

THE THREE GREAT FEASTS IN THE WORSHIP OF ISRAEL

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The three following feasts are mentioned together as a trio in Exodus 23:14-16; 34:18-23; Deuteronomy 16:16-17 and 2 Chronicles 8:13. At the very least all the adult males are expected to attend,¹ although the legislation itself presumes that often whole families (including slaves and local Levites) will be attending.

1) FEAST OF PASSOVER

(seven days)

References

Exod. 12-13; 23:14-15; 34:18-20, 25; Lev. 23:5-8; Num. 9:1-14; 28:16-25; Deut. 16:1-8; Josh. 5:10-12; 2 Kgs 23:21-23; 2 Chron. 30; 35:1-19; Ezra 6:19-22; Ezek. 45:21-24

The Jewish calendar took its first month from the celebration of passover, i.e., the exodus out of Egyptian slavery. This became the most important of the three annual religious feasts commanded in the Mosaic law.

There are three aspects to the celebration of this feast, namely, the passover meal itself, the week long celebration of the feast of unleavened bread, and the sanctification of every first-born of man and beast to the Lord (Exod. 13:1, 11-16; 34:18-20).

It is clear from Deuteronomy 16:7 that the annual passover meal was to be eaten in the sanctuary. This rule was clearly also followed during the famous celebration under king Hezekiah, for we read of his concern that a number of celebrants had not ritually purified themselves for eating the meal, a ritual which confirms that the meal was eaten within the temple precincts (2 Chron. 30:18-19). This tradition was still known at the time of the book of Jubilees in the second century BC (cf. Jub. 49:20-21). By the time of Jesus, however, a different tradition along the lines of the celebration under king Hezekiah (see below) had been introduced. The lambs were slaughtered in the temple, but eaten in houses in the city of Jerusalem. The worshippers, therefore, no longer needed to be ritually clean to eat the passover meal (cf. *Mishnah, Pes. 7.4*). Because so many pilgrims flocked to the city, it was no longer compulsory to eat the passover meal as a family unit. Groups of pilgrims gathered together to form a table fellowship which would use one passover lamb. We know from Josephus that the groups which laid at table to eat the passover in the city contained up to twenty people,² but were generally not permitted to number less than ten, probably because it was considered that less than ten people would not be able to eat the lamb within the permitted time period (*BJ. 6.423*).³

It is clear from the regulations concerning the passover lamb that this sacrifice must be considered a special kind of peace offering. In common with the peace offerings, the passover lamb may be eaten by the worshippers in a holy place (i.e., within the temple precincts). The time for eating the meat is more restricted than the various sorts of regular peace offerings, for it may only be eaten on the night of the passover. From 2 Chronicles 35:14 we gather that the fat of the lambs was offered on the altar, as was standard practice for peace offerings.

Summary

first month (Abib or Nisan = March/April)

¹ Given that the census at the time of the law counted adult males from the age of twenty and upwards, we may presume, in accordance with later tradition (cf. Jub. 49:17), that all males twenty and older were expected to attend the feasts.

² The maximum reasonable number will, of course, have been practically determined by the number of couches able to be fitted into the dining hall. *Mishnah, Pes. 8.7* limits the number to less than a hundred because each participant needs to have a portion of lamb at least the size of an olive. Such large table fellowships were permitted to sacrifice additional animals to provide more meat for the meal.

³ *Mishnah, Pes. 8.7*, however, mentions a rabbinical dispute wherein it is clear that at least some permitted a passover lamb to be slaughtered for only one person. That the group should consist of 10 people is also mentioned in *Targum Ps.-Jonathan* on Exod.12.

- 10th Each household takes a lamb (1 year old unblemished male lamb from sheep or goats) – according to *Mishnah* this only applied to the first celebration.
- 14th At twilight⁴ the lamb is slaughtered, roasted with fire and the head, legs and entrails are eaten (no bone is to be broken) with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. What is not eaten must be burned. The meal is to be eaten hastily with sandals on, loins girded and staff in hand (i.e., ready for a quick departure – a prescription only applying to the first celebration). It is to be eaten in the sanctuary.
- 15th All leaven must be removed from one’s house. This is the beginning of the feast of unleavened bread. This day is a “low sabbath” (cf. Lev. 23:11 for the use of the term “sabbath” for this day). No work may be done (except for the preparing of meals) and a holy gathering must be held. On each of the seven days of the feast the following sacrifices are to be brought (in addition to the daily sacrifice):
- Burnt offerings (+ grain offerings, libations): 2 bulls, 1 ram, 7 male yearling lambs
Sin offering: 1 male goat
- 21st The last day of the feast. A “low sabbath,” therefore no work and a holy gathering.

In total: 14 bulls, 7 rams, 49 male yearling lambs as burnt offerings; 7 male goats as sin offerings.⁵

Some Important Texts

Exodus 12. This initial celebration of the feast was rather different than the later remembrance services. There was of course no temple and there were no priests. Did the Israelites celebrate the feast of unleavened bread on the journey? Only in the sense that during their hasty exit out of Egypt they ate the unleavened bread which was hurriedly prepared. The initial celebration involved the ritual of smearing the blood of the paschal lamb on the doorposts and lintel. According to the *Mishnah* (*Pes.* 9.5) the setting aside of a lamb on the 10th only pertained to this observance, as well as the blood rites on the doorposts and lintel, and the eating in haste.⁶ In the initial celebration the meal was eaten in one’s own home. Later it was to be eaten in a holy place (i.e. the temple courts) until later times when the number of celebrants entailed permission being given to eat the meal in Jerusalem (see above).

Numbers 9. To encourage the Israelites just before they leave Sinai for the journey to Canaan, the Lord permits them to celebrate the passover (without the feast of unleavened bread). This should be viewed as exceptional, for the rules for celebration originally given envisage a situation when Israel is already settled in Canaan. In addition, provision is made for those who are unclean or on a journey at the time of the passover. For these people a second celebration may be held a month later.

Deuteronomy 16. There is an exegetical problem in Deuteronomy 16:2 which seems to suggest that the use of cattle as sacrificial meat for the passover is permitted. Or does this text only mean that cattle are used for accompanying sacrifices, or the mandatory sacrifices for each of the days of the feast? Cf. 2 Chronicles 35:7-9.

Joshua 5:10-12. In Joshua 5:10-12 we read of the first passover in the promised land. On this day the Lord stops sending manna. For possible connections between manna and Passover / Lord’s Supper see John 6 and 1 Corinthians 10:3.

2 Chronicles 30. In the time of king Hezekiah the passover celebration was delayed a month because not enough priests had been sanctified and the people were not assembled in Jerusalem. At the celebration the Levites slaughter the lambs for those people who are still unclean (implying that the people do not eat it in the temple courts). The priests sprinkle the blood which the Levites give to them (presumably the Levites are only responsible for handing over the blood for those people who were still unclean). The feast is celebrated twice over (for 14 days).

⁴ In later times the word “twilight” (lit. “between the evenings”) was interpreted to mean between midday and sunset (cf. *Mishnah*, *Pes.* 5.3). In New Testament times, the sacrifice of the lambs began at 3pm (*Jos. BJ.* 6.423).

⁵ Ezek. 45:22-23 mentions seven bulls and seven rams for the daily burnt offering during the feast of the visionary temple, and one male goat for the sin offering. On the 14th the prince (who in Ezekiel provides for all the sacrifices) also provides a bull as a sin offering.

⁶ The relevant article also adds eating during only one night, but the context suggests that this remark applies to the eating of unleavened bread, on the supposition that the feast of unleavened bread only lasted one night, instead of seven days, for the first celebration.

At passover celebrations all the blood would have been sprinkled by the priests according to the rule of Leviticus 17. This rule was changed in Deuteronomy 12 for those who wished to eat meat and did not live close to the sanctuary. The change did not apply to the passover celebration since everybody was present in Jerusalem.

2 Chronicles 35; 2 Kings 23:21-23. The passover was also celebrated in the time of Josiah for Israel and Judah as part of the reform of religion after finding the book of the Law of the Lord. We read here that the Levites slaughtered the lambs, the priests sprinkled the blood and the Levites skinned the lambs. The roasted lambs were then brought to the people.

Ezra 6:19-22. Also here the Levites do the slaughtering.

Mishnah, Pes. 5.5-7. The Israelites slaughter their own lambs in the temple and the priests stand ready to catch the blood in basins. The blood is then thrown against the foot of the altar.

Leaven

Leaven was forbidden for the regular grain offerings (which had to be burnt), Leviticus 2:11-12. In Exodus 23:18 (34:25) it is stated that leaven may not be offered together with blood. Loaves of bread with leaven were used as wave offerings at Pentecost (Lev. 23:17, see further below) and viewed as first-fruits. The peace offering for thanksgiving (with its accompanying grain offerings of unleavened bread) were provided with leavened loaves of bread for the use of the priest (Lev. 7:13-14; Am. 4:5).

Leaven was old dough which had become sour and thus appropriate material for fermentation. Traditional Jewish explanation for the prohibition of leaven with sacrifices is confirmed by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 5:6-8, namely, that the old fermenting dough represents the rottenness of sin. Paul's explanation is specifically applied to the unleavened bread eaten together with the passover lamb.

The actual passover (14th Nisan) is followed by the seven day feast of unleavened bread (first celebrated in Josh. 5 after the crossing of the Jordan). The reason for the use of unleavened bread in this feast is quite different for it is a festive memorial of the haste with which provisions for the flight out of Egypt had to be prepared (Exod. 12:33-34, 39). Bread appears to have been normally prepared very early in the morning, but on the morning of the flight from Egypt, it was still dark when they left. The dough may not have been leavened (Exod. 12:34), or it may have been leavened, but not given enough time to rise. In any case, it was baked later, perhaps at the resting place of Succoth (cf. Exod. 12:37-39) and formed unleavened cakes. Celebration of the feast of unleavened bread may also have brought to mind the fact that all throughout the wilderness wanderings the Lord fed His people on manna, which may be compared with flat cakes of unleavened bread (cf. Exod. 16:14, 31). It is significant that the first celebration of the feast of unleavened bread occurred at the same time that the manna stopped (Josh. 5:11-12).

Why is the lamb roasted and not boiled?

That the lamb had to be roasted and not boiled is directly connected to the prohibition against breaking any of its bones. In order to boil an animal it needs to be cut in pieces. There is also the additional factor that boiling takes longer than roasting, but this is not as important as preserving the wholeness of the lamb. Given that Exodus 12 lays importance on the fact that the size of the lamb should be equal to the eating capacity of the household(s) which will consume it, we may be led to connect the wholeness of the lamb with the unity of the participants in the meal.⁷ We may compare Paul's emphasis on the wholeness of the Lord's Supper bread. The wholeness of Christ's body preserved at the crucifixion is in fulfilment of the prescriptions for the passover lamb and points to the fulfilment of this feast in his sacrifice (John 19:36, cf. Ps. 34:20).

Passover in New Testament times

The ordering of the passover meal at the time of the New Testament may be gleaned from the detailed information contained in *Mishnah, Pes.* 10. It may be summarized as follows:

1. The first cup of wine is mixed (with warm water for serving) and the blessing over the day and over the wine is said.

⁷ Jub. 49:13 suggests a different reason, namely "because no bone of the Israelites shall be broken."

2. The herbs and bitter fruitnutmix are eaten with unleavened bread. The body of the lamb is brought in.
3. A second cup of wine is mixed. The son asks his father about the peculiarities of the meal and the father answers with the confession of Deuteronomy 26:5 ff (originally not intended for this feast, see below under the feast of weeks).
4. The first part of the Hallel (Pss. 113—118) is sung, that is, to the end of 113 or 114. A blessing (praise to God for redemption out of Egypt) concludes the singing. We can assume that now the lamb is eaten.
5. The third cup of wine is mixed, whereupon the blessing over the meal is said, which marks the end of the meal proper.
6. The fourth cup of wine is mixed and the rest of the Hallel is sung, after which the wine is consumed and a blessing over the song is said.

From this information we may consider the ordering of the events at the Last Supper. A number of questions arise however.

What were the disciples eating when the betrayer was revealed? And was this revelation made before or after the lamb was served? If we retain the order of Matthew and Mark, then it must be when the herbs and fruit-nut mix were first eaten, before the meal proper. The reason for this conclusion is that the blessing before the meal proper was the moment Jesus chose to break the bread as a symbol of his body. And again the blessing at the end of the meal was the moment for instituting the wine as blood of the covenant. It is possible that Matthew and Mark, wanting to keep the institution of the two elements of the supper together, place the story of identifying the betrayer beforehand. Both of them are vague in their specific identification of the moment, i.e. “while they were eating.” Luke, however, clearly places the identification of the betrayer after the institution of the Lord's Supper and thus after the meal proper. But this may also be schematic, although it is possible that this is the correct timing. He adds that the disciples discussed which of them was the betrayer and that this led to an argument about who was the greatest among them. Jesus quells this by referring to he who serves as the greatest. He tells his disciples that will eat and drink at His table in the kingdom and sit on 12 thrones judging the 12 tribes of Israel. At this point Luke adds the reference to the sifting of Simon and his denial before the cock crows. There appears to have been considerable discussion between Jesus' statement that one of them would betray Him, and the moment when he added that the betrayer had dipped his hand with him in the bowl. If there was only one bowl, then it would appear that the revelation was made during the meal. If two people shared one bowl, then the revelation could easily have been made after the meal. But John makes clear that it was he who was reclining on Jesus breast. However John also states that Jesus gave the morsel He himself dipped to Judas. John seems to place Jesus' indication that there is a betrayer after his lesson (and prior to the foot-washing) concerning who is the greatest. Yet before this lesson he does indicate that Satan had entered Judas. We may therefore perhaps conclude that already at that point He indicated a betrayer, the discussion of the disciples about the identity led quickly to the discussion who was the greatest. Jesus solved this with the foot-washing and a lesson. He then repeated that there was a betrayer. Peter asked John who it is. John asked Jesus. Jesus indicated that it was the person who dipped with him in the bowl (Mt, Mk) and dipped a new piece, giving it to Judas. Judas left. The fact that the disciples thought that Judas was leaving to purchase things needed for the feast seems to indicate that the lamb had already been eaten (otherwise his leaving would have been strange).

Another question is whether the grand speech of Jesus, including the promise of the Comforter, and the prayer to the Father before or after the cup of blessing?

Luke adds, before the institution of the Supper, Jesus' words over his desire to eat this passover with them, for he will not eat it again until the kingdom of God comes. At this point he takes a cup, gives thanks and has the disciples share it and repeats that he will not drink wine again until the kingdom of God comes. Only after this is the Supper itself instituted.

So we get the following order for the Last Supper (material mentioned in the Gospels is in boldface):

1. **Jesus indicates his desire to be sharing this last meal with the disciples. Mixing of first cup. Blessing over the day and the wine. He gives it to the disciples to share.**
2. The herbs and bitter fruitnutmix are eaten with unleavened bread. The body of the lamb is brought in.

3. Mixing of second cup. Questions about the meal and the confession of Deuteronomy 26:5 ff.
4. The first part of the Hallel (Pss. 113—118) is sung to the end of 113 or 114. **Jesus takes a bread, says the blessing, and institutes the token of bread as His body.** The lamb is eaten. **During the meal Jesus indicates a betrayer, there is consternation and a discussion over who is the greatest. Jesus gets up and washes the disciples feet teaching them a lesson about serving. Jesus indicates Judas having dipped into the bowl simultaneously with him and also given him a morsel. Judas leaves.**
5. Mixing of the cup of blessing over the meal (marking its end). **Jesus says the blessing and institutes the token of wine as His blood. (Matthew and Mark indicate that he repeats the comment that he will no longer drink wine with them until the coming of the kingdom). Probably at this point the long speech (in John) is held culminating in the prayer to the Father. The comment in Matthew and Mark is their summary of this speech.**
6. The fourth cup of wine is mixed and **the rest of the Hallel is sung**, after which the wine is consumed and a blessing over the song is said.

It is of course possible that Jesus said an extra blessing when he broke the bread and that He did this just before the cup of thanksgiving. But would there have still been a whole bread to share? Perhaps. And yet the Gospels say that Jesus did this "while they were eating," not at the end of the meal.

The actual dating of the Lord's Supper in connection with the Passover has also been a subject of debate. While Matthew, Mark and Luke identify this supper with the Passover meal, John appears to place it on the day before (Joh. 19:14). The seeming contradiction is solved when we see that John 19:14a is better translated as follows: "Now it was the 'day of preparation' of the Passover" that is, the Passover occurred on a Friday, a day generally referred to by Jews as "the day of preparation." The reference to eating the Passover on the Friday (Joh. 18:28) should be interpreted as a reference to the passover feast, and not the meal itself, which was eaten on Thursday afternoon or evening. When the Jews say to Pilate that they are not permitted to put anyone to death (Joh. 18:31) they are referring to the fact that the first day of the Passover feast was a special Sabbath day on which no work was permitted. That Jews were permitted to execute the death penalty in general is clear from John 14:6.⁸

Passover in the Early Church

In the early church the observance of passover was continued, and was known as "the passover feast of the saviour." Around the middle of the second century we learn that the bishops Polycarp of Smyrna and Anicetus of Rome disagreed on the dating of the Christian passover. Different traditions had developed. Christians in all the ecclesiastical districts in Asia observed it on (from?) the 14th of Nisan (the day stipulated in the law of Moses for the slaughter of the paschal lamb). Polycrates of Asia claimed around AD 195 (he was 65 years old when writing) that this date had always been observed in Asia and went all the way back to the apostle of John (who was buried in Ephesus).⁹ In other areas passover was observed from the Friday through Sunday following upon the 14th of Nisan. Around AD 195 this difference caused quite some controversy and synods were held in all the major centres to discuss the problem. The story is told by Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History* (5.23-25). The controversy was finally settled by the Council of Nicea which ruled in favour of the Friday through Sunday following upon the 14th of Nisan.

It is interesting to note that nobody seems to have questioned whether or not passover as a feast prescribed in the laws of Moses was still mandatory. It was simply accepted that this feast was still to be celebrated, although now in Christian fashion as the feast of the slaughter (and resurrection) of the real paschal lamb, Jesus Christ.

If we say that Jesus was *intentionally* resurrected on the Sunday (i.e. the first day of the week), then we may take account of that in a Christian dating of passover — if we want to say that a Christianized celebration of the passover feast is an appropriate New Testament application of God's law.

⁸ See further, the appropriate section in J. van Bruggen, *Christ on Earth*.

⁹ He notes that John had been "a priest who wore the breastplate."

I wonder what the early church then did with the other two feasts? There was no controversy around them, so there is little information to go on. In relation to Pentecost we might consider the literal demands to bring first-fruits in the early church.

Is, however, passover not completely fulfilled in the Lord's Supper, or is the Lord's Supper an additional element in Christian worship, beside the continuing (Christian) celebration of the passover?

2) FEAST OF WEEKS (FEAST OF THE HARVEST / PENTECOST)

(two separate days)

References

Exod. 23:16; 34:22; Lev. 2:11-13; 23:9-21; Num. 28:26-31; Deut. 16:9-12; 26:1-11

Other references to First Fruits

Exod. 23:19 (= 34:26); 22:29-30; Num. 15:18-21; 18:12-18; Deut. 18:4; 2Kgs 4:42.

For the dating of this feast due attention must be given to the fact that Leviticus 23:9 marks the beginning of a new legal unit.¹⁰ Orthodox Jews and many modern interpreters ignore this and interpret Leviticus 23:9-14 as if these verses are a continuation of the law of the feast of Passover. The sabbath day of v.11 is then either interpreted as the first sabbath after the 14th of Nisan (e.g., Book of Jubilees¹¹) or as the “low sabbath” of the 15th of Nisan (e.g., orthodox Judaism¹²). Not only does the making of this connection with the Passover ignore the fact that this passage belongs to the law on the feast of Weeks (the legal unit is Lev. 23:9-22), but it would also be the only reference in the whole Bible connecting the feast of the Passover to the harvest. Furthermore, Leviticus 2:12 makes it clear that the grain offering of Leviticus 23:13 is *leavened* (an impossibility if this is to take place during the feast of *unleavened* bread).¹³ Finally we should note that the feast of weeks is the only feast not specifically dated to a particular month (let alone a day of the month, cf. Lev. 23; Num. 28-29; Deut. 16).

In both Leviticus 23:10-15 and Deuteronomy 16:9 this feast is dated from the very beginning of the harvest. Whilst Deuteronomy 16:9 is clearly a summary statement, Leviticus 23 shows that on the first Sunday (the day after the sabbath) after the grain harvest¹⁴ has begun, a sheaf of first-fruits is given to the priest who presents it as a wave offering before the Lord. Together with the sheaf there is also a burnt offering of a yearling male lamb with its accompanying grain offering and libation. Until this moment no bread, roasted grain or any produce from the recent harvest may be eaten. The sheaf marks the very beginning of the new harvest. Seven weeks later the feast of Pentecost (= feast of Weeks) is celebrated since the harvest has now properly begun and the bread-loaves of first-fruits can be presented as grain offerings. The date of this festival in any given year is directly related to the start of the harvest (which will be dependant on the weather).

The sheaf which is presented seven weeks before the feast is not mentioned in Deuteronomy, but the freewill offering made at the feast of weeks is (Deut. 16). The regulation of Deuteronomy 26 (which refers to a basket of first-fruits, not a sheaf) probably refers to the offering made at the feast itself and not to the sheaf which is to be presented seven weeks earlier. It gives the formula of confession for the official presentation of the two loaves of first fruits. It is not clear exactly who should present this to the priest. Verse 3 would seem to suggest that the presentation is to be made to the high-priest.

Summary

Preliminary Day (first Sunday after the beginning of the wheat harvest)

¹⁰ Leviticus is essentially an ordered collection of 35 different revelations (laws) which the Lord spoke to Moses. Each revelation begins with an introductory formula such as “Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying ...” Occasionally the particular revelation concerned is dated, e.g., 16:1. Here and there various historical incidents (related to a revelation) are recorded, e.g., chapters 8-10; 24:10ff. Individual laws within the different ‘revelation’ sections are marked off by the phrase “I am the Lord”, which concludes the individual legal unit.

¹¹ This view is opposed in the *Mishnah* (*Hagigah* 2.4).

¹² This was the interpretation of the Pharisees in the first century AD. It is followed by the Septuagint (LXX Lev. 23:11), Philo (*De Spec. Leg.* 2.162), and Josephus (*Antiq.* 3.250).

¹³ Lev. 2:12 speaks of קָרְבַּן רֵאשִׁית (“gift of first-things”) which is said to be leavened and then in vs. 14-16 of מִנְחַת בְּכוֹרִים (“grain offering of first-fruits”). This corresponds to the offerings in the legislation of Lev. 23:9-22. Firstly, there is the wave offering of the עֹמֶר רֵאשִׁית (“sheaf of first-things”, Lev. 23:10), and then seven weeks later the wave offering of the מִנְחַת הַדִּשָּׁה (“new grain offering”) which is said to be of בְּכוֹרִים (“first-fruits”) and is also leavened.

¹⁴ According to Exod. 34:22 this feast specifically concerns the *wheat* harvest. Barley was generally grown for animals (and also used by the poor). According to W. E. Shewell-Cooper “the wheat harvest in Palestine is from the third week of April until the second week of June, depending on the soil, situation, and the time of sowing” (article “Wheat” in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. M. C. Tenney, Grand Rapids, 1976).

This is not a low sabbath, but until this day no bread or roasted grain from the harvest may be eaten. The required sacrifices are ...

- a wave offering of the sheaf of first-fruits
- 1 yearling male lamb as burnt offering + grain offering + libation

Day of Pentecost (exactly seven weeks later, = 50 days inclusive)

This is a low sabbath. The required sacrifices are ...

- a wave offering of two loaves of leavened bread (first-fruits)
- 7 yearling male lambs, 2 bulls, 1 ram as burnt offerings + grain offerings + libations¹⁵
- 1 male goat as sin offering
- 2 yearling lambs as peace offerings (to be waved with the bread *for the priest*)

It is unclear whether these sacrifices are to be brought by every land-owner, or are representative of the whole people of Israel. Numbers 28 would suggest that these offerings were to be brought on behalf of the whole people. Who paid for them? Some kind of fair system would have to be devised. If this is correct, then the “tribute of a freewill offering” mentioned in Deuteronomy 16:10 is what every Israelite male would be expected to bring on the day of Pentecost in order to celebrate and rejoice before the Lord on account of his blessings. The grain offerings accompanying this tribute are described in Leviticus 2:11-13. In Deuteronomy 16 this tribute is of the grain harvest, but Numbers 18:12 and Deuteronomy 18:4 (cf. Exod. 23:19; 34:26) make clear that such a tribute of first fruits was also expected from the harvest of oil and wine as well as wool from the first shearing of the sheep. The offering was not to be delayed (Exod. 22:29). These first fruits formed a part of the income of the priests (Num. 18:13; Deut. 18:4). They were gifts to God which God in turn made available to the priests. As such the first fruits were holy and had to be eaten by the priests in a ritually clean state. An historical example of an offering of first fruits is recorded in 2 Kings 4:42.¹⁶

Although only adult males are required at the feast, Deuteronomy 16:11 shows that the feast (held at the central sanctuary) was to be a family affair including male and female servants and even the local Levites. The joy expressed in the Lord’s blessings of the harvest was to be accentuated by remembrance of the slavery in Egypt (Deut. 16:12; 26:1-11).

Feast of Pentecost in the New Testament

Because this feast was always celebrated on the first day of the week, the mandatory low sabbath now falls on the day of rest and worship of the New Testament era. Jesus’ timing of the outpouring of the special gifts of the Spirit on this day enabled the event to be heard and recognized by a great number of people. Because Pentecost was a low sabbath, nobody was out working in the fields and the apostle Peter therefore had the opportunity to address a large crowd.

See Acts 2; 20:16; 1 Cor. 16:8 (where we see that Paul still thinks in terms of the Jewish calendar).

¹⁵ This list is according to the more detailed account of Num. 28. In Lev. 23 mention is made of 1 bull and 2 rams (instead of 2 bulls and 1 ram). Josephus appears to want to solve the discrepancy by treating the lists as complementary and adding the totals together (although he counts only 2 rams instead of 3), *Antiq.* 3.253. His solution is not particularly convincing.

¹⁶ This offering is brought to the prophet Elisha because Israel at this time (the reign of Joram, the second son of Ahab) is still under the official religion of Baal.

3) FEAST OF BOOTHS (FEAST OF THE INGATHERING)

(eight days)

References to the Feast

Exod. 23:16; 34:22; Lev. 23:33-43; Num. 29:12-39; Deut. 14:22-29; 16:13-17; 31:9-13 (cf. 15:1-11); 2 Chron. 8:13; Ezra 3:4; Neh. 7:73b – 8:18; Ezek. 45:25; Zech. 14:16-21; John 7:2.

The harvest of grain and wine has now been completed (Deut. 16:13). This implies that the tithes of grain and new wine would be brought (and partially eaten) at this feast (Deut. 14). From Deuteronomy 14 it is apparent that the dedication of first-born animals from the flocks and herds were also made at this feast. These facts explain the greatly increased number of standard sacrifices to be made (Num. 29) which would be taken from the tithes. Of course the feasting itself would be provided via peace offerings made from a portion of the tithes. Deuteronomy 16 emphasizes that the feast is not just for land-owners, but also for children, slaves, local Levites, foreigners, orphans and widows.

Deuteronomy 31:10-13 prescribes that once every seven years at this feast the remission of debts be pronounced and the law (the book of Deuteronomy?) be publicly read to the people (cf. Exod. 23:10-11; Lev. 25:1-7, 18-22; Deut. 15:1-11). This is the most joyous feast of eating and drinking before the Lord (at Passover there are bitter herbs to be eaten and leaven is forbidden, Pentecost is only for one day). The celebratory sphere is heightened by the remission of debts, although given that the remission of debts occurs in the sabbath year, when there is no harvest and therefore no tithe, the food was presumably provided from the storehouses. Nehemiah 8 describes the reading of the law at each day of this feast. In fact Ezra began with this reading on New Moon's day before the feast (i.e. the first of the month). The law read was, however, not identical to Deuteronomy for they learn from the reading of the law that they are supposed to be living in booths during this feast (only mentioned in Lev. 23 in our compilation of the laws of Moses). We even read that Israel had neglected this aspect of the feast since the days of Joshua!

Summary

7th month

15th "Low sabbath" and therefore a holy convocation. Booths of branches are to be made wherein the native born Israelites (foreigners are not mentioned) are to live during the feast reminding them of the sojourn in the desert.

It would seem probable that the pilgrims' procession from outside the city to the temple took place on this day, see below on the "songs of ascents".

22nd "Low sabbath" and therefore a holy convocation. An offering by fire is to be presented.

Sacrificial Schedule (in addition to the daily sacrifice)

Day 1	Burnt offerings (+ grain offerings, libations): 13 bulls, 2 rams, 14 male yearling lambs Sin offering: 1 male goat
Days 2-7	The same offerings except each day one less bull (thus on the 7th day, 7 bulls)
Day 8	Burnt offerings (+ grain offerings, libations): 1 bull, 1 ram, 7 male yearling lambs Sin offering: 1 male goat

In total: 71 bulls, 15 rams, 105 male yearling lambs as burnt offerings; 8 male goats as sin offerings

Celebrations mentioned in the Old Testament

We do not hear much further in the Old Testament of the feast of booths. Given the dancing and the location (Shiloh, where the tabernacle was, Josh. 18:1; Judg. 18:31), it is probable that the feast mentioned in Judges 21:19-21 was the feast of booths. Perhaps this is also the annual feast at Shiloh attended by Elkanah and his wives in 1 Samuel 1:3-5. It was certainly celebrated in the days of Solomon, Hezekiah and also after the exile (2 Chron. 8:13; 31:3; Ezra 3:4).

The Feast of Booths and the New Testament

Zechariah 14 mentions the celebration of the feast of booths by the nations in an eschatological setting in the context of the new Jerusalem (i.e. upon the second coming of Christ). Any nation which does not celebrate

will be plagued by the Lord with no rain. This should be seen in light of the blessings showered upon the faithful of all nations on the new heavens and earth, and the curse upon those who have rejected the Lord and are doomed to eternal judgment.

John 7 tells us about the feast of booths which was celebrated in the third year of Jesus' ministry.

The “Songs of Ascents” as a song cycle for the feast of booths

Psalms 120 to 134 form a collection of 15 psalms which at some time in Israel's history were placed together and given the title “songs of ascents.” It is probable that this refers to the ascent of pilgrims as they march up the hill to Jerusalem to attend the feast of booths, as we shall see below. We look first at the authorship of these psalms, then consider the date of this collection and its setting.

Authorship

The only authored psalms in this collection are ascribed to David or Solomon. Psalm 127 is attributed to Solomon and Psalm 124 to David in both the Hebrew Massoretic text (MT) and the Septuagint (LXX).¹⁷ MT alone attributes Psalm 122 to David (actually the attribution is lacking in two Hebrew mss, as well as LXX and Targum). 11QPs^a (a Hebrew text from Qumran) attributes Psalm 123 to David. The MT attribution of Psalm 122 must be incorrect. The throne of David's *house* is spoken of, implying his progeny. Furthermore, the psalmist presumes that the temple (house of the LORD) is to be found in Jerusalem. Whilst the escape from the snare of enemies in Psalm 124 could refer to the time of David, this must have new meaning in the context of the series of psalms of ascents.

Date

Such a new meaning to Psalm 124 put in the mouth of the pilgrims ascending to Jerusalem for one of the feasts must surely refer to the exiles after their return. If this is so, Psalm 120 may refer to the many non Israelites living in the land at the time. The context of return from exile is confirmed in Psalm 126. The songs of ascents presume that the temple has been rebuilt and that sacrifice is possible. This gives us a *terminus a quo* of 516 BC. If 122:7 also implies that the walls were reconstructed then we have a *terminus a quo* of 445 BC.

Several psalms suggest that the celebration of the feast of booths, i.e. the harvest feast, is intended by this cycle of psalms. Psalm 122:4 mentions the tribes going up to Jerusalem in obedience to the ordinance of the LORD. This can only be a reference to one of the three great feasts. Given that the purpose is stated as “to give thanks to the name of the LORD” we might think of the feast of booths in that this feast was most especially the feast of thanksgiving for the harvest. This admittedly tentative pointer is confirmed by Psalm 126:6 which speaks of bringing in the sheaves of the harvest.

If so, this cycle of songs may have been first used in connection with the famous feast of booths in 445 BC. The “dwelling” of Psalm 133 will then refer to the fact that the Israelites dwell in booths for eight days together during the feast.

Setting

From Psalm 42:4 we know that the Levitical singers used to accompany the pilgrims in procession to the temple. The Old Testament does not make clear where this accompaniment actually began. But this group of “songs of ascents” is clearly compiled for just such a procession and may give us an idea about where this procession started. Already by the third psalm in the cycle (Ps.122) it is clear that the pilgrims are standing within the gates of Jerusalem. The psalm implies that this phase in the procession has just been reached. This means that the procession must have begun outside of the city walls. Going by the beginning of Psalm 121 (“I will lift up my eyes to the mountains”) it would appear that the procession began at the bottom of the gully and made its way up to the city gates. Given that there are only two psalms which are sung before the gates are entered, the procession cannot have begun too much further away than this. We may sketch the progression of the procession as follows:

Pss. 120-121 *in the gully heading up to the city gates*
Ps. 122 *standing inside the gates of Jerusalem*

¹⁷ Some Hebrew mss and the uncorrected codices of the LXX omit David's authorship to Ps. 124.

Ps. 123 *moving on and looking up towards the temple*
Pss. 124-132 *sung on the march to the temple*
Pss. 133-134 *arrival in the temple*

It is clear from the text of the psalms that they were to be sung by the pilgrims coming for the feast (and were not intended as choir psalms for the Levites). Frequently the first person is used of those coming to God's house, and in Psalm 134 the pilgrims sing *to* the Levites and priests. Yet Psalm 42:4 suggests that the Levites also engaged in singing during this procession. It is not clear whether they sang responses to the psalms of the pilgrims, or whether they joined in with the pilgrims' songs.

On which day did this procession take place? This is a difficult question. Not everyone will have arrived in Jerusalem for the feast on the same day. In the Gospels we see pilgrims arriving for the feast of the Passover at least a week early. These considerations would seem to suggest that the pilgrims were expected to get together on a stated day and re-enact the entrance into Jerusalem in a procession which took them all the way to the temple. Such a procession from the gully below the city would not necessarily be impossible on a sabbath day since the distance would still be well below what was later defined as a "sabbath day's journey" and in any event this restriction would not have applied to a low sabbath such as required for the feast of booths. All in all it would not seem unreasonable to hypothesize that this procession would have taken place on the 15th of the 7th month, that is, the first day of the celebration of the feast of booths which also counted as a low sabbath.