

Major Feasts and Pilgrimage Festivals of Ancient Judaism

by Prof. Felix Just, S.J. - Loyola Marymount University

Three Main Pilgrimage Festivals:

- **Hebrew Bible Origins:**
 - Three agriculture-related pilgrimage festivals are mandated in **Exodus 23:14-17**: a 7-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).
 - 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 (see Deut 16:1-17).
- **Passover (*Pesach*) and Unleavened Bread (*Mazzot*):**
 - Commemorating the original Exodus, when the Hebrews came out of Egypt, 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**; cf. John 19:29).
 - The lamb is 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 are combined into a major pilgrimage feast, with the people going to the Jerusalem temple to offer the sacrificial lamb (Lev 23:4-14; Num 28:16-25; **Deut 16:1-8**).
- **Feast of Weeks (Pentecost or *Shavuot*):**
 - The older "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 Law 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).
 - Holocaust literally means "that which goes up" and is a burnt offering in the Old Testament. It was only in WWI and II that it was used for atrocities.

- **Feast of Booths (Tabernacles or *Sukkoth*):**
 - The older "Ingathering" festival later 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**).
 - 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.
- **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)
 - John's Gospel reports three different Passovers during Jesus' public ministry (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 that some scholar think might be Pentecost (5:1).

Other Important Feasts:

- **Weekly Sabbath:**
 - 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)
- **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 writers do not direction mention this feast day, but adapt the imagery to speak of Jesus' death as an atonement for sins (Rom 3:25; Heb 2:17)
- **Feast of Dedication (*Hanukkah*):**
 - The temple of Jerusalem had been "desecrated" (but 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 also mentioned briefly in John 10:22, but nowhere else in the New Testament.
- **Sabbath Years and the Jubilee Year:**
 - Every seventh year, no agricultural work should 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)
 - Every fifty years, all debts are forgiven, slaves are freed, and land that was sold is returned to its original owners (Lev 25:8-17, 25-55; 27:16-25).