

The Feast of Tabernacles Or “Dwelling Places” (Succoth)

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A shadow of things to come
(the reality is found in Jesus)

Colossians 2:17



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In October 2011, I was privileged to go to Jerusalem at the time of the feast of “Tabernacles” which is known in Hebrew as Succoth. I had always wanted to go at that time of year, as I had been told how special and exciting it was, but had never previously been able to go, as the feast had not fallen during my half term holidays. That year was different though, and so I was able to experience for myself the carnival atmosphere with all the feasting, singing and dancing and the sense of corporate identity. I was also able to attend the Western Wall, or the Wailing Wall, and see all the orthodox Jews waving their lulavs*¹ and praying with particular fervour.

It is a special time in Israel, one of the three main pilgrim feasts of the Lord when the Israelites were expected to go to Jerusalem during the temple period and it is the climax of the autumn feasts, with all their activity, and change in emphasis from repentance to rejoicing.

In the verse from Colossians I have quoted on the front cover, Paul says we are not to judge anyone about the observance of festivals, as they are a “shadow of things that were to/are to come.” It is the purpose of this article to look at the various scriptures relating to this particular feast both in the Old and the New Testaments, in order to examine the major themes of this time and to look at what they did and do foreshadow. It is a great time of expectancy and anticipation, and perhaps I can get some way to explaining why this should be the case.

¹ *The lulav is the name given to the branches of Palm and Willow that God instructed should be waved in Leviticus 23:40

As I see it, there are four main themes that surround the feast:

- God’s perfection or completion.
- God’s provision
- God’s presence and glory
- God’s protection

So let’s start by looking at the first time it is mentioned in the Bible. In Leviticus 23 God sets out His “appointed times” or appointed feasts. There are seven of them mentioned in the chapter, namely Shabbat, Passover, Firstfruits, the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost), the Feast of Trumpets, Yom Kippur and finally Tabernacles (Succoth). The last three are all in the seventh month of Tishrei, with Tabernacles falling in the latter half of the month, and lasting for seven days. So, it’s the seventh feast, in the seventh month, and lasts for seven days. Now, in Scripture the number seven is the number of completion and fulfilment. So there was a sense at Tabernacles, which is primarily a harvest festival, when the fruit has all been gathered in, that the year’s cycle is complete, the barns are full, and it is time to pray for rain to soak the earth ready for planting the cereal crops that would be harvested at Passover. There is a sense of things coming full circle, just like the weekly cycle of seven, and a new period of time beginning.

Early on in their desert wanderings, God also sets out the pattern of this feast in Leviticus:

“So beginning with the fifteenth day of the seventh month, after you have gathered the crops of the land, celebrate the festival to the Lord for seven days; the first day is a day of sabbath rest, and the eighth day also is a day of sabbath rest. On the first day you are to take branches from luxuriant trees—from palms, willows

and other leafy trees—and rejoice before the Lord your God for seven days each year. This is to be a lasting ordinance for the generations to come; celebrate it in the seventh month. Live in temporary shelters for seven days: All native-born Israelites are to live in such shelters so your descendants will know that I had the Israelites live in temporary shelters when I brought them out of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.” So Moses announced to the Israelites the appointed festivals of the Lord.’ (Leviticus 23:39-44).

Essentially, then, they were to have a time of celebration every year at this season when they waved palm branches, camped outside, and remembered the experience of their forefathers in the wilderness. So, what was so special about the wilderness experience? Well, for a start, it was a time of utter dependence on God and His miraculous provision. No ready water supply in every venue they stopped in, no local food outlets to go and get a pastie if you were a bit peckish. It was the deserts of Sinai, Sin, and Shur, and there were upwards of two million people (we are told there were 600,000 males over 20) and God provided for their needs, and for their livestock, every day, for 40 years. Yes, there were times when they got a bit bored with the menu of quails and manna, and so thirsty they wanted to stone Moses and Aaron (Exodus 17v4), but He fed and clothed them too, and what is perhaps more important, He camped alongside them in His own Tabernacle.

They had been slaves in Egypt, so there must have been a tremendous sense of freedom in being nomads and not accountable to their Egyptian taskmasters any more. But they had been used to having their every move

controlled; to find themselves in a vast open space with no master to provide their needs must have been a bit freaky. But God was there too, even before the tabernacle was finished, His presence was tangible (Exodus 18v12).

In fact in Exodus 33 v14, Moses makes it clear to the Lord that if His presence didn't go with them, he was not going anywhere:

“Then Moses said To Him, “If your presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the Earth?” And the Lord said to Moses, “I Will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name.” Then Moses said, “Now show me your glory.””

So, from the outset there is a link between God's presence and His glory. In Exodus 40, we have an account of His particular presence when the tabernacle was complete:

“Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out; but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out—until the day it lifted. So the cloud of the Lord was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the Israelites during all their travels.”

Exodus 40v34-38

His presence then would have provided protection: a cloud-covering in the day from the scorching heat of the sun; and at night, fire to provide warmth and protection from wild animals. What's more such an evident manifestation of His presence would have acted as a deterrent for the surrounding nations. They would not be in a hurry to attack Israel.

So here we have the four main themes delineated in their desert wanderings, and Paul says these themes were a shadow of what was to come. So let's take a look at the next major mention of this feast when Solomon's Temple was dedicated. We find an account of this in 2 Chronicles 6. It has taken Solomon years to build, but he finishes it just in time for Succoth. In fact, the celebration for the dedication immediately precedes the feast (2 Chronicles 7 v 8-10). As Solomon was not a warring king, like his father David, he has enjoyed a time of peace and prosperity and this has enabled him to devote his energies into building the temple and to pay for it out of the wealthy royal coffers. Once again, it is a time of completion, of ingathering. In Numbers God had asked for the sacrifice of 70 bullocks during the feast; thirteen on the first day and each day one less until on the seventh day – guess how many? Yes, seven were to be sacrificed (Numbers 29 v 13-25)

Victor Buksbazen in his book, "The Gospel in The Feasts of Israel" says that the number seventy was significant as it represented the number of the known nations of the world. Hence Israel were being asked to sacrifice on the nations' behalf, heralding the day when they too could be converted and gathered under the Shekinah glory. At the dedication of the temple, this is emphasised and we have a

sense that God was to extend His grace and mercies all over the Earth:

"As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of your great name and your mighty hand and your outstretched arm—when he comes and prays toward this temple, then hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel, and may know that this house I have built bears your Name." (2 Chronicles 6 :32- 33)

So, under Solomon, the festival was a time of ingathering, both of the produce of the land and hints towards a greater ingathering of nations to God. Certainly today in the celebrations in Jerusalem, other nations participate in an immense procession through the main streets together with representatives from all over Israel. It is very moving to observe because, although many of the participants are secular, the non-Israelis are mostly Christians rejoicing in the received through the Messiah of Israel.

In Solomon's day, too, it was once again a time of great rejoicing when the presence of God was key:

"The trumpeters and musicians joined in unison to give praise and thanks to the Lord. Accompanied by trumpets, cymbals and other instruments, the singers raised their voices in praise to the Lord and sang: "He is good; his love endures forever." Then the temple of the Lord was filled with the cloud, and the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the temple of God."
(2 Chronicles 5:12-14)

In Hebrew the word for Tabernacle is Mishkan, meaning residence or dwelling place. So it is the feast of dwelling places. How appropriate then that Solomon's temple, God's dwelling place, should be dedicated at Succoth. There is a verb associated with Mishkan, it means to dwell, "skene". It is this word that John uses to talk about Jesus' coming among us:

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling (tabernacle) among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1 v14)

Barney Kasdan in his book, "God's Appointed Times," says that John is using the metaphor of Tabernacles to describe Jesus' birth. Could it have taken place at Tabernacles? Could his "stable" have been a sukkah, because there is nowhere in the New Testament that says it was a stable. Certainly in Genesis 33 v 16 we know that Jacob kept his cattle in "tabernacles." This the first time the word is used in the Scriptures, and he names the place "Sukkoth" after his cow shed shelters:

"Jacob, however, went to Sukkoth, where he built a place for himself and made shelters for his livestock. That is why the place is called Sukkoth."(Genesis 33v17)

Surely, in terms of consistency, might God not choose to dwell amongst mankind in the person of His Son at Tabernacles? Might He not choose to reveal His glory then as He had before in the tabernacle in the wilderness and His temple in Jerusalem? The Scriptures are not clear on the date, but God ordained His Lamb to be sacrificed at Passover, and His Spirit to come in His fullness at Pentecost. "Would such an important event as the birth of Messiah go unheralded by one of these biblical feasts?" (Barney Kasdan, p 96)

Just look at the imagery in this passage in Isaiah:

"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep shadows a light has dawned. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest ...For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And He will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God."
(Isaiah 9 v2-3,6-7)

Again we have Tabernacles imagery associated with His birth, the huge light which dispels shadows and rejoicing in the harvest.

Certainly, what is clear is that Jesus participated in celebrating Tabernacles a few months before he died. By this time, in the Second Temple period a whole host of traditions had developed that it is interesting to take note of. The High Priest would draw water from the pool of Siloam and carry it back to the temple to pour it out on the altar. On each day of the festival a procession would gather to follow him in his ascent with lots of rejoicing and it became known as the Simcha Bet Ha-sho-evah (The Rejoicing of the House of Drawing Water). Obviously, as we have said, it is the season when they pray for the outpouring of natural rain for the success of the early cereal harvests, but there was also associated in their hearts the sense of messianic expectation and the fulfilment of Isaiah 12v3, "with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation." Salvation in Hebrew is "Yeshua", so, with joy you will draw water from the wells of Yeshua, which is Jesus' Hebrew name.

According to the Mishna, which is part of the Talmud (the Jewish oral law),

“At night the city was aglow with the light of the four huge menorahs (75 feet high) which were set up in the temple courtyard and which lit the whole city of Jerusalem with their blazing light. The celebration of the Water-drawing was a highlight of the Feast. It was a happy, even ecstatic occasion, with a torchlight parade, including musicians, priests juggling lighted torches, and dancers marching up to the Temple at night as the whole city of Jerusalem was lit up by giant torches and the light of the giant menorahs. As the lyres, drums, cymbals, trumpets, drums and horns played, the Rabbis entertained and clowned, adding to the joy. Not one day of Sukkot passed without joyous festivities that celebrated the happiness of the harvest, and the joy of community.” Mishnah (Succah 5)

On the last day of the feast, the seventh day which is called “Hoshanah Rabba” – the day of the great Hosannah, they would do this procession seven times while chanting the hallel: Psalms- 113-118. Psalm 118 is an amazing Psalm which echoes the death and resurrection of Jesus, and then it says:

“The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes. The Lord has done it this very day; let us rejoice today and be glad. Lord, save us! Lord, grant us success! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. From the house of the Lord we bless you. The Lord is God, and he has made his light shine on us. With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar.”

It is at this point in the proceedings, on the last day of the feast, when all this crying out to God to save them is resounding through the

temple courts, and they are calling out for rain and for the living water of salvation (Yeshua) that Jesus stands up and cries out:

“If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.” (John 7v37-39)

The significance of what He was saying would not have been lost on His audience. “Guys, it’s Me, I’m here, don’t you recognise Me? I am the answer to your prayers. I have come to tabernacle among you and show you My glory, the glory of the only Son of the Father. You don’t need to cry out any more. I am Emmanuel, God’s presence with you.”

God’s clock had reached midday. No shadows. Here was the reality of God incarnate among them. The following morning, in the temple courts that would have been dominated by the huge menorahs (candleholders) 75 feet high that lit up the skyline for miles around, again he says, in John 8v12:

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows Me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

Here He was, the great light prophesied by Isaiah in chapter 9; their long-awaited Messiah, and within months He would fulfil the first part of Psalm 118 and meet with death, resurrection and then pour out the long-awaited water of the Spirit.

So, that was it then, was it? Jesus fulfilled the feast’s symbolism. He presented Himself with us by His Holy Spirit, as promised. He is the Light of the World and the source of living

water. No more need to celebrate it. End of story. Or is it? Well, it's interesting to note that the NKJ, the RSV and the Moffat translations render Colossians 2 v17 I quote on the cover as, "the shadow of what **IS** to come."

So, could it be that there is a future shadow or shadows that predict a change in the way God presences Himself with us, and if so, is this time or times associated with a feast in any way? Well, this is a much debated issue, and Bible scholars disagree. We are after all, talking of future shadows for which we don't have the benefit of hindsight. But let's examine a few passages that point to a time as yet unfulfilled.

If we start in Revelation 7, we do see a change of the way Jesus presences Himself with us. John has just received the letters to the seven Churches and The Lamb has opened six of the seven seals. There are dire things happening on the Earth; famines, wars, death and cosmic disturbances, the sort of things Jesus refers to as "the birth pangs" in Matthew 24. Here is John having a guided tour of heaven. It seems fairly unpopulated; four living creatures, the Father, the Lamb, 24 elders and some martyrs under the altar. All of a sudden he sees an innumerable crowd from every nation appear waving palm branches and shouting, this time not for God to save them, but rejoicing in the fact that He has done, past tense. One of the elders asks him who they are, and where they have come from; the sort of moment where you would want to "phone a friend." Fortunately he knows someone with the answer. Let's look at what it says:

"After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and

before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice:

"Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

Revelation 7v 9-10

And he said, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb". Therefore, "**they are before the throne of God and serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will shelter them with His presence. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.**"

Revelation 7v14-17

So, here is a transferral of the saints from the Earth to Heaven. This ties in with Jesus' statement in John 14 v 2-3 where He says that He is going away, but will come back to fetch His Church:

"My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with Me that you also may be where I am."

That's change in manner of presence number one. Let's now look at what it says in Zechariah 14. Jerusalem is surrounded by armies from all nations and there has been mourning on the plain of Ha Megiddo, which is in northern Israel and that's the name from

which we derive Armageddon. So, dire stuff is happening in Israel. Then it says:

“Then the LORD will go out and fight against those nations, as he fights on a day of battle. On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south..... Then the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with him. On that day there will be neither sunlight nor cold, frosty darkness. It will be a unique day—a day known only to the LORD—with no distinction between day and night. When evening comes, there will be light.

On that day living water will flow out from Jerusalem, half of it east to the Dead Sea and half of it west to the Mediterranean Sea, in summer and in winter.”

Zechariah 14 v 3,4,8.

So, change number two. The “Holy ones” have come down with Him to Jerusalem to rescue Israel. Then it says this:

*“The LORD will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one LORD, and his name the only name. ...Then the survivors from all the nations that have attacked Jerusalem will go up year after year to worship the King, the LORD Almighty, **and to celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles.** If any of the peoples of the earth do not go up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the LORD Almighty, they will have no rain. If the Egyptian people do not go up and take part, they will have no rain. The LORD will bring on them the plague he inflicts on the nations that do not go up to celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles. This will be the punishment of Egypt and the punishment of all the*

nations that do not go up to celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles.”

Zechariah 14 v 9, 16-19.

So there’s no getting away from it this time, folks. This reference is crystal clear. There will be a future celebration of Tabernacles when Jesus is King over all the Earth; Light in the evening and waters flowing like never before. Can’t get much better than that, can it? It couldn’t be a shadow of things yet to come at this stage. Or could it?

Well, yes it appears so. What about Abba? Where is He in all this? Wonderful and marvellous though it will be to be alive with King Jesus reigning over the Earth, there does appear to be a time limit set for this period, and we find this in Revelation 20. Satan has been bound for 1000 years, so he cannot deceive the nations, but then he is released for a battle called that of Gog and Magog (verse 8). He is conquered, cast into the lake of fire where the Beast and the False Prophet are, the great white throne appears for a great day of judgement of the dead. All judgement has then ended. Things have come to their completion; we have seen the seventh angel who had the seven bowls filled with the seven last plagues, and there is about to be the new beginning we have all been waiting for. John has the privilege of seeing a foretaste of the seventh change in the way God has dwelt with man over time. First we have had the Tabernacle, the Temple, Jesus incarnate, the Spirit-filled Church, the Church in heaven, Jesus on Earth and now this:

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God,

*prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! **God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death nor mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.**" He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. **The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp.** The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendour into it.*

*Then the angel showed me **the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him.**"*
Revelation 22 v1-5

His presence, The Father and Jesus as the light, and the water of life streaming through the city, with the most abundant harvest ever from the trees of Life. I am crying as I write this. God's plans are awesome, and one day we will see the fulfilment of the feast of Tabernacles in all its fullness: God and the Lamb dwelling with us on a New Earth, their glory giving light to the Holy City, where the

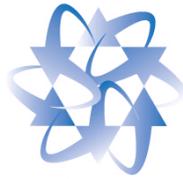
river of the water of life flows, surrounded by numerous trees of life that bear fruit every month and the leaves are for the healing of the nations. How superb is that?

Thank you, God, for giving us your shadows of things to come. Our hearts yearn for the fullness you intend to reveal to us in your time. We are privileged to see these shadows of your future promises and we, the Bride, cry out with the Spirit, "Come!" "Surely I am coming quickly," Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!" **Revelation 22 v1, 20.**

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Reshet ministries, meaning "net" or "network" in Hebrew, was the name given in 2009 to a network of Christian leaders in Leicester, who share the burden to promote a Biblical understanding of the significance of Israel and its relevance to the Church today.

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