

Sacred Assemblies



These are the appointed festivals of the Lord that you shall proclaim as holy convocations, my appointed festivals.

“The festivals can be considered a map for traveling in time. The special days of the festival cycle are not random moments scattered over the year.

One can also say that the festivals act as lodgings for travelers making their way through the year. These festival inns are special accommodations not solely for rest or retreat from the world, but also places to halt and take our bearings to make sure we are traveling and not just going around in circles.

These are not inns for sleeping but rather for awakening from obliviousness.”

The Jewish Holidays by Michael Strassfeld

“What does the significance of feasts and festivals of the Old Testament hold for Christians today?”

“How should Seventh-day Adventist theology, that recognizes the validity of the Seventh-day Sabbath, view the Levitical feasts?”

These two questions were raised by Jacques B. Doukhan, Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament Exegesis, Andrews University. They remain two of the toughest questions for Seventh-day Adventist's to answer today.

Purpose

This brochure is not intended to be a rebuttal to the stance taken by various Christian groups on the observance of the feasts. It is also not intended to be an exhaustive treatise on the subject. It is instead an attempt to give a clearer insight into the appointed times of the Lord.

In this brochure we are going to briefly touch on each of the festivals of the Bible, why they have relevance today, and how we

“Shall we not keep holy festivals unto God?”

Shall we not show that we have some enthusiasm in His service? With the grand, ennobling theme of salvation before us, shall we be as cold as statues of marble... shall we be unmoved when the plan of salvation is unfolded before us?”

E. G. White in AU CR, November 24, 1913 par. 1

should approach them.

These times of celebration are important not only to Israel but also to the overall message of the Bible. Each one foreshadows or symbolizes an aspect of the plan of redemption. That is why they are referred to as the Feasts of the LORD and not the ‘Feasts of Israel’ or the ‘Feasts of the Jews’ as some theologians refer to them.

When you mention the “Jewish Festivals,” most people immediately think of Leviticus 23. but in addition to those appointed times, there are additional festivals that were celebrated in the Bible and have relevance to us today.

So let us start with a listing of the festivals. For ease of understanding they are listed both by their Hebrew name and their commonly understood Greek/Latin name:

Shabbat	The Sabbath
Pesach	Passover/Feast of Unleavened Bread
The Omer	Feast of First Fruits
Shavout	Feast of Weeks/Pentecost
Rosh Hashanah	Day of Remembrance/Feast of Trumpets
Yom Kippur	Day of Atonement
Sukkot	Feast of Tabernacles/Booths
Simhat Torah	Rejoicing in the Law
Hanukkah	Feast of Dedication/Festival of Lights
Purim	Feast of Lots/Feast of Esther

You will note that the list of festivals starts with the Sabbath as it is the most important celebration of all!

Whenever determining the correct path that God wants us to follow, it is important to always start with His Word. The following is a partial list of verses in which the above listed festivals are found:

The Sabbath – Genesis 2:2; Exodus 20:10; Deuteronomy 5:14; Matthew 12:8; Hebrews 4:9–10; Revelation 1:10

Pesach/The Omer/Shavout/Rosh Hashanah/Yom

Kippur/Sukkot/ Simhat Torah – Exodus 12; Exodus 34:18; Leviticus 23; Numbers 28; Deuteronomy 16; Nehemiah 8:1-12; John 2:23; John 7; Hebrews 11:28; Revelation 14

Hanukkah & Purim – 1 Maccabees 4; John 10:22; Easter 9:17-32

The feasts often began and ended with a “Sabbath rest” where the Jews were commanded to not do any customary work on those days. Both the normal weekly Sabbath and the special Sabbaths that were to be observed as part of the Jewish Feasts point us to the ultimate Sabbath rest which is found only in Jesus Christ.

A Brief Overview of Each of the Festivals/Feasts

The Sabbath is one of the most important commandments of the ten. It is a part of those commandments related to our relationship with God and our worship of God. It is also the commandment chosen to be the “sign” of the entire Covenant. Learning the meaning of the Sabbath will provide us with a most valuable lesson in how to study, interpret, and apply the Scriptures.

Pesach reminds us of redemption from sin. It was the time when Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, was offered as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. It is on that basis alone that God can justify the ungodly sinner. Just as the blood of a lamb sprinkled on the doorpost of Israelite homes caused the spirit of the Lord to pass over those homes during the last plague on Egypt (Exodus 12), so those covered by the blood of the Lamb will escape the spiritual death and judgment God will visit upon all who reject Him.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread is part of the Passover and lasted one week, during which time the Israelites ate no bread with yeast in remembrance of their haste in preparing for their exodus from Egypt. In the New Testament, yeast is often associated with sin (1 Corinthians 5:6-8; Galatians 5:9) and just as Israel was to remove yeast from their bread, so are Christians to purge sin from their lives and live a new life in godliness and righteousness.

The Omer took place at the beginning of the harvest and signified Israel’s gratitude to and dependence upon God. According to Leviticus 23:9-14, an Israelite would bring a sheaf of the first grain of the harvest to the priest, who would wave it before the Lord as an offering. Deuteronomy 26:1-11 states that when the Israelites brought the first fruits of their harvest before the priest, they were to acknowledge that God had delivered them from Egypt and had given them the Promised Land. This reminds us of Christ’s resurrection as He was the “first fruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Corinthians 15:20). Just as Christ was the first to rise from the dead and receive a glorified body, so shall all those who are born again also follow Him, being resurrected to inherit an “incorruptible body” (1 Corinthians 15:35-49)

Shavuot occurred 50 days after the Omer festival. It is held to celebrate the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai. This feast reminds us of the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise to send “another helper” (John 14:16) who would indwell in believers and empower them for ministry. The coming of the Holy Spirit 50 days after Jesus’ resurrection was the guarantee (Ephesians 1:13-14) that the promise of salvation and future resurrection will come to pass.

Rosh Hashanah was commanded to be held on the first day of the seventh month and was to be a “day of trumpet blast”. The trumpet blasts were meant to signal to Israel that they were

entering a sacred season. The agricultural year was coming to a close; there was to be a reckoning with the sins of the people on the Day of Atonement. The Feast of Trumpets signifies Christ's second coming. Certainly this feast points towards the coming Day of the Lord.

Yom Kippur occurs just ten days after Rosh Hashanah. It is considered the holiest day of the year by the Jewish people. The Day of Atonement was the day the High Priest went into the Holy of Holies each year to make an offering for the sins of Israel. Yom Kippur clearly points to the work of the Messiah in the heavenly temple on our behalf.

Sukkot takes place five days after Yom Kippur. For seven days, the Israelites presented offerings to the Lord, during which time they lived in huts made from palm branches. Living in the booths recalled the sojourn of the Israelites prior to their taking the land of Canaan. This feast signifies the future time when Christ rules and reigns on earth. For the rest of eternity people from every tribe, tongue and nation will "tabernacle" or dwell with Christ in the New Jerusalem.

Simhat Torah is held on the eighth day of Sukkot. It is for celebrating "in the Torah". While this may sound much like Shavuot, it differs in that the Jewish people are expressing their joy for being "in" the Law. This festival is for us to express our joy in in our study of God's word.

Hanukkah is about light and dedication. Celebrated for eight nights in commemoration of the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem, on Hanukkah Jesus Christ declared that He was indeed the Messiah, the Light of the world.

Purim is the holiday that celebrates the saving of the Hebrew people from extermination while in Persian captivity. It is about

redemption and God's protecting hand even when everything looks lost. It is also symbolic of His second coming when all will be saved.

What is the will of the Father?

That we keep his commandments. Christ, to enforce the will of his Father, became the author of the statutes and precepts given through Moses to the people of God. *Christians who extol Christ, but array themselves against the law governing the Jewish church, array Christ against Christ.*

E. G. White in RH, May 6, 1875 par. 16

The biblical festivals were intricately linked to the sacrificial system. Indeed, the sacrifices were not mere rituals or cultural expressions of piety; they were central to the very meaning of the festivals. The Feast of Passover, for example, did not just require the slaughter and eating of a lamb (Exod. 12:3-10); in fact, the lamb gave Passover its fundamental meaning and reason for existence. The Passover was specifically designed as a reminder of the sacrifice of the lamb offered in the Exodus event: God's passing over the blood of the slaughtered animal, thereby granting redemption (Exod. 12:13). This connection is so strong that Passover is actually identified with the lamb itself. Pesach (Passover) is the lamb (2 Chron. 30:15).

Not only Passover, but also all the other festivals revolved around sacrifices in connection to atonement. The biblical texts dealing with the feasts stipulate the sacrifice of a goat as a sin offering to make atonement for the people (Num. 28:15, 22, 30; 29:5, 11, 28).

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. **It was God's design that these anniversaries should call Him to the minds of the people.**

E.G. White – DA 447

In the New Testament, the sacrifices point to the coming and function of Christ. Jesus is identified with the Passover lamb (John 1:36; cf. 1 Cor. 5:7), with the whole sacrificial system seen as the shadow of "things to come" (Heb. 10:1; cf. Col. 2:16, 17). The sacrifices convey a prophetic message concerning the process of salvation: God will come down and offer Himself as a sacrifice in order to atone for sin and redeem humanity.

The effect of Christ's sacrifice is definitive and perpetual. In that sense, we have to understand the phrase "statute forever throughout your generations" (Lev. 23:14, NKJV). The phrase "statute forever" does not mean a perpetual stipulation; otherwise this would mean that we still have to do all the sacrifices. Indeed, the same phrase "statute forever" is also used for the sacrifices (Lev. 3:17) and all the other rituals associated with the tabernacle—the ablutions (Exod. 30:21), the priestly garments (Exod.28:43), the lamps (Exod. 27:20, 21), etc. In other words, the use of the expression "forever" does not mean a perpetual obligation but should be understood within the context of the temple—that is, as long as the temple was standing.

Now that the sacrifices are no longer possible because of the absence of the temple, and because the prophecy contained within the sacrifices has been fulfilled in Christ, it follows that sacrifices and related rituals, such as Levitical festivals, are no longer

mandatory. The type has met the Antitype. To engage in festivals with the idea that they are compulsory for our own salvation makes the Antitype, the Messiah, altogether irrelevant.

Understanding Antitypical Application

So is there a way in which the festivals can be understood within the Christian context? Are the festivals shadowy types to be done away with? Or do they remain God ordained teaching tools which guard us from forgetting the incredible glory of God's gift to us?

Let us consider the application of the gospel in the modern believer's life and those shadows which have yet to be fulfilled.

The First Pesach was a culminating event. Prior to it, the children of Israel were in bondage in Mizraim, a place of narrow places or straits. The event that initiated the most heated oppression was the return to keeping Sabbath. God established it as the sign that He was going to deliver them from the tight spot they had found themselves in. He would deliver them from bondage and give them freedom.

All future Pesachs, also known as the days of unleavened bread, were a symbol of the importance of removing sin from the most important dwelling of all—the human heart which has been delivered from its bondage to self-service and self-destruction. Embracing this practice brings home to the heart in a most powerful way our complete helplessness to remove the self-centeredness from ourselves. We discover that something as simple as removing all leaven from our homes reminds us of our dependence upon the Gift of God.

The eighth day being a holy convocation points us to final removal of sin from the universe. We also recognize that unless we are hidden in Christ, God will be a consuming fire to all who are

outside. All who love self above God will become their own sacrifice, never to be seen again.

Shavuot does more than remind us of the giving of the Holy Spirit. It reminds us that the disciples prepared their hearts for this outpouring by submitting to the instruction of the Moses and He who was the one greater than Moses. On that day, they could truly say “great peace have they that love thy law.” It is an excellent opportunity to review the relationship between the law and the gospel, and to open our hearts to receiving the Spirit rather than the letter (as we are so prone to doing).



Rosh Hoshana warns us of the final judgment which is approaching rapidly. It draws our attention to the time in which we live.

In Jewish thought, the purpose of the 10 days leading up to Yom Kippur is multi-faceted. It is a time of examination—reviewing the life lived in the past year, putting things right with those you have

things against and those who may have things against you. It is a time to remember that God is the creator and King of the universe. It calls us to hear the shofar as God’s recall of those who have strayed from Israel’s fold. It is a time to rejoice in restoration and celebrate freedom. It is pointing forward to the coming of Messiah’s kingdom of peace.

Do any of these ideas resonated with you? Is this not the work preparatory to the final cosmic Yom Kippur we have taught since 1844?

Yom Kippur takes us to the end of the great controversy between Christ and Satan. It reminds us of who is at fault for the current condition of things. And it points us to the work of our Great High Priest as first the once and for all sacrifice, and then the one who calls us to identify with His call to let Him live out His live within us.

Yom Kippur drives home to our hearts that we must identify with Jesus, even as He identified with us. We must deny the old man of self-love and embrace the self-less love of God. We afflict our souls in sorrow for what our self-centered ways did to the Lamb of God, and praise Him for what He did on our behalf. We agree that Satan is to blame!

Sukkot reminds us that this world is not our home. We are still sojourners. We have not yet inherited that land which God has promised our Father Abraham—that city whose builder and maker is God.

The reason God gives Israel for observing this appointment was to remember that when God brought them out of the Land of Egypt, He made them dwell in booths or tents. In Zech. 14:16, the prophet speaks of “every one that is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall even go up from year to year to worship the

King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the feast of tabernacles." Could it be that in the earth made new, Sukkot may be an eternal reminder of the time when we were caught between Mitzrayim and the promised redemption?



Summary

Valuing the riches and blessings associated with festivals, Christians may search for a proper way to engage in festivals. This practice should not only be conducted with theological lucidity but also with prudence and balanced wisdom, humility, openness, and a willingness to learn.

The most important lesson to learn from the festivals is to relax and enjoy your religious life. All these tensions and discussions on whether we should observe the festivals, in fact, go against the very spirit of the feasts. Far from urging a serious and tense discussion and pressing obligation to observe or not observe, the message of the feasts is, on the contrary, a gracious invitation for joy and peace.

It is important to remember what Paul stated in Colossians 2:16, "Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or Sabbaths.," and James 1:23–25 states, "be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive [yourselves]. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing."

God gave the festivals so that we could grow closer to Him in understanding. He desired to make plain His plan of redemption and for us to spend time with Him throughout the year. The festivals are not about having a celebration in the worldly sense but rather for awakening from the obliviousness of the world to the consciousness of the gospel message.

As you consider the festivals, remember the words of Psalms 119: 97–106:

Oh, how I love your law!

It is my meditation all day long.

Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies,
for it is always with me.

I have more understanding than all my teachers,
for your decrees are my meditation.

I understand more than the aged,
for I keep your precepts.

I hold back my feet from every evil way,
in order to keep your word.

I do not turn away from your ordinances,
for you have taught me.

How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth!

Through your precepts I get understanding;
therefore I hate every false way.
Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.
I have sworn an oath and confirmed it,
to observe your righteous ordinances.

Christ is the Good Shepherd, with earnest, unwearied steps seeking for the lost sheep. **He attended the great yearly festivals of the nation**, and to the multitudes, absorbed in outward ceremony, He spoke of heavenly things, bringing eternity within their view. He gained the attention of high and low, rich and poor. To all He brought treasures from the storehouse of wisdom. He delighted and comforted the poor and lowly with the assurance of God's love for them. He spoke to them in language so simple that they could not fail to understand, and His words lifted their minds to the heavenly Father, full of grace and tenderness.

E.G. White, 21MR 99.1



Beit Shalom Balevav

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