

Readings,

The Festival of Tabernacles

The Lord said to Moses, 'Say to the Israelites: "On the fifteenth day of the seventh month the Lord's Festival of Tabernacles begins, and it lasts for seven days. "'So beginning with the fifteenth day of the seventh month, after you have gathered the crops of the land, celebrate the festival to the Lord for seven days; the first day is a day of sabbath rest, and the eighth day also is a day of sabbath rest. On the first day you are to take branches from luxuriant trees – from palms, willows and other leafy trees – and rejoice before the Lord your God for seven days. (Lev.23:33 & 39-41 NIV)

Seven Feasts in the Hebrew Calendar

Sometimes I think the Hebrew calendar would be a better calendar to live under. Under Moses and during the time of the Israelite's exodus, the Lord God created seven feasts in the year. I like the idea of seven feasts in a year, though if I was arranging that calendar, I'd spread them out as evenly as possible across the year ensuring that gave us frequent breaks from work and school.

God did not do that, for He arranged them in spring and autumn as agricultural feasts – but still I like His idea because they gave the people rest from the long days of heavy labour of preparing the land, planting and harvesting.

When given the feasts, the Hebrews were still in the wilderness, but they were already being called to remember God's provision and celebrate God's presence. These **two pillars of Provision and Presence**ⁱ were to remain with them always; especially when they came into the promised land and had an abundance of water and food.

Their clustering in the agricultural calendar serves also as a reminder of feast and famine; that God provides in both seasons; something that the beginning of those festivals in the wilderness would have made obvious.

In our calendar there are only three feasts in the year, Christmas, easter and Harvest – though harvest is not an official holiday and because we have supermarkets with global trade we are not immersed into the agricultural seasons. I wonder, are we poorer spiritually – for we don't have such obvious reminders of those two pillars, God's Provision and his Presence?

Despite the Hebrew calendar's seven feasts, only three were full-on holidays where God told them to celebrate a festival to him (see Ex.23:14-19). The three festivals are:

- i. The Feast of Unleavened Bread – symbolising new beginnings by the harvest of first fruits and Passover which celebrates **freedom** from slavery in Egypt, a festival of redemption from bondage.

Palm Sunday: The Festivals Converge in Jesus

- ii. The Feast of the First Harvest, also Pentecost for it is seven weeks after Passover. **'First fruits'**
- iii. The Feast of Tabernacles. The biggest of the three and culmination of the calendar events remembering God's provision during the nomadic 40-years and coming into **His Kingdom** in the promised land. The final pilgrimage feast where the people travelled to the Temple,ⁱⁱ

It is in the Feast of Tabernacles that the use of palm branches was begun, on the first day of this seven-day festival.

"On the first day you are to take branches from luxuriant trees – from palms, willows and other leafy trees – and rejoice before the Lord your God for seven days." (Ex.23:40 NIV)

Which Feast?

As we celebrate Palm Sunday it is this action that is on display, as the people did this for Jesus coming into Jerusalem on a donkey. Matthew, Mark and John record this.ⁱⁱⁱ

But there is a problem - have you spotted it? Jesus came into Jerusalem as a King just before the Passover festival and not for the Feast of Tabernacles.

Why did the people celebrate Jesus' arrival as if it were the Feast of Tabernacles?

I suggest that all the feasts converge in the person of Jesus the Christ.

The actions of the people, remembering the Feast of Tabernacles when Jesus came to Jerusalem for the Passover feast, is a sign of a prophecy given many years before. Through the prophet Zechariah the Lord had declared that people of all nations would eventually go up to Jerusalem year after year as the Feast of Tabernacles to celebrate being brought out of the time of wilderness wandering, into a harvest where they were all ruled under one King. (See Zech.14:16)

Jesus had also inferred that God's Kingdom would bring all the promises of the Feasts into one. When Jesus previously attended the Festival of Tabernacles he went secretly (see Jn.7:10), however,

On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.' By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.
(Jn 7:37-39 NIV)

His Word imagines God's harvest **provision** (celebrated in both thanksgiving for first fruits with promise of harvest and the Feast of Weeks, celebrating when that harvest came).

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And his word imagines God's **presence** (remembered in the Passover and Atonement feasts). Jesus was quoting from Isaiah which also talks of a Covenant promise where the people are united under one King (celebrated at the Feast of Tabernacles).

Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; listen, that you may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David. (Isa.55:1-3 NIV)

Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem puts flesh on the bone of prophecy. He is both the bread and water of the harvest and the coming King to unite all peoples under His rule. No longer do any of us need to spend our lives wandering in the spiritual wilderness, for we are given a King and a Kingdom to whom we belong, an everlasting covenant.

The two pillars of Presence and Provision are in Jesus. And the third festival? The third festival that converges in the person of Jesus is Pentecost. It is the day when Jesus' words about living water come to fruition through the giving of the Holy Spirit.

Summary

Like the people of 1st century Jerusalem, we too celebrate Jesus coming as King and, in holding and waving our palm branches remember Jesus' presence and provision. It may not be the proper time in the calendar but hey, our public calendar doesn't follow the Israelite one and anyway, it was good enough for the people of Jesus day!

They didn't realise their actions were being led by God's Spirit but that's the thing – this is a God-ordained day to say that his harvest has arrived, and a new thing is about to begin!

That beginning will be remembered and celebrated at Passover and later, after a time of waiting, at Pentecost when all the three of the great Hebrew festivals converge in Jesus. Until then we celebrate the coming of the King and live in hope for those days to come. Amen.

ⁱ David Brickner, *Christ in the Feast of Tabernacles* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2006), p.17.

ⁱⁱ Brickner, p.16.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Matt.21:8-9, Mk11:8-10 and Jn12:13