

# Preparing for Sukkot

## I. Sukkot

(Feast of Tabernacles; Feast of Ingathering; Feast of Booths)

(The bulk of the information taken in this paper is an outlined compilation from Samuele Bacchiocchi's *God's Festivals in Scripture and History: Part II: The Fall Festivals*)

### A. Dates:

Tishrei 15 – Tishrei 22 on the Hebrew calendar (occurs each year in September or October)

### B. Overview

1. **Terminology:** The term “Tabernacles” [can seem] misleading because it conveys the idea of “tent structures” like the Tabernacle in the wilderness. In reality, *sukkot* refers to temporary “booths” or “huts” made especially for the feast, not of canvas, but of branches of leafy trees (Bacchiocchi, 218).
2. **Two Names/Two Functions:** The two names of the feast reflect its dual meaning and function. With reference to the harvest, it is called “the Feast of Ingathering” (Ex 23:16; 34:22) because it is a thanksgiving celebration for the blessings of the harvest. With reference to the history of Israel, it is called “the Feast of Booths” (Lev 23:34, 43; Deut 16:13, 16; 31:10; Ezra 3:4) because it commemorated God’s protection of the people as they dwelt in booths during their sojourn in the wilderness. Both of these features are preserved in the observance of the Feast of Tabernacles (Bacchiocchi, 218).
  - a. There are two descriptions of the Feast in Leviticus 23 to represent the dual character of Sukkot and not superseding the Feast of Ingathering.
  - b. “While the harvest festival of Asif and the exodus festival of Sukkot have separate identities, they are linked to each other in substance as well as in time. The observance of the Feast of Booths at the close of the Fall harvest made it possible for the Israelites to have a double thanksgiving celebration: thanksgiving for the blessing of the harvest and for God’s protection through the sojourning in the wilderness. We see that these dual themes of *past* and *present* divine protection and blessings served to nourish the hope for a *future* Messianic restoration (Bacchiocchi, 220).
3. **We Are Pilgrims:** One practical lesson the Feast of Tabernacles can teach us is to remind us that we are pilgrims journeying to the Promised Land and not permanent residents of this world (Bacchiocchi, 289).

### C. Biblical Descriptions: Leviticus 23:33-36, 39-43; Numbers 29:12-39; Deuteronomy 16:13-15, 31:9-13

1. **Dwell in Booths:** Various branches of leafy trees were used to build booths that would house the people for the duration of the feast. The people erected these huts on their roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the temple, and in the different squares in Jerusalem (Neh. 8:16). Native Israelites were enjoined to live in those temporary booths (*sukkah*) for the duration of the feast. They were to eat, sleep, pray, study, in short, live entirely in the booths. Exceptions were made in case of rain or for the sick, women, and infants who depended on their mothers (Bacchiocchi, 221).
  - a. Living in booths served as a reminder of God’s protection during the forty years of wandering in the desert (Lev 23:42). The temporary booths symbolized the human need to depend upon God for His provision of food, water, and shelter (Bacchiocchi, 221).

- b. Living in booths for seven days served as a reminder, not of the unsettled conditions of the wilderness sojourning, but of God's sustenance and protection given by God in the desert (Bacchiocchi, 221).
- 2. Sacrifices:** The instructions regarding sacrifices are spelled out in detail in Numbers 29:12-39. On no other occasion were so many sacrifices required of Israel to be offered on a single day. Presumably, the vast number of sacrifices were to reflect Israel's depth of thanksgiving for a bountiful harvest (Bacchiocchi, 223).
  - a. Some believe that these sacrifices are representative of the nations; 70 bulls for 70 nations (seventy is the traditional number of all the nations).
- 3. Season to Rejoice:** In contrast to the Feasts of Trumpets and Atonement which were a time of introspection and repentance, the Feast of Booths was a time of rejoicing. The festive atmosphere reflected the Israelites' thankfulness for both material and spiritual blessings. The explicit reason for rejoicing is given in Deuteronomy 16:15: "*because the Lord your God will bless you in all your produce and in all the work of your hands, so that you will be altogether joyful.*" (Bacchiocchi, 223).
  - a. Repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation lead to joy.
  - b. Material blessings from the harvest.
  - c. Spiritual blessings commemorating how God led the Israelites through the wilderness to the Promised Land.
- 4. Remember the Needy:** This as well as all the festivals is a time to specifically remember, include, and bless the needy in our midst (Deut. 16:14)
  - a. Yahweh commands us to not appear before him empty handed and to give as we are able (Deut. 16:16-17).
  - b. At this festival many congregations specifically take up a special offering for the poor and needy.

#### **D. Sukkot Observance in the Bible**

1. Sukkot is infrequently mentioned (probably because of the apostasy of the people). *The entire assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in them. The sons of Israel had indeed not done so from the days of Joshua the son of Nun to that day. And there was great rejoicing.* Nehemiah 8:17
2. Dedication of Solomon's Temple (1 Kings 8:1-66; 2 Chronicles 5:2-7:22).
3. Psalms 42-43; 81, & 118 are associated with Sukkot.
4. Future Observance Described in Zechariah (Zechariah 14:1-21).

#### **E. Hebrew Customs**

- 1. Pilgrimage Festival:** The Feast of Booths was the last of the three pilgrimage festivals and it attracted the largest number of pilgrims. The Jewish people were not required to go up to Jerusalem for the Feast of Trumpets or the Day of Atonement, but they were required to do so for the Feast of Booths (Bacchiocchi, 235).
- 2. Building & Living in the Booth:** Usually, the booth had three walls, the fourth being a wall of the house. Instead of a door, a curtain hung over one of the sides. The roof was built with great care with palm branches or other leafy branches. The branches were spaced so they would screen out the sunlight without blocking the visibility of the stars. The people watched for the stars at night during the feast because of the prophecy "*a star shall come out of Jacob*" (Num 24:17). It is possible that it was during the Feast of Tabernacles, the special season of star watching, that the wise men saw the Messianic star and "*rejoiced exceedingly with great joy*" (Matt 2:10). The shade provided by the

covering was to exceed the sunshine. Once the booth was erected, smaller children joined in beautifying it by hanging various kinds of fruits along the walls. The fruits that were hung for decoration could not be eaten until the end of the festival (Bacchiocchi, 237).

- a. By deliberately giving up living in a solid construction for a week, the Jews were taught to place the ultimate trust in God's protection (Bacchiocchi, 237).
- b. Living in booths taught the Jews that the ultimate protection is to be found not in building solid walls of security but in trusting Yahweh (Bacchiocchi, 237).
- c. The notion of an open door to "holy guests" is fundamental to the celebration of the Feast of Booths and finds expression in the custom still prevailing today among the Jews, to invite the poor and the needy to share in the special "booth" meal. "Holy guests" only deign to enter a booth where the poor are welcome (Bacchiocchi, 237).

**3. Waving of the Lulav & Etrog:** The second major ritual of the Feast of Booths is the waving of special branches, known as *lulav* and *etrog*. These terms are not found in the Bible, though the rabbis derived their use from Leviticus 23:40: "*And you shall take on the first day the fruit of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and boughs of leafy trees, and willow of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days.*" The rabbis concluded that this passage refers not only to the actual building of booths but also to specific branches and leaves to be waved to express rejoicing in Yahweh (Bacchiocchi, 240).

- a. The term *lulav*, which originally meant "a sprout," came to refer to bundle of willow, myrtle, and palm branches, which were tied together and waved in rejoicing during the Feast of Booths. *Etrog*, an Aramaic word meaning "something which shines," refers to a citrus fruit, the citron, which is carried along with the *lulav*. The citron is an oblong, fragrant fruit, somewhat larger than a lemon, with a stem at the base and a small knobby projection at the head. Since the *etrog* is not mentioned in the Bible, the rabbis derived its use from the Biblical phrase "the fruit of goodly trees" (Lev. 23:40). To the rabbis, this phrase implied that *both* the tree and the fruit had to be goodly, which meant that the fruit and the wood must have a similar taste. In their view, only the *etrog*, the citron, fulfilled both of these requirements (Bacchiocchi, 240).
- b. The *lulav* was made with a palm branch to which was attached two willow branches to its left and three myrtle branches to its right. Rings were placed on the center and upper part of the *lulav* to keep the branches together during the waving ritual. This cluster was held in the right hand while the *etrog*, or citron, was held in the left. They were to be held in the upright position in the manner in which they grow (Bacchiocchi, 240).

**4. Prayers for Water:** Praying for rain was an important part of the ritual of the Feast of Booths. The rabbinical perception was that God determines the amount of water for the coming year during the Feast of Booths. The only hint in the Biblical text of a link between the Feast of Booths and the promise for rain is the inclusion of the willow branches among the four species of branches that comprised the *lulav* bundle that was waved during the feast. The willow branches are called "willow of the brook" (Lev 23:40), implying a connection with water (Bacchiocchi, 241).

## F. Sukkot in the Gospels

### 1. The Incarnation (Birth of Yeshua)

*John 1:14* <sup>14</sup> *And the Word became flesh, and dwelt (tabernacled) among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

- a. It is a recognized fact that the adoption of the date of December 25<sup>th</sup> by the Western Church to commemorate the incarnation of the Messiah, was influenced by the pagan celebration of the return of the sun after the winter solstice. Such a date is not only devoid of Biblical meaning but also inaccurate as far as the actual time of Messiah's birth (Bacchiocchi, 252).
- b. Indirect support for a September/October dating of Messiah's birth is provided also by the fact that from November to February shepherds did not watch their flocks at night in the fields. They brought them into a protective corral called a "sheepfold." Hence, December 25 is a most unlikely date for the birth of Messiah (Bacchiocchi, 252).
- c. The overcrowded conditions at the time of Messiah's birth ("there was no place for them in the inn"—Luke 2:7) could be related not only to the census taken by the Romans at that time, but also to the many pilgrims that overrun the area especially during the Feast of Tabernacles—the last and most important pilgrimage of the year. Bethlehem is only four miles from Jerusalem. "The Romans," notes Barney Kasdan, "were known to take their censuses according to the prevailing custom of the occupied territories. Hence, in the case of Israel, they would opt to have the people report to their provinces at a time that would be convenient for them. There is no apparent logic to calling the census in the middle of winter. The more logical time of taxation would be after the harvest, in the fall," when people had in their hands the revenue of their harvest (Bacchiocchi, 253).

## 2. Water-Drawing Ceremony

- a. Description: While the morning sacrifice was being prepared, a special procession was organized for the joyous waterdrawing ceremony which was rich in symbolism and high drama. The procession of faithful worshippers began at the Temple, led by a priest who carried a golden pitcher. A band of liturgical flutists enhanced the wonder of the ceremony with their cheerful music. When the Temple procession reached the pool of Siloam, the priest filled his golden pitcher with water. Journeying back to the Temple, the cortege would pass through the Water Gate (its name being derived from the ceremony). The Water Gate had special eschatological significance because it was identified by some rabbis as the south gate of Ezekiel's Temple through which the water of life would flow to all the land (Ezek. 47:1-5).

The procession was timed to arrive back at the Temple just in time for the morning sacrifice on the altar of burnt-offering. A threefold blast of trumpets welcomed the arrival of the priest who was joined by another priest who carried the wine for the drink-offering. The two priests ascended together the 'rise' of the altar and placed two magnificent silver basins on the southwest corner of the altar. One of the bowls was used for pouring the water from the pool of Siloam and the other for pouring the wine. Both bowls had a hole which allowed the water and wine to flow to the base of the altar.

As soon as the priests began pouring the water and the wine, the Temple music began. The people chanted "*With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation*" (Is. 12:3). Then the 'great Hallel,' consisting of Psalms 113 to 118, was chanted antiphonally to the accompaniment of flutes. Edersheim explains that "As the Levites intoned the first line of each Psalm, the people repeated it; while to each of the other lines they responded by *Hallelu Yah* (Praise ye the Lord'). But in Psalm 118 the people not only repeated the first line, '*O give thanks to Yahweh,*' but also '*O then, work now salvation, Yahweh*' (Ps. 118:25), '*O Yahweh, send now prosperity*' (Ps. 118:25); and again at the close of the Psalm, '*O give thanks to Yahweh.*' As they

repeated these lines, they shook toward the altar the *lulavs* which they held in their hands—as if with this token of the past to express the reality and cause of their praise, and to remind God of His promises.”

The morning service closed with a procession around the altar by the priests, who chanted “*O then, work now salvation, Yahweh! O Yahweh, send now prosperity*” (Ps. 118:25). On the seventh and last day of the Feast, the priests made the circuit of the altar seven times, each time chanting the Psalm and crying *Hosheanah* (save now”). This is why the last day was called “the Great Hosannah.” (Bacchiocchi, 258).

- b. Yeshua’s Fulfillment: Most probably it was right after the symbolic rite of the water-pouring ceremony at the altar, after the people had chanted some of the verses of Psalm 118 praying for Yahweh to send salvation, that the voice of Yeshua was heard loud and clear throughout the Temple: “*If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink*” (John 7:37) (Bacchiocchi, 260).

The meaning of Messiah’s invitation to come to Him and drink His living water is explained by the Lord Himself as representing believing in Him. “*He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water’*” (John 7:38). To drink Messiah’s living water means to believe in Him as our Savior and source of eternal life. The ministry of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believers causes the living water to flow as they become channels through which the blessings of salvation flow unto others (Bacchiocchi, 263).

### 3. Illumination of the Temple

- a. Description: Most commentators maintain that the setting of Yeshua’s self-proclamation as the Light of the World is the nightly illumination of the Court of Women that took place during the Feast of Tabernacles. The Mishnah offers us this graphic description of the ceremony. “There were there golden candlesticks [in the Court of Women] with four golden bowls on the top of them and four ladders to each candlestick, and four youths of the priestly stock and in their hands jars of oil holding a hundred and twenty logs which they poured into all the bowls. They made wicks from the worn out drawers and girdles of the priests and with them they set the candlesticks alight, and there was not a courtyard in Jerusalem that did not reflect the light of the Beth ha-She’ubah [Court of women].”

The festivities lasted all night with singing and playing of harps, lyres, cymbals, and trumpets. The climactic moment came at sunrise when two priests reached the gate that led to the east (the beautiful gate) while blowing their trumpets. Once through the gate with a multitude of worshippers, the priests turned their faces toward the west and chanted this ancient prayer: “Our fathers when they were in this place turned with their backs toward the Temple of the Lord and their faces toward the east, and they worshiped the sun toward the east; but, as for us, our eyes are turned toward Yahweh.”

The meaning of the illumination of the Temple was similar to that of the pouring of the water. The light shining out of the Temple into the darkness around, was seen “as a symbol not only of the Shekinah [God’s glory manifested in the Most Holy above the ark] which once filled the Temple, but also of the ‘great light’ which ‘the people that walked in darkness’ were to see, and which was to shine ‘upon them that dwell in the land of the shadow of death’ (Is. 9:2).” It seems most probable that it was in the context of this illumination ceremony that Yeshua said: “*I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life*” (John 8:12) (Bacchiocchi, 264).

b. Yeshua's Fulfillment: By proclaiming Himself as the light of the world, Messiah revealed Himself to be the fulfillment of the Messianic pillar of fire that guided the Israelites through the wilderness. The enormous candelabra burning in the Court of Women reminded the people of the light which had guided their ancestors. Yeshua had spoken of Himself as "*the bread of life*" (John 6:25) and "*the rivers of living water*" (John 7:38), now He reveals Himself as "*the light of the world*" (John 8:12). Whereas the light of the candelabra placed in the Court of Women brightened all of Jerusalem, the light emanating from Messiah enlightens the whole world (Bacchiocchi, 265).

i. Future Fulfillment: *19" No longer will you have the sun for light by day, Nor for brightness will the moon give you light; But you will have Yahweh for an everlasting light, And your God for your glory. 20" Your sun will no longer set, Nor will your moon wane; For you will have Yahweh for an everlasting light, And the days of your mourning will be over. Isaiah 60:19-20*

*22 I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. 23 And the city has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp is the Lamb. 24 The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. 25 In the daytime (for there will be no night there) its gates will never be closed; Revelation 21:22-25*

**G. Sukkot in Revelation:** [Some believe in Revelation 7:9] that the palm branches waved by the redeemed "are certainly the *lulavs* of the Sukkoth festival [Feast of Tabernacles] (Lev. 23:40; Neh. 8:15). Made of the same (or similar) materials as the booths themselves, one may consider them even more 'portable' and 'personal' reminders of these 'temporary shelters' which mark the feast (Bacchiocchi, 273).

**H. The Eighth Day (Shemini Atzeret/Simchat Torah):** Some scholars think that the Eighth Day is a separate feast which does not belong to the Feast of Tabernacles. This appears to be true, since the celebration of the latter was to last only seven days (Bacchiocchi, 225).

1. **Observance:** In Israel, Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah are both celebrated on Tishri 22, but in the Diaspora (communities outside of Israel), Shemini Atzeret is observed on Tishri 22 and Simchat Torah on Tishri 23.
  - a. Most probably, the Eighth Day was set apart from the seven days of festivities to conclude the three feasts of the seventh month or the whole annual cycle of the feasts. Presumably, the day helped people make the transition back to normal life (Bacchiocchi, 226).
  - b. Referred to as the Eighth Day of Assembly (Numbers 29:35)
2. **Prayers for Rain & Wind:** rain for the coming harvest; wind (north & south winds) typically starts at this time and is prayed up til Pesach. Jewish tradition believes that all the world is judged at this time related to the amount of rainfall that will come for the upcoming year.
3. **More Reflective:** During this festival day it is characteristic to reflect on the past festival cycle.
  - a. In addition, in Temple times during the week of Sukkot seventy bulls were sacrificed as Musaf offerings on the altar (for the seventy nations of the earth), but on Shemini Atzeret only one bull was sacrificed - for Israel alone:

- b. “You may compare it to a king who had a festival for seven days and invited all the nations of the world to the seven days of feasting. When the seven days were over and the guests had gone, he said to his friend (Israel), ‘Let us now have a small meal together, just you and I.’” (Bamidbar Rabbah 21, Sukkah 55b)
- 4. A Picture of Eternity:** Shemini Atzeret represents the eternal state of perfection the Day of the new heavens and the new earth (Isaiah 65:17; Revelation 21:1)
- a. In linking this Torah section with the eighth day, the Sages intend to emphasize that *Shemini tzeret is symbolic of the conclusion of the whole festival cycle*. In fact, if the history of the earth is patterned after the 7 day week, with the 7th day (Shabbat) symbolic of the Millennial reign of Yeshua, then the eighth day represents the World to Come in which (like the Sabbatical year and especially the Jubilee) everything returns to its rightful owner, all debts are cancelled, and freedom is proclaimed for all slaves (Hegg).

## I. Fulfillments

### 1. Past Fulfillments

- a. God’s faithful provision to the Israelites as they traveled 40 years through the wilderness. He provided manna, water from the rock, supernatural direction/leading, and shoes not wearing out.

*5I have led you forty years in the wilderness; your clothes have not worn out on you, and your sandal has not worn out on your foot. 6You have not eaten bread, nor have you drunk wine or strong drink, in order that you might know that I am the Lord your God. 7When you reached this place, Sihon the king of Heshbon and Og the king of Bashan came out to meet us for battle, but we defeated them; 8and we took their land and gave it as an inheritance to the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of the Manassites. 9So keep the words of this covenant to do them, that you may prosper in all that you do.* Deuteronomy 29:5-9

- b. Yeshua’s Incarnation: Yeshua came down and “tabernacled” with us

### 2. Present Fulfillment: God’s faithfulness to us in our “wilderness journeys”

### 3. Future Fulfillment:

- a. Sukkot looks forward to the Millennium
- b. Shemini Atzeret looks forward to the new heaven and the new earth

## J. Ways to Celebrate

### 1. No Work (On First & Eighth Days)

### 2. Holy Convocation (On First & Eighth Days)

### 3. Build a Sukkah

- a. Items needed:
  - 4 sturdy posts for the corners (7-8 feet long)
  - 4 smaller poles for the roof (7-8 feet long)
  - Several light tree branches
  - Canvas or bed sheets for the sides
- b. Construction: First, sink 4 holes in the ground for the four upright corner poles. You may also use an existing building or fence for one side of the sukkah. Once the uprights are firmly in place, attach the horizontal rods at the top along the outside. Drag the bedsheets or other coverings around three sides. In the front, a bedsheet attached on a wire track works well for a door. Finally, place the tree branches on top, but don’t make the roof too thick. You need to be able to see the stars! You may

wish to decorate the walls with fruit or vegetables. Also decorate with a string of lights.

- c. What to do in a sukkah
  - i. Praise God through prayer, reading Scripture, and singing songs.
  - ii. Invite relatives, friends, and neighbors to celebrate with you.
  - iii. Wave your lulav.
  - iv. Relax.
  - v. Eat and drink with friends, family.
  - vi. Read the story of Yeshua's birth in Luke and the Scriptures about Sukkot.
  - vii. You can even sleep in your sukkah.

#### 4. Make a Lulav

- a. Collect:
  - i. Hardwood deciduous.
  - ii. Flowering or fruiting.
  - iii. Evergreen or palm.
  - iv. Leafy shrub or willow.
- b. Tie them together with twine.
- c. Wave the lulav in all four directions and as a praise to God.
- d. One spiritual teaching
  - i. The *palm* bears fruit (deeds) but is not fragrant (spiritual blessing). This is like a person who lives by the letter of the law but does not have compassion or love for others.
  - ii. The *myrtle* only has fragrance, but can't bear fruit. This is like a person who is "so heavenly minded he is no earthly good." He (or she) may recite scripture, but doesn't produce fruit.
  - iii. The *willow* can neither produce fruit nor fragrance. This is like a person who is intrigued by different doctrines, but never produces fruit.
  - iv. The *citron* creates both fruit and fragrance. This is like a faithful Believer who lives a balanced life in wisdom before Yahweh and man.

#### 5. Party

- a. Spend time with friends.
- b. Eat special foods and treats.
- c. Procure and play special music (can rightfully play music related to the birth of Messiah).
- d. Have a meal where you invite the poor and needy to fellowship with you.
- e. Stay up late and sleep in.

#### K. Spiritual Preparation

1. **Rejoice!** We are commanded to rejoice

2. **Be Thankful:**

- a. For God's provision.
- b. For God's presence and faithfulness.
- c. You can make a list of things you are thankful for.

#### L. Congregational Activities

1. **Erev Sukkot:** We will have a service where we put up a sukkah and decorate it. We will have liturgy and worship that commemorate the themes of this festival that are listed previously in this document.



2. **Eighth Day Service:** At this time we will have one final convocation which concludes the Mosaic festivals and the commemoration of Yahweh's redemptive cycle.
3. **Parties:** Many congregations try to have a party at someone's house for each of the nights of Sukkot.
4. **Retreats:** Some congregations get together with other congregations to have a retreat and a time of joyous celebration together during this festival.

#### **M. Bibliography**

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