

## The Feast of Booths

### Overview

Scripture reading: Lev 23:33-43.

About a year ago I came across an interesting interpretation of the feast of booths that I'd like to share with you today. I'll start with the punch line, and then work up to it. There is scriptural reason to believe that our Lord was born, not in December, but on or about the feast of booths.

The motive for sharing this possibility with you is twofold.

1. Methodologically, it is a nice illustration of the value of paying attention to the small details of scripture, what J.J. Blunt, in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, called "undesigned coincidences." The Scriptures contain a huge amount of information that can help in their own interpretation, if we are attentive and diligent.
2. Theologically, there are two benefits.
  - a) It suggests the prophetic nature of the Jewish feasts. Jesus died, as our passover (1 Cor 5:7), at the feast of passover, and Pentecost aligns the giving of the law with the giving of the Spirit. If the feast of tabernacles is when the Lord came to tabernacle among us (John 1:14), we begin to see a pattern.
  - b) The symbolism of the feast helps us to understand the implications of the incarnation of Christ, and our current situation during the present age.

We will develop the thesis in three steps.

1. We will summarize the chronological data from the Scriptures.
2. I will point out collateral points that, while not definitive, confirm the hypothesis.
3. Then we'll think about the theological implications.

### Chronological Data

The basis of the argument is Luke's record of the conception and birth of John the Baptist, and the conception of our Lord. Notice the chronological details in Luke 1:

5 There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judaea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: ... 8 And it came to pass, that while he executed the priest's office before God **in the order of his course**, 9 According to the custom of the priest's office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord.

Luke is at pains to tell us the course to which Zechariah belonged. The courses are listed in 1 Chr 24:7-18. Abia (Abijah) is the eight course, listed in v. 10.

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Each course served for a week at a time, as we can see from 1 Chr 9:25, “after seven days,” confirmed also by the Jewish sage Maimonides (see Gill on Luke 1:5). 2 Chr 23:8 relates that they changed on the sabbath day. This makes up  $2 \times 24 = 48$  weeks of the year. But a lunar month is a bit more than four weeks (29.53 days), so lunar year of 12 lunar months actually covers about 51 weeks. How would the extra three weeks be covered?

All males were required to attend the three pilgrimage feasts, the *xaggim* (passover, weeks, and tabernacles) (Deut 16:16), and it would seem reasonable to have all the priests on duty at these times because of the press of pilgrims and the large number of sacrifices to be offered. If this was done, the cycles of priests would remain roughly aligned with the calendar of holy days.<sup>1</sup>

Luke tells us that Zechariah was serving “in the order of his course,” thus at one of the two weeks specifically designated for Abijah, not one of the three pilgrimage feasts. We don't know which of the two it was, but if it was the first, several interesting synchronisms emerge.

The first table<sup>2</sup> shows when Zechariah would have been on duty:

	First Month (Nisan, March-April)	Second Month (Iyyar, April-May)	Third Month (Sivan, May-June)
<b>Week 1</b>	1. Jehoiarib	4. Seorim	All (Pentecost)
<b>Week 2</b>	2. Jedaiah	5. Malchijah	<b>8. Abijah</b>
<b>Week 3</b>	All (Unleavened Bread)	6. Mijamin	9. Jeshua
<b>Week 4</b>	3. Harim	7. Hakkoz	10. Shecaniah

Luke continues:

23 And it came to pass, that, as soon as the days of his ministration were accomplished, he departed to his own house. 24 And **after those days his wife Elisabeth conceived**

He started his duty on the second sabbath of Sivan, so he would return home after the third, and shortly after that, some time in late Sivan, Elisabeth conceived.

24 And **after those days his wife Elisabeth conceived**, and hid herself **five months**, saying, 25 Thus hath the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein he looked on *me*, to take away my reproach among men. 26 And **in the sixth month** the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, 27 To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name *was* Mary. ... 36 And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and **this is the sixth month with her**, who was called barren.

Our Lord was conceived of the Holy Spirit six months after John the Baptist, which would be in the second half of the month Kislev. This period happens to correspond to the feast of dedication

<sup>1</sup> The greatest uncertainty in this theory is whether the courses were synchronized with the calendar year or whether they just rotated through the year. This exposition assumes that they were synchronized.

<sup>2</sup> This and the next table are suggested by Michael Scheifler, <http://biblelight.net/sukkoth.htm>

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(Hanukkah), although that feast was established under the Maccabees and is not a Mosaic feast. Thus the time that the church customarily celebrates as Christmas may actually be the time of Christ's conception rather than of his birth.

The second table shows the alignment of months between John and Jesus:

Jewish month	Begins the New moon of	John the Baptist	Jesus
1. Abib / Nisan	March-April	Birth of John ~14 Nisan = Passover	4
2. Zif / Iyyar	April-May		5
3. Sivan	May-June	Conception of John after 3rd Sabbath	6
4. Tammuz	June-July	1	7
5. Ab / Av	July-August	2	8
6. Elul	August-September	3	9
7. Ethanim / Tishri	September-October	4	Birth of Jesus ~15 Tishri = Booths
8. Bul / Marheshvan / Heshvan	October-November	5	
9. Chisleu / Chislev / Kislev	November-December	6	Conception of Jesus 24 Kislev = Dedication
10. Tebeth / Tevet	December-January	7	1
11. Shebat / Shevat	January-February	8	2
12. Adar	February-March	9	3

56 And Mary **abode with her about three months**, and returned to her own house. 57 Now Elisabeth's **full time came** that she should be delivered; and she brought forth a son.

Full term for a human fetus is 38 weeks. Since Hebrew months are lunar, they are just over 4 weeks each, bringing us to early Nisan of the following year. John would be born on or just before Passover. In this connection, it is interesting to note that the Jews set out an extra cup at the Passover table for Elijah, whom Malachi prophesied (4:5) would return before the day of the Lord, and our Lord taught (Matt 11:14) that John the Baptist was the promised Elijah.

Since Jesus was conceived six months after John, his birth would be six months after Passover. Passover is the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the first month, so we expect our Lord's birth to be around the middle of the seventh month, which brings us to the Feast of Booths.

## Collateral Confirmation

Two NT texts would appear to support this chronology.

Luke records of our Lord's birth,

Luke 2:7 And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

Two details here are interesting.

1. “There was no room for them in the inn.” This constraint is usually attributed to the census, but there is no record that Roman censuses required people to show up at a particular date. The crowding is more likely explained by the festival season.
2. The “manger” is traditionally understood as the trough in which fodder was placed for animals. However, the word is not that specific. In Luke 13:15 our version renders it “stall,” a shelter for animals (to be contrasted with the word translated “inn,” which refers to a shelter for people). In this light, it is interesting to note that the first use of the word *succah* “booth” in the Bible is in Gen 33:17, describing the crude shelters that Jacob built for his animals. Our Lord may in fact have come into the world in a *succah*.

John 1:14 records,

the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us,

We often hear it remarked that “dwelt” literally means “tabernacled,” “dwelt in a tent.” In exposition, the verse is usually connected with Moses' tabernacle, which God had constructed so that he could “dwell among them” (Exod 25:8, though the LXX doesn't translate it this way). But the Greek word “tent” *sknē* has several Hebrew correlates: *ohel* “tent,” *miškan* Moses' tabernacle, and *succah* “booth.” And in fact, if we take into account the relative frequency of these terms (see technical notes), the strongest correlation is with “booth,” not “tabernacle.” In this case, John may be connecting the Lord's birth with the feast of *sknāi*, “booths.” Certainly, John gives a great deal of attention to the Lord's presence at the feast of booths in ch. 7.

## Theological Implications

What conclusions should we draw from this association? I'll suggest two.

### ***The Role of the Feasts***

It is clear that God chose Passover for the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus. Earlier this year we saw that the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost was significant because Pentecost was the day on which the law was given. If he also chose Tabernacles for Messiah's birth, we begin to see in Israel's sacred calendar an anticipation of the calendar of the new covenant. This won't do us any good in trying to set dates—the calendar only tells us the day of the year, not the year. But it

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does identify the crucial events in God's salvation history, events that are parallel between the two covenants. Here's a sketch of how the Mosaic feasts might line up with New Covenant ideas:

Passover	A sacrifice redeems us from bondage
Unleavened Bread	A redeemed people requires purity of life (1 Cor 5)
Firstfruits (two parts)	God guides his redeemed people (giving of the law/Spirit)
Trumpets	The king of the redeemed people will come to rule over them. The trumpets are the sign of coronation, and all three 7 <sup>th</sup> month feasts are "sabbaths," which according to Hebrews points to the coming kingdom.
Atonement	A redeemed people has access into the holy of holies, to the Father
Booths	A redeemed people are not alone during their wilderness wanderings

### ***Christ our Fellow-Sojourner***

God said (Lev 23:43) that the feast of booths was to remind Israel

that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt:

The reference is to their period of wandering in the wilderness. Even after they took possession of the promised land, the feast reminded them that they were not yet in possession of their final dwelling place. They were still "strangers and pilgrims in the earth," as Abraham (Gen 23:4) and Jacob (Gen 47:9) confessed and as Hebrews urges on us today (11:13). Compare David's confession in 1 Chr 29:15 and Ps 39:12. They awaited the day of the Lord, when he would come to earth and establish his kingdom. This was the point of last year's study.

Living as a pilgrim is not easy. We are forever dealing with strange customs, unfamiliar languages, and unfriendly governments. The property that pilgrims can own is minimal, for necessary uses such as burial, compared with the permanent residents of a land. We've seen the attention that the Lord gives in the URD to our ongoing conflict with the world. That conflict is due directly to our position as strangers and pilgrims, dwellers in booths, always on the move.

This perspective gives new meaning to John 1:14, particularly when we read it in reference to the feast of booths. The Word, who was God, dwelt among us—lived among us in a booth—came and shared our pilgrim condition. As we move through a hostile wilderness, he is there with us.

In the Old Testament, God tabernacled with Israel in the wilderness, the pillar of cloud and fire, but he was isolated from the nation in the holy of holies, where no one could approach. The chronology of booths confirms the testimony of the NT, that our Lord tabernacled with us in a very different way. He came to live in a booth, as one of the wanderers, a stranger and pilgrim..

- He had nowhere to lay his head (Matt 8:20).
- He had to scavenge money to pay the temple tax (Matt 17:27)
- He was out of touch with the sinful culture of his day.
- Few people could understand what he said.

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Passover reminds us that he came to redeem us, but Booths reminds us that he came to help us live in that condition, and to assure us that his present intercession for us is based on an understanding of our needs and problems.

### Technical Notes

Matthew Henry mentions this theory in his comments on Lev 23:33ff.

The following spreadsheet shows the translation space for *sk8n8*. Totals are overall in the MT and LXX, and include translations of other words not listed and untranslated instances. Thus the row and column totals are not the same, and the grand total is the average of the two.

	)ohel "tent"	mi\$kan "Tabernacle"	sukkah "booth"	bayt "house"	Total
sk8n8	247	88	27		436
sk8nwma "habitation"	45	17			80
sk8nophgia "feast of booths"			5		9
oikos "house"	22			1645	2066
diata "habitation" (Job)	5			2	13
oikia "house"	4			204	268
Total	389	139	31	2052	2741.5

The expected value of a cell in such a table is row sum \* column sum / overall sum. If we subtract the expected value from each cell and then divide by it, we get this table, which shows the degree to which individual cells exceed the expectation. *sk8n8* represents *)ohel* and *mi\$kan* about three times as often as one would expect by chance, but it represents *sukkah* four and a half times as often as by chance, and *sukkah* is thus the most likely antecedent in an otherwise undifferentiated occurrence such as John 1:14.

	)ohel "tent"	mi\$kan "Tabernacle"	sukkah "booth"	bayt "house"	Total
sk8n8	2.99	2.98	4.48	-1	436
sk8nwma "habitation"	2.96	3.19	-1	-1	80
sk8nophgia "feast of booths"			48.13		9
oikos "house"	-0.92			0.06	2066
diata "habitation" (Job)	1.71			-0.79	13
oikia "house"	-0.89			0.02	268
Total	389	139	31	2052	2741.5