

FEASTS AND FESTIVALS - the holy convocations, the regular assemblies of the people of Israel for worship of the Lord. Following is a complete list of all the feasts and festivals observed by the people of Israel. Some were annual events, while others occurred weekly or once every several years.

Atonement, Day of: The tenth day of the seventh month was set aside as a day of public fasting and humiliation. On this day the nation of Israel sought atonement for its sins (LEV 23:27; 16:29; NUM 29:7). This day fell in the month equivalent to our August, and it was preceded by special Sabbaths (LEV 23:24). The only fasting period required by the Law (LEV 16:29; 23:31), the Day of Atonement was a recognition of people's inability to make any atonement for their sins. It was a solemn, holy day accompanied by elaborate ritual (LEV 16; HEB 10:1-10).

The high priest who officiated on this day first sanctified himself by taking a ceremonial bath and putting on white garments (LEV 16:4). Then he had to make atonement for himself and other priests by sacrificing a bullock (NUM 29:8). God was enthroned on the MERCY SEAT in the sanctuary, but no person could approach it except through the mediation of the high priest, who offered the blood of sacrifice.

After sacrificing a bullock, the high priest chose a goat for a sin-offering and sacrificed it. Then he sprinkled its blood on and about the mercy seat (LEV 16:12, 14, 15). Finally the scapegoat bearing the sins of the people was sent into the wilderness (LEV 16:20-22). This scapegoat symbolized the pardon for sin brought through the sacrifice (GAL 3:12; 2CO 5:21).

Booths, Feast of (see Tabernacles, Feast of):

Dedication, Feast of: This feast, also known as Hanukkah and the Feast of Lights, is mentioned only once in the Bible (JOH 10:22). It developed in the era of the MACCABEES and celebrated the cleansing of the Temple after its desecration by ANTIOCHUS; EPIPHANES. The Feast of Dedication is observed on the 25th day of the ninth month.

Hanukkah (see Dedication, Feast of):

Harvest, Feast of (see Weeks, Feast of):

Jubilee, Year of: The references to the Year of Jubilee in the Bible include LEV 23:15-16; 25:8-55; 27:14-24, JER 34:8, 14-17; and ISA 61:1-2. The Jubilee Year began with the blowing of the RAM'S HORN. It took place after seven Sabbatical years, or every 49 years; and the 50th year was thereby set aside as the Year of Jubilee. Once the Israelites entered and possessed the Promised Land, it became their obligation to observe this year.

The Year of Jubilee was a special year in family renewal. A man who was bound to another as a slave or indentured servant was set free and returned to his own family. If any members of his family were also bound, the entire family was set free. Houses and lands could also be redeemed in the Year of Jubilee. If they were not redeemed within a year, however, they became the permanent possession of the previous owner. The land owned by Levites was exempted from this law; they could redeem their land at any time.

The rights and privileges extended by the Israelites to other Israelites did not extend to non-Israelites. Servants obtained by Israelites from the non-Israelite world were permanent slaves. And property purchased from non-Israelites was not redeemable. The law of the Year of Jubilee favored the Israelites. JER 34:8, 14-17 warned Judah for first practicing the Jubilee and then taking away people's liberty. Apparently, those who gained wealth and power in Israel did not observe this festival willingly. The inscription on the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia-"Proclaim liberty throughout the land to all the inhabitants thereof" (LEV 25:10)-is a modern application of the Year of Jubilee.

Lights, Feast of (see Dedication, Feast of):

New Moon: The references in the Bible to the New Moon celebration include EXO 40:2, 17, NUM 10:10; 28:1-10; 11-15, and PSA 104:19. The law specified that two bullocks, one ram, seven lambs, and one kid were to be offered in connection with this celebration. Grain mixed with oil accompanied the offerings; a trumpet blast introduced this feast. The sins committed and not expiated during the previous month were covered by the offerings of the New Moon.


Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread: References to the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread include EXO 12:1-13:16; 23:15; 34:18-20, 25; LEV 23:4-14; NUM 28:16-25; DEU 16:1-8; JOS 4:19-23; 5:10-12; and 2CH 30:2, 3, 13, 15. The Passover was the first of the three great festivals of the Israelite people. It referred to the sacrifice of a lamb in Egypt when the people of Israel were slaves. They smeared the blood of the lamb on their doorposts as a signal to God that He should "pass over" their houses when He destroyed all the firstborn of Egypt (EXO 12:13). Passover was observed on the 14th day of the first month, Abib, with the service beginning in the evening (LEV 23:6). It was on the evening of this day that Israel left Egypt. Passover commemorated this departure from Egypt in haste. Unleavened bread was used in the celebration because this showed that the people had no time to put leaven in their bread as they ate their final meal as slaves in Egypt.

Several regulations were given concerning the observance of Passover. Passover was to be observed "in the place which the LORD your God will choose." This implied the sanctuary of the tabernacle or the Temple in Jerusalem.

JOS 5:10-12 refers to the observing of Passover in the plains of Jericho near GilGAL 2CH 30:1, 3, 13, 15 describes a Passover during the reign of Hezekiah. Messengers were sent throughout the land to invite the people to come to Jerusalem to observe the Passover. Many refused; some even scorned the one who carried the invitation. Because the people were not ready to observe the Passover, a delay of one month was recommended. That year the Passover was on the 14th day of the second month. Even after the delay many still were not ready to observe the Passover.

In New Testament times, large NUM gathered in Jerusalem to observe the annual Passover. Jesus was crucified in the city during one of these Passover celebrations. He and His disciples ate a Passover meal together on the eve of His death. Like the blood of the lamb that saved the Hebrew people from destruction in Egypt, His blood, as the ultimate Passover sacrifice, redeems us from the power of sin and death (1CO 5:7).

Pentecost (see Weeks, Feast of):

Purim, Feast of: References to Purim include EST 3:7; 9:24, 26, 28-29, 31-32. This feast commemorates the deliverance of the Jewish people from destruction by an evil schemer named Haman during the days of their captivity by the Persians. It took its name from the Babylonian word  meaning "lot," because Haman cast lots to determine when he would carry out his plot against the Jews. The Feast of Purim took place on the 14th and 15th of Adar, and during its celebration the Book of Esther is read as a reminder of their deliverance. A happy ceremony, Purim is accompanied with the giving of gifts and much celebration.

Sabbath: The Sabbath is taught in many places, including EXO 16:22-30; 20:8-11; 23:12; 31:12-16; 34:21; 35:2-3; LEV 23:3; 26:2; NUM 15:32-36; 28:9-10; DEU 5:12-15. The Hebrew word for Sabbath means "to cease or abstain." Two reasons are given for observing the Sabbath: Creation and Exodus. EXO 20:8-11 reminded the nation of Israel to remember that God rested on the seventh day (GEN 2:2). This grounds the observance of the Sabbath in the creation of the world. DEU 5:12-15 reminded Israel to remember its bondage years when there was no rest. This passage fixed the origin of the Sabbath in the bondage of the Hebrews in Egypt.

The Israelites were instructed to include the family, the hired servants, the stranger, and even their domestic animals in observance of this holy day. All were commanded to cease from normal labor. This included the command not to gather firewood (NUM 15:32-36) or to kindle a fire (EXO 35:2-3). Stoning to death was apparently the penalty for gathering firewood on the Sabbath. Those who violated the Sabbath would be excommunicated from the community or could be put to death (EXO 31:12-16).

The Sabbath became not only a day of rest but a convocation to the Lord as well. A specific sacrifice on the Sabbath is required in NUM 28:9-10. It included a lamb, a grain offering mixed with oil, and a drink offering. This was to be offered as a burnt offering. In later periods, prayer and other rituals became the procedure for observing the Sabbath. The purpose of the Sabbath was twofold. It symbolized that the nation of Israel had been set apart by the Lord as His special people. The Sabbath was also a celebration of the fact that the land belonged to God. This is seen in His provision of a Sabbatical Year—one year out of every seven when the land should rest from cultivation in order to renew and replenish itself.

The observance of the Sabbath set the Israelites apart from their neighbors. Unfortunately, burdensome restrictions and heavy requirements eventually grew up around its observance. The day that was set apart for rest, renewal, and worship became a day filled with rules of many things that must not be done. Jesus attempted to restore the purpose of the Sabbath (MAT 12:1-14; MAR 2:23-3:6; LUK 6:1-11). He declared God's intention for the Sabbath by pointing out that "the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath" (MAR 2:27).

Sabbatical Year: The concept of the sabbatical year was that the land was to be given a rest every seventh year. This law included grain fields and vineyards. Even that which grew from the planting and pruning of the sixth year was not to be consumed by the owner. Eventually, the cancellation of debts was added to the land rest as a part of the sabbatical year. Debts to fellow Israelites were to be forgiven during this year, although debts of non-Israelites might be collected. But the spirit of generosity was encouraged even toward non-Israelites. Indentured servants were to be granted their freedom. They were also to be provided with grain, meat, and drink in generous portions.

The purpose of the sabbatical year was renewal—renewal of the land, renewal of hope in the canceling of debts, and renewal of life in a new start.

Seventh Month Festival: This festival is mentioned in LEV 23:24-25, 27-32 and NUM 29:1-40. It was introduced with the blowing of trumpets, the halt of labor, sacrifices, and a testing (LEV 23:24-32; NUM 29:1-40). The exact reason for its observance is not clear. Some scholars believe it originated during the Babylonian Captivity as a way of counteracting the influence of the Babylonian New Year Festival. This feast is also known as the Feast of Trumpets.

Tabernacles, Feast of: References to the Feast of Tabernacles in the Bible include EXO 23:16; 34:22; LEV 23:33-36; 39-43; NUM 29:12-32; DEU 16:13-16; EZR 3:4; and ZEC 14:16, 18-19. This festival was observed on the 15th day of the seventh month to celebrate the completion of the autumn harvest. Features of the celebration included a holy convocation on the first and eighth days, and the offering of many animal sacrifices. The Israelites were also commanded to live in booths made of palm and willow trees during the festival to commemorate their period of wilderness wandering when they lived in temporary shelters. This feast is also known as the Feast of Booths.

Trumpets, Feast of (see Seventh Month Festival):

Unleavened Bread, Feast of: This feast began on the 15th day of the first month as a part of the larger celebration of Passover (EXO 13:3-10; LEV 23:6-8). Manual labor was strictly forbidden. Strangers and native-born people alike were punished if they failed to keep this holy day. A convocation began the feast.

Only unleavened bread was to be eaten during this feast. Bread without leaven commemorated the haste with which Israel left Egypt. As the blood was drained from the sacrificial animal, so the life or the power of leaven was removed from the bread offered to God during this annual celebration.

Weeks, Feast of: Biblical references to the Feast of Weeks include EXO 23:16; 34:22; LEV 23:15-21; NUM 28:26-31; DEU 16:9-12; and 2CH 8:13. This feast was observed early in the third month on the 50th day after the offering of the barley sheaf at the Feast of Unleavened Bread. It included a holy convocation with the usual restriction on manual labor.

NUM 28:26-31 describes the number and nature of offerings and DEU 16:9-12 describes those who were to be invited to this feast. They include servants, sons and daughters, Levites, the fatherless, the widow, and the stranger. This feast was also known as the Feast of Harvest as well as Pentecost (a Greek word meaning "fifty"). The early Christian believers, who were gathered in Jerusalem for observance of this feast, experienced the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit in a miraculous way (ACT 2:1-4).