

**Feast of Booths**  
9/20/2004 6:39 AM

**Overview**

This is the first of the three pilgrimage holidays that we consider, but the last in the order of the sacred calendar.

Feast	Agricultural Significance	Historical Significance	Prophetic Significance
Unleavened Bread	Beginning of grain harvest	Exodus from Egypt, Deut 16:1	Sacrifice of Messiah 1 Cor 5:7
Weeks	End of grain harvest	Giving of the Law (Jewish tradition; cf Ex 19:1; see Edersheim)	Giving of the Spirit Acts 2
Booths	End of fruit and vegetable harvest	Wandering in the Wilderness Lev 23:42,43	Gathering all nations Zech 14:16-19; Isa 25:6-8, cf. Rev 21:4

Edersheim notes that its three names correspond to these references:

- feast of ingathering, Exod 23:16; 34:22, with reference to the agricultural calendar
- feast of tabernacles, Lev 23:34, 43, and elsewhere
- feast of the Lord, Lev 23:39 (literally), or “the feast” *simpliciter*, 2 Chr 5:3; 7:8,9.

**OT Ritual**

This is one of only two Mosaic holidays to be marked with the word *smx* “rejoice” (Lev 23:40; Deut 16:14,15); the other is weeks (16:11). Since this one lasted for a full week, it would be the bigger party. Elements of the celebration:

**Booths.**—They were to construct temporary dwellings to remind them of their wanderings in the wilderness. The word translated “tabernacles” is more properly “booths,” temporary shelters, usually constructed of branches (Neh 8).

- Jacob made these for his cattle on his way back from Haran to Canaan, Gen 33:17
- This is where an army lives while on campaign, 2 Sam 11:11; 1 Kings 20:12
- The temporary shelter in a vineyard from which the owner could guard the crop, Isa 1:8

Distinguish

- the word for “tabernacle” *mi\$kan*, which emphasizes the dwelling place *\$kn* of the Glory of the Lord, e.g., Exod 25:9
- tent *ohel* as in “tent of the congregation,” referring to a nomad’s cloth structure.

## Feast of Booths

It is interesting that while the people lived in cloth tents in the wilderness, the feast is to be celebrated in booths, not tents. The reason may be that this is not just a recollection of their wanderings (thus requiring temporary dwellings), but also a celebration of their tenure in the land (which gives them the right to cut the branches off the “goodly trees,” lit. “trees of splendor” compare Gen 23:17, which makes clear the value attached to trees—they could be sold separately from the land!).

There was a dispute between the Pharisees and Sadducees as to whether the branches mentioned in Lev 23:40 were to be carried in celebration, or to serve as the materials of the booths, but Neh 8:15 mentions different branches as actually making up the booths. In Rabbinic practice, the branches were tied together to form a kind of banner that the people waved during the sacrifices.

**Feasting.**—Here certainly we may speak of a “feast,” to be celebrated with the needy in one’s town (Deut 16:14,15).

**Special sacrifices.**—Num 29:12-38 describes the elaborate sacrifices offered during this week: two rams, fourteen lambs, a kid of the goats, and bullocks starting with 13 and working down one each day. There were 70 bullocks offered in all, which the Talmud explains as representing the 70 nations in the world, so that these bullocks were offered, not for Israel, but for the Gentiles. This emphasizes the eschatological reference of the feast, seen in Zech 14.

**Reading the law.**—Deut 31:10-13, in each sabbatical year, marked by reading of the law.

### OT Celebrations

The feast of booths figures prominently in the return from Babylon.

The first thing the exiles did when they returned was to set up the altar, even before they had reconstructed the temple or the city walls. Ezra 3:4 records that the newly dedicated altar was first used in the seventh month, and expressly mentions the sacrifices of the feast of tabernacles.

Neh 8:14-17 records a subsequent celebration, emphasizing the construction of booths, the daily reading of the law, and the joy *simxa* (end of v.17) characteristic of this feast. The reading of the law at this celebration led to the renewal of the covenant in ch. 9, and Deut 31 suggests that this may have been a regular aspect of this celebration.

### NT References

John 7:1-10 records that our Lord attended a celebration of the feast of Tabernacles. Two details in John 7-9 reflect aspects of the feast that, though not Mosaic, are described in the Mishna.

**Pouring of Water.**—Edersheim’s account:

“While the morning sacrifice was being prepared, a priest, accompanied by a joyous procession with music, went down to the Pool of Siloam, whence he drew water into a golden pitcher, capable of holding three log (rather more than two pints).... Then the ordinary sacrifice proceeded, the priest who had gone to Siloam so timing it, that he returned just as his brethren carried up the pieces of the sacrifice to lay them on the altar. As he entered by the ‘Watergate,’ which obtained its name from this ceremony, he was received by a threefold blast from the priests’ trumpets. The priest then went up the rise of the altar and turned to the left, where there were two silver basins with narrow holes—the eastern a little wider for the wine, and the western

## Feast of Booths

somewhat narrower for the water. Into these the wine of the drink-offering was poured, and at the same time the water from Siloam ...”

The Talmud associates the ceremony with Isa 12:3, and the giving of the Holy Spirit: Thus the Talmud says distinctly: ‘Why is the name of it called, The drawing out of water? Because of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, according to what is said: “With joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation.”’

It is against the context of this custom, and perhaps while it was being conducted, that the Lord uttered John 7:32-46. Their ceremony looked forward to the pouring out of the HS on God’s people; here, the Lord offers himself as the source of that spirit. Note that the proclamation is made in the presence of the temple guard, who have been sent to apprehend this troublemaker but find themselves unable to do so.

**Illumination of the Court of the Women.**—Edersheim again:

“At the close of the first day of the feast the worshippers descended to the Court of the Women, where great preparations had been made. Four golden candelabras were there, each with four golden bowls, and against them rested four ladders; and four youths of priestly descent held, each a pitcher of oil, capable of holding one hundred and twenty log [about 9.5 gallons], from which they filled each bowl. The old, worn breeches and girdles of the priests served for wicks to these lamps. There was not a court in Jerusalem that was not lit up by the light of ‘the house of water-pouring.’ The ‘Chassidim’ and ‘the men of Deed’ danced before the people with flaming torches in their hands...”

I do not know of any Rabbinic interpretation of this ceremony, but Edersheim suggests it is meant to recall the Shekinah shining out of the temple in the days before the Babylonian captivity, and also such Messianic prophecies as Isa 9:2 and Isa 60:1.

This ceremony lends context to our Lord’s claim (8:12; 9:5) to be the “light of the world.” He announces himself as the Glory of the Lord once again occupying his holy place. Compare the prophecy of Haggai 2:9.

## Prophetic Reference

It is striking that Zech 14 describes the feast of booths as the focal point for the gathering of the Gentiles. The survivors of the great war against Jerusalem (14:2) gather to pay their homage to the Lord, the great king (v.16). The imagery of this feast may function in two ways here.

- Just as the feast commemorates Israel’s tenure in the land after wandering in the wilderness, so for the nations it will symbolize their place in God’s blessing after years of rebellion against him.
- The role of the feast in covenant renewal (Neh) here expands to become the occasion for all the nations of the earth to acknowledge that they are the Lord’s vassals; compare Isa 60 (and recall the importance of light in the rabbinical celebration of this feast). Compare Rev 11:15, at the sounding of the seventh trumpet.

One day every knee will bow, whether willingly or (as suggested by the case of Egypt in Zech 14) unwillingly. We should be thankful that God has granted us faith to come willingly, now, so that we can enjoy his blessings at this present time.