

Our Jewish roots... the traditions of Jesus

Sukkot – The Feast of Tabernacles

This Friday evening (Sep. 29th 2023) the seven day Jewish Festival of **Sukkot** begins. Just as in the time of Jesus, Jews will live (eating and sleeping) in a *sukkah*—a small shelter built of tree branches—for seven days.

The feast of Sukkot is one of the three feasts in the year (the others are Passover and Pentecost) when Jews were required to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The festival of Sukkot has its origins in ancient harvest celebrations inviting thanksgiving to God for the bounty of the earth. Over time Sukkot also became associated with the memory of the nomadic life that Israel experienced as wanderers in the desert living in tents under the stars. The word *sukkot* means “protection or covering” and the *sukkah* is a practical memorial to God’s protective care and presence during Israel’s so-journ in the wilderness with Moses.

While the festival of Sukkot celebrated God’s bounty and the Divine presence, it also anticipated a future “end time” in which the land would be blessed with fertility and abundance and all the nations of the world would gather together in Jerusalem (Zechariah 14).

At the time of Jesus the festival had developed religious rituals which the gospel of John uses as a background to explain Jesus’ activities in Jerusalem and his message. Every day of the festival the priests from the Temple would go to the Pool of Siloam and draw water. As they returned with it to the Temple the people lined the streets and waved branches (palm, willow, myrtle and citrus) while reciting the Hallel (Psalms of Praise, Ps.113-118). Once at the Temple the water was poured out as a libation on the altar and allowed to flow away down the Kidron Valley to the Dead Sea. According to Ezekiel’s vision (Ch. 47) the waters would bring new life and healing.

Each evening four huge menorahs (a seven branched candle) were lit in the courtyard of the Temple—their brightness was such that it was claimed that there was not a courtyard in Jerusalem not illuminated with their light. At dawn each day the priests stood with their backs to the Temple facing the east and the rising sun in a symbolic welcome to the Lord.

We know that Jesus participated in the Festival of Tabernacles—John’s gospel (Chs. 7-9) tells us so, and develops the three images of life-giving water, light and faith associated with the Feast of Sukkot (or Tabernacles).

Jews today continue to celebrate Sukkot, eating, studying Torah and sleeping for seven days in a *sukkah*, remembering God’s gracious gifts and rejoicing in the experience of the forgiveness of Yom Kippur, just five days ago. Sukkot, The Feast of Tabernacles, continues to be life-giving for a faithful people.