

## Festivals & feasts or, Is the holy life all doom & gloom?

You shall celebrate ... you shall rejoice before Yahweh your  
God ... you shall celebrate ... you shall celebrate ...

— LEVITICUS 23:39

### Analysis

#### A. (23:1-22) Distinguish the first 4 sacred festivals

[23] After the offerings, the priesthood, and the purifications, come the special occasions for worship – weekly, monthly, annually, and (chap. 25) every seventh and fiftieth year. Stated times for approaching God are natural and inevitable. The idea of “seven” enters into all these festivals ... [Thomas 130]

[23:1-22] Holiness, thus far, has been related to holy persons, holy things, and holy places. But now in chap. 23 it is extended to holy times. ... Just as chaps. 18-19 use the formula “I am the LORD your God” to act as a colophon and a divider between subsections, so also chap. 23 is divided into two main divisions by the appearance of this same formula in vv. 22 and 43, giving the spring festivals in the first division (vv. 1-22) and the autumn festivals in the second division (vv. 23-43). [Kaiser 1155]

[23:2 ... my appointed times] ... the expression is not only used with reference to the Sabbath, the new moon, and the other yearly feasts; but in Numbers 28:2 and Numbers 29:39 it is extended so as to include the times of the daily morning and evening sacrifice. (On the “holy convocation” see Exodus 12:16.) [Keil ii 438]

How many “appointed times” – sacred days – were fixed in the Divine calendar year?

#### The Weekly Sabbath

[23:3] While the idea of the sabbath was familiar to the Mesopotamians, the days that were observed as such were far less regular than those of the Hebrews, and had a strictly superstitious basis. For fear of offending various deities in the pantheon, the Babylonians observed a *sabbatu* on the 7<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup>, and 28<sup>th</sup> days of the month. Special sacrifices were offered to the gods on these occasions in order to avert their wrath or to propitiate them. Apparently only certain classes of Babylonian society were affected by ‘sabbath’ restrictions upon their normal activities, but these groups included the ruler and some priests. [Harrison 215]

[23:1-3] The eye of God rested on his holy creation, and He was refreshed; so was the eye of man to rest on the creation and the Creator, and his soul be refreshed. ... It is remarked, that “no work” whatever was to be done on this day; and no other

festival has so strict an injunction put on it, except only the day of expiation. Thus, the rest in atonement is to equal the rest that was enjoyed in an unfallen creation. Is it so with thy soul, believer? [Bonar 397]

[23:1-3] These are thus the two sabbatic ideas; rest and redemption. They everywhere appear, in one form or another, in all this sabbatic series of sacred times. Some of them emphasise one phase of the rest and redemption, and some another; the weekly Sabbath, as the unit of the series, presents both. For in Deuteronomy (5:15) Israel was commanded to keep the Sabbath in commemoration of the exodus, as the time when God undertook to bring them into His rest; a rest of which the beginning and the pledge was their deliverance from Egyptian bondage; a rest brought in through a redemption. [Kellogg 455]

[23:3] Kidner highlights [130] that this is one of the few indications in the OT that the sabbath was used for community worship as well as rest.

#### Passover, Feast of Unleavened Bread, Weeks (Pentecost)

[23:1-22] The annual processes of nature have indeed a place and a necessary recognition in the system, simply because the personal God is active in all nature; but the place of these is not primary, but secondary and subordinate. They have a recognition because, in the first place, it is through the bounty of God in nature that the life of man is sustained; and, secondly, also because nature in her order is a type and shadow of things spiritual. For in the spiritual world, whether we think of it as made up of nations or individuals, even as in the natural, there is a seed-time and a harvest, a time of firstfruits and a time of the joy and rest of the full ingathering of fruit, and oil, and wine. Hence it was most fitting that this inspired rubric, as primarily intended for the celebration of spiritual things, should be so arranged and timed, in all its parts, as that in each returning sacred season, visible nature should present itself to Israel as a manifest parable and eloquent suggestion of those spiritual verities; the more so that thus the Israelite would be reminded that the God of the Exodus and the God of Sinai was also the supreme Lord of nature, the God of the seed-time and harvest, the Creator and Sustainer of the heavens and the earth, and of all that in them is. [Kellogg 452-543]

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[23:6-8] The feast, then, of unleavened bread was meant to be a continuation of the same topics on which they had begun to meditate on the passover-night. The passover was the cause, the feast of unleavened bread the effects, of their deliverance from the grasp of Egypt. To a believer now, the one exhibits the way of pardon, the other exhibits the fellowship of God, and the holiness that follows upon pardon. ... His deliverance from corruption (leaven) is to date its commencement from the very hour he rises to forsake his house of bondage. And all saints rejoice to keep a feast to this effect – seeking holiness more than joy in their festivals, and rejoicing in deliverance from corruption as much as in deliverance from the bondage of Egypt. “We are redeemed from our vain conversation” (1 Pet. 1:18) as well as from

our state of death and condemnation. "Purge out the old leaven" (1 Cor. 5) [Bonar 399]

**B. (23:23-44) How are the last 3 festivals set apart from the first 4? And which months are marked particularly?**

(v 39) Let us remark how the command to *celebrate ... rejoice* is set right alongside the command to set apart the 1<sup>st</sup> & 8<sup>th</sup> days as 'solemn rest'. How do our worship habits incorporate these 2 imperatives?

**Trumpets, Day of Atonement**

[23:26-32] It is the only day divinely announced as a fast in the whole OT, even though tradition added several other days of fasting (see Zech 7:2-5; 8:19). This day has already been described in chap. 16, but here it is placed in its relationship to the other annual events of celebration to the Lord. [Kaiser 1159]

[23:26-32] Sorrow for sin seems to be like the rough sand that a man uses to rub off rust from iron; sorrow searches and rubs sore on the soul, but at the same time effectually removes what cleaved to the soul before. The vessel is thus rinsed of the flavour of former wines, and left quite clean for the new wine of the kingdom. Sorrow does not take away the sin, but it takes away the taste for it, and the pleasant taste of it; it does not empty out the vessel, but it frees the emptied vessel (the pardoned soul) from the former relish it had for earth. It is thus that the Lord's children pass through fire and water to the wealthy place. For this reason it is that their souls are tried with spiritual griefs and outward tribulation. It makes the joy of the Lord the fuller and sweeter to them. [Bonar 417]

**Sorrow does not take away sin – just the taste for it, and the pleasant taste of it**

[23:23-43] The seventh month, then, marked the end of the agricultural year and the beginning of a new one. Farm work was at a minimum and there was time to take stock spiritually and materially. The festivals of this month have a more solemn flavor than those in the spring. Four extra sabbaths are prescribed in the space of one month including the most holy day of atonement (vv. 25,28,35,36). [Wenham 305]

[23:23-32] In the post-exilic period the Torah was generally read in public, and the atmosphere was one of celebration and rejoicing. And that time the seventh month also marked the beginning of the Jewish civil year, so that after the exile the festival of trumpets was in effect a new year's festival also. The people were reminded of God's mercies to them through the covenant, which if obeyed would sustain them through another year. [Harrison 218]

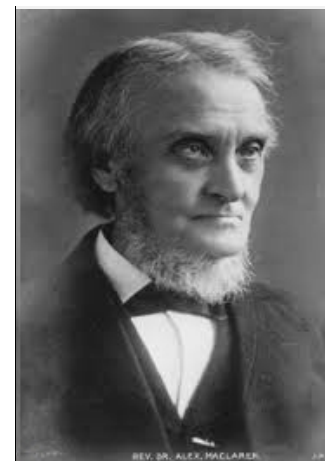
**Festival of Tabernacles (Booths)**

[23:33-43] No one need feel any difficulty in seeing in this a connection with similar harvest and vintage customs among other peoples of that time. That other nations had festivities of this kind at that time, was surely no reason why God should not order these to be taken up into the Mosaic law, elevated in their significance, and sanctified to higher ends. Nothing could be more fitting than that the completion of the ingathering of the products of the year should be celebrated as a time of rejoicing

and a thanksgiving day before Jehovah. Indeed, so natural is such a festivity to religious minds, that – as is well known – in the first instance, New England, and then, afterward, the whole United States, and also the Dominion of Canada, have established the observance of an annual "Thanksgiving Day" in the latter part of the autumn, which is observed by public religious services, by suspension of public business, and as a glad day of reunion of kindred and friends. [Kellogg 466]

[23:39] The feast of tabernacles was the consecration of joy. Other religions have had their festivals, in which wild tumult and foul orgies have debased the worshippers to the level of their gods. How different the pure gladness of this feast 'before the Lord' ! No coarse and sensuous delights of passion could live before the 'pure eyes and perfect witness' of God. In His 'presence' must be purity as well as 'fullness of joy.' If this festival teaches us, on the one hand, that they wofully misapprehend the spirit of godliness who do not find it full of gladness, it teaches us no less, on the other, that they wofully misapprehend the spirit of joy, who look for it anywhere but 'before the Lord.' The ritual of the feast commanded gladness. Joy is a duty to God's children. [Maclaren ii 265]

**C. (Summing up) Joy of the Lord in continuity with the Jewish festivals – but not without penitence**



**ALEXANDER MACLAREN**  
"... they wofully misapprehend the spirit of joy, who look for it anywhere but 'before the Lord.'"

In Israel, holiness was not confined to people and objects but also extended to times and seasons. Life was not an unbroken highway leading endlessly to more of the same. Here and there along the way there were holy oases of refreshment, celebration, and commemoration – sabbaths, festivals, and special days of awe and praise. The special times of holiness aimed to disclose what was true of all time, that it belongs to God. The purpose of a sabbath, for example, was not to be the one and only holy day in the week. Instead, the sabbath brought to visibility the holiness of all days. A sabbath or a festival was like a kiss between lovers. It gathered into a special moment what is always true. Just so, a Tuesday was as holy as a sabbath, but it took the "kiss" of the sabbath to make that clear. [Kaiser 1160]

Nowhere is the continuity between the testaments so clear as in the calendar. Three of the principal OT feasts were taken over directly by the Christian church: passover = Good Friday, unleavened bread = Easter, weeks = Pentecost. The three most significant events in Christ's redemptive ministry coincided with these festivals. That they no longer always coincide today is because of various modifications to the calendar

introduced since the first century. [Wenham 306]

As the Judean theocracy developed, the sabbath not merely became the opportunity for weekly synagogue worship, but also a time when the law was read and studied. In conjunction with this there emerged the many details of sabbath observance that

were formulated by the scribes. [Harrison 216]

### Typical of Christ's return

We have already seen that the earlier feasts of the year were also prophetic; that Passover and Unleavened Bread pointed forward to Christ, our Passover, slain for us; Pentecost, to the spiritual ingathering of the firstfruits of the world's harvest, fifty days after the presentation of our Lord in resurrection, as the wave-sheaf of the firstfruits. We may therefore safely infer that these remaining feasts of the seventh month must be typical also. But, if so, typical of what? Two things may be safely said in this matter. The significance of the three festivals of this seventh month must be interpreted in harmony with what has already passed into fulfilment; and, in the second place, inasmuch as the feast of trumpets, the day of atonement, and the feast of tabernacles all belong to the seventh and last month of the ecclesiastical year, they must find their fulfilment in connection with what Scripture calls "the last times." [Kellogg 468]

Most beautifully, thus regarded, does all else connected with the feast of tabernacles correspond, as type to antitype, to the revelation of the last things, and therein reveal its truest and deepest spiritual significance: the joy, the reunion, the rejoicing with son and with daughter, the fulness of gladness also for the widow and the fatherless; and this, not only for those in Israel, but also for the stranger, not of Israel, – for Gentile as well as Israelite was to have part in the festivity of that day; and, again, the full attainment of the most complete consecration, signified in the ten-fold burnt-offering; – all finds its place here. And so now we can see why it was that our Saviour declared (Matt. 13:39) that the end of this present age should be the time of harvest; and how Paul, looking at the future spiritual ingathering, places the ingathering of the Gentiles (Rom. 11:25) as one of the last things. [Kellogg 469]

[23:33-44] The ideal of religious life, which these set times of the Lord kept before Israel, was a religion of joy. Again and again is this spoken of in the accounts of these feasts. This is true even of Passover, with which we oftener, though mistakenly, connect thoughts of sadness and gloom. Yet Passover was a feast of joy; it celebrated the birthday of the nation, and a deliverance unparalleled in history. The only exception to this joyful character in all these sacred times is found in the day of atonement; but it is itself instructive on the same point, teaching most clearly that in the Divine order, as in the necessity of the case, the joy in the Lord, of which the feast of ingathering was the supreme expression, must be preceded by and grounded in an accepted expiation and true penitence for sin. So it is still with the religion of the Bible: it is a religion of joy. God does not wish us to be gloomy and sad. He desires that we should ever be joyful before Him, and thus find by blessed experience that "the joy of the Lord is our strength." Also, in particular, we do well to observe further that, inasmuch as all these set times were sabbatic seasons, joyfulness is inseparably connected with the Biblical conception of the Sabbath. This has been too often forgotten; and the weekly day of sabbatic rest has sometimes been made a day of stern repression and forbidding gloom. How utterly astray are such conceptions from the Divine ideal, we shall perhaps the more clearly see when we call to mind the thought which appears more or less distinctly in all these sabbatic seasons, that every Sabbath points forward to the eternal joy of the consummated kingdom, the sabbath rest which remaineth for the people of God (Heb. 4:9). [Kellogg 473]

**The joy of the Lord  
is your strength**

### D. EXCURSUS: On the significance of the number 7

[23:1-22] These so-called harvest feasts in fact form part of an elaborate system of sacred times – a system which is based upon the Sabbath, and into which the sacred number seven, the number of the covenant, enters throughout as a formative element. The weekly Sabbath, first of all, was the seventh day; the length of the great festivals of unleavened bread and of tabernacles was also, in each case, seven days. Not only so, but the entire series of sacred times mentioned in this chapter and in chap. 25, constitutes an ascending series of sacred septenaries, in which the ruling thought is this: that the seventh is holy unto the Lord, as the number symbolic of rest and redemption; and that the eighth, as the first of a new week, is symbolic of the new creation. Thus we have the seventh day, the weekly Sabbath, constantly recurring, the type of each of the series; then, counting from the feast of unleavened bread – the first of the sacred year – the fiftieth day, at the end of the seventh week, is signalled as sacred by the feast of firstfruits or of "weeks;" the seventh month, again, is the sabbatic month, of special sanctity, containing as it does three of the annual seasons of holy convocation – the feast of trumpets on its first day, the great day of atonement on the tenth, and the last of the three great annual feasts, that of tabernacles or ingathering, for seven days from the fifteenth day of the month. Beyond this series of sacred festivals recurring annually, in chap. 25, the seventh year is appointed to be a sabbatic year of rest to the land, and the series at last culminates at the expiration of seven sevens of years, in the fiftieth year – the eighth following the seventh seven – the great year of jubilee, the supreme year of rest, restoration, and release. All these sacred times, differing in the details of their observance, are alike distinguished by their connection with the sacred number seven, by the informing presence of the idea of the Sabbath, and therewith always a new and fuller revelation of God as in covenant with Israel for their redemption. [Kellogg 450-452]

**The festival system – saturated in sevens**