Lesser Agricultural Feasts:**
 - "Fifteenth Day of the Month of Shevat" (*Tu B'Shevat*) - considered the "New Year for Trees" (Lev 19:23-25)
 - "Counting the Omer" (*Sefirat Ha'Omer*) - based on Lev 23:15-16, which tells the Israelites to "count" the fifty days between Pesach and Shavuot.
- **Sabbath Years:**
 - Every seventh year, no agricultural work was to be done; the land should also be allowed to "rest," and the people should harvest only what grows on its own in the fields (Exod 23:10-11; Lev 25:2-7, 18-24; 26:34-43).
- **Jubilee Year:**
 - Every fifty years, all debts are to be forgiven, slaves are to be freed, and land that was sold was to be returned to original owners (Lev 25:8-17, 25-55; 27:16-25). Scholars debate whether this biblical injunction was ever actually carried out.

Jewish Feasts Introduced in the Rabbinic Period:

- ***Simchat Torah*** ("Rejoicing in the Torah"):
 - Held on the day after the end of Sukkoth (thus the 23rd day of Tishri), this feast celebrates the ending and restarting of the annual cycle of Torah readings in the synagogue.
 - On this day, the end of the Book of Deuteronomy is read, followed immediately by the beginning of the Book of Genesis.
 - Although not mandated in the Hebrew Bible as a particular feast day, many biblical passages celebrate the centrality of the Torah in Jewish life (e.g., Ps 119).
- ***Tish B'Av*** ("9th day of the month of Av"):
 - A major fast day (fasting for 25 hours), commemorating the two destructions of the Jerusalem Temple (586 BCE & 70 CE).
 - The destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians is told near the end of the Books of Kings and Chronicles, and bemoaned by the prophet Jeremiah.
 - The destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans is told by the first-century Jewish historian Josephus.
 - The Book of **Lamentations** (attributed to Jeremiah) is read in synagogue services on this day.