

Sukkot is a plural word and refers to the transient dwelling booths [*sukkah*, sing.] in which the Israelites were caused to live when the LORD brought them out of Egypt. The Festival of Sukkot is also called *The Feast of Tabernacles* or *Booths*.

“You shall observe it as a festival of the LORD for seven days in the year; you shall observe it in the seventh month as a law for all time, throughout the ages. You shall live in booths [*sukkot*] seven days; all citizens in Israel shall live in booths, in order that future generations shall know that I made the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of Egypt.” (Lev. 23:41-43)

The Festival of Sukkot lasts seven days and is closely followed by Shemini Atzeret (The Eighth Day of Assembly) and Simchat Torah (the Joy of Torah). [In Israel Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah are celebrated together on the eighth day.] Throughout Sukkot Jews will live (eating and sleeping) in a *sukkah*—small shelter built of tree branches—for seven days.

THE FEAST OF SUKOT

Sukkot is one of the three feasts in the year [the others are Passover and Pentecost] when, in the time of the Temple, 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.

“You shall keep the festival of the Lord, lasting seven days; a complete rest on the first day, and a complete rest on the eighth day...” (Lev. 23:39; cf. Deut. 16:13).

THE SPECIAL MITZVAH (COMMANDMENT) OF SUKOT IS THAT ONE SHOULD BE JOYOUS.

The solemn-ness of Yom Kippur is left behind in a happy and jubilant celebration of Sukkot. Sukkot is also called “the season of our joy”—a time to celebrate the deep satisfaction and happiness that comes from God’s bounty (manifested in the harvest) and rejoice that the season of judgment has passed so that people can start life anew, confident that sins are forgiven.

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

SUKKOT IN TEMPLE TIMES

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—the *Lulav*) while reciting the *Hallel* (Psalms of Praise, Pss.113-118).

As the priests passed by the people shook their *lulav* branches (which made a sound like falling rain) and chanted “his steadfast love endures forever” [in Hebrew: *Ki ley-olam baas dob*] from Psalm 118...

These chants come from the *Hallel* psalms [Psalms 113-118] and the chant is very familiar—echoing the singing of these hymns at the Passover Seder!

“O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!
Let Israel say, ‘His steadfast love endures forever.’
Let the house of Aaron say, ‘His steadfast love endures forever.’
Let those who fear the LORD say,
‘His steadfast love endures forever’”. (Ps 118:1-4)
and also

“Save us we beseech you O LORD! O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!” (Ps 118:25 – *Hosanna*)

SUKKOT THEMES—WATER AND LIGHT

When the priests arrived at the Temple with the water drawn from the pool of Siloam 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 (Chapter 47) the waters would bring new life and healing. The early rabbis who could recall seeing the ceremonies in Jerusalem before the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE said, "Whoever has not seen the joy of the temple water drawing has never seen joy at all!"

The theme of God as Light was realized each evening when 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 that did not reflect their light; and again, at the dawn each day when the priests stood with their backs to the Temple facing the east, and the rising sun, and ceremoniously turned their backs to the sun to face the temple proclaiming the LORD as Light. During the festival of Sukkot Jerusalem was filled with the symbolism of Light—*night* and *day*.

During the festival Jerusalem was seen as being "filled" with *Divine* light—both day and night.

From the *Mishnah*, Tractate Sukkah...

"At the close of the first festival day they went down to the Court of the Women, and made great preparations there. There were golden candlesticks there with four golden bowls on the top of them. The candlesticks were fifty cubits high. Four ladders led up to each candlestick, and four youths from the priestly stock went up holding in their hands jars of oil, of twenty-four logs' capacity, which they poured into the bowls. They made wicks out of worn-out garments 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 *beit hashoevah*."

(Sukkah 5:2-3)

Rabbi Judah said,
"They used to repeat the words, 'We belong to God, and our eyes are turned towards God.'" (Sukkah 4:9-5:4)

"Men of piety and good deeds used to dance before them with burning torches in their hands, singing songs and praises. And countless Levites played on harps, lyres, cymbals and trumpets and other instruments of music, on the fifteen steps leading from the Court of the Israelites to the Court of the Women. Two priests stood at the Upper Gate, which leads down from the Court of the Israelites to the Court of the Women, with two trumpets in their hands.

"He that never has seen the *simchat beit hashoevah* [the joy of the Water-Drawing] has never in his life seen joy."

(*Mishnah*, Sukkah 5:1)

"At cock-crow they blew a *tekiab - teruah - tekiab*. When they reached the tenth step, they again blew a *tekiab - teruah - tekiab*. When they reached the Court they again blew a *tekiab - teruah - tekiab*. They went on until they reached the gate that leads out to the east. When they reached that gate, they turned their faces toward the west (facing the Sanctuary), and said '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 worshipped the sun toward the east, (Ezek. 8:16) but as for us, our eyes are turned toward the LORD'."

"What was the manner of the Water-Libation? They used to fill a golden flagon holding three logs with water drawn from the Siloam. When they reached the Water Gate they blew on the *shofar a tekiab - teruah - tekiab*. On the right of the Altar ramp were two silver bowls. They each had a hole like a narrow snout—one wide, the other narrow—so that both bowls emptied themselves together (the wider one was for wine, since wine flows out more slowly). The bowl to the west was for water and the one to the east was for wine."

(*Mishnah*, Sukkah 4:9)

REJOICING IN THE WATER-DRAWING

It was related of Hillel the Elder that when he was rejoicing with the joy of the Water-Drawing, he used to say, "...Where I love to be, thither my legs carry me. And the Holy One, blessed is He, says, 'If you come to My house, I will come to your house, and if you do not come to My house, neither will I come to yours.'"

It was related of Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel that when he was rejoicing with the joy of the Water-Drawing he would take eight burning torches in one hand and toss them upwards; he tossed one and caught one, and never did one touch the other.... (T.B. Sukkah 53).

The Talmud states: “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 out of the wells of salvation.’” (Isaiah 12:3).

THE JEWISH FEASTS IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

The feasts of the Jews become the focus of John’s gospel in chapters 6:1-10:21. The events that occur in this section focus on Judaic traditions and are presented as transforming them. The imagery of the feasts and the traditions celebrated are shown to be fulfilled in Jesus. The Passover manna is now the living bread offered by Jesus (6:1-71), and the themes of the Feast of Sukkot/Tabernacles (water and light) are developed in 7:1–10:21. The close association of the messianic theme within the festival of Sukkot/Tabernacles plays a major part in the Johannine development of Jesus’ identity.

JEWISH SPIRITUALITY ALSO DEVELOPED MESSIANIC THEMES IN THE FEAST OF SUKKOT

Zechariah makes the link between the gift of rain and Sukkot, and the gift of living waters associated with the day when the Lord would come. On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea; it shall continue in summer as in winter. And the LORD will become king over all the earth; on that day the LORD will be one and his name one. (Zech. 14: 8–9)

Jewish messianic expectation, celebrated in the Feast of Sukkot, linked the gift of welling water and light with the Messiah and the interpretation of the Law.

The association of the Messiah with Sukkot and Jesus’ identification with the themes and symbols of Israel’s eschatological (end-time) expectations is the subject of a large part of the discussions with Jesus in John’s gospel, especially those scenes associated with Jesus’ presence in Jerusalem during the feast of Sukkot.

SUKKOT (TABERNACLES) AND JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

The gospel of John is concerned with the question of ‘who’ Jesus is, and is written in a way that justifies the faith of believers in Jesus as the fulfillment of Israel’s expectations.

The writer has structured the narrative to present a theology and Christology that reveals Jesus as

- Revealer of God
- The Messiah in whom Israel’s hopes are transformed, not nullified
- The source of ‘living water’
- The source of ‘light’ in the world
- The one who is rejected by those who are not of God

It is the writer’s intention that Jesus is understood to be the fulfillment of the expectations of Israel, that in the person of Jesus the divine presence that Israel sought to see, to hear, and to experience, came and dwelt in the midst of humanity. According to John, Jesus is the new Temple manifest for Israel (Jn. 2:19).

UNDERSTANDING TABERNACLES AS BACKGROUND TO THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

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

The Jewish feast of Tabernacles has its earliest roots in a cultic harvest festival, the Feast of Ingathering (Ex. 23:16 and 34:22), and a later significance as the Festival of Booths* (Deut. 16:13, 16; Lev. 23:34). By the time of the prophet Zechariah the festival had acquired eschatological [end-time theology] significance. The *haftarah* [Prophetic reading] passage prescribed for the first day of the festival today (Zech. 14: 1-21) underlines this perception, placing particular importance on the themes of water and light and the importance of the Jewish practice of worshipping the LORD the King and LORD of Hosts in Jerusalem at Sukkot (Zech. 14:16).

*During the festival people then and now construct Sukkot (booths/tents) and dwelling in them “so that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt” (Lev. 23: 43).

Zechariah 14 connected the rain motif of the festival with the theme of light (Zech 14:7), and living waters (Zech. 14:8); the theme of light occurred again in the *Hallel* (Psalm 118) sung during the festival.

John's gospel transfers the end-time symbolism associated with the Temple and water, as it was celebrated during the liturgy of the Feast of Tabernacles, to Jesus. Jesus is able to offer water because for John he is the new Temple and source of living waters.

On the last day of the festival, *the Great Day*, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink' (Jn. 7:37-38).

The eschatological focus of Zechariah is again present in the Feast of Tabernacles' celebration of light.

This visual experience of light is described in the *Mishnah*:

"There was not a courtyard in Jerusalem that did not reflect the light of the House of Water Drawing" (Sukkah 5:3).

The powerful experience of Light as the image of God is recalled in the *Hallel* chant prayed in the procession accompanying the water drawing:

The Lord is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar
(Ps 118: 27).

This imagery is developed further in the morning sunrise ritual in which the priests each morning turned their backs to the rising sun and faced the temple reciting:

"Our fathers when they were in this place turned their backs towards the Temple of the Lord and their faces toward the east, and they worshipped the sun toward the east (Ezek. 8:16); but as for us, our eyes are turned toward the Lord"
(Sukkah 5:4).

The rite of the 'Facing the Temple' proclaimed Israel's recognition that the LORD was the one true God to whom all allegiance was due.

JESUS' REVELATIONS DURING THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES

The feast of Tabernacles is the background feature used in John's Gospel to highlight claims of Jesus' identity. John's gospel seeks to proclaim Jesus as the 'light of the world' and the 'source of living water'—the Word made flesh. The writer of the gospel seeks to uphold the claim of the Christian community that Jesus is the en-fleshed manifestation of the divine logos described as 'tabernacling'* among us (Jn. 1:14) by contrasting Jesus with the symbolism of God's presence (Shechinah) which was associated with the Temple in Jerusalem. The writer's purpose is to show that Jesus is the 'new' Temple in and through whom God's dwells with people who have faith. The contrast between light and darkness; blindness and vision; is the difference between those who have faith in Jesus and those who do not.

*The Greek word translated as "take up residence" or "dwelled/lived among" is *σκηνοῶ* and alludes to the tabernacle where the Shechinah, the manifestation of the physical glory of God, resided.

Jews, today, continue to celebrate Sukkot, eating and sleeping for eight days in a *sukkah*, remembering God's gracious gifts and rejoicing in the experience of the forgiveness of Yom Kippur, just five days before the beginning of the Festival.

The Mishnah describes the practice of the Tabernacles festival

(Tractate Sukkah)

The joyful festal procession with branches (Lev. 23:40) accompanied the daily ceremony of drawing water in a golden flagon from the pool of Siloam. While this ceremony most likely had its origins in the cultic petitions for rain, the later eschatological significance was associated with the Water Gate through which the party processed as it returned to the Temple.

[The Water Gate has been associated with the identification of the South Gate envisioned in Ezek. 47: 1-5 through which the waters of life would issue from beneath the Temple.]

At Sukkot the water would be carried by the priest to the altar and poured into one of two bowls standing there. Into the other bowl was poured a libation of wine and both bowls were caused to overflow onto the altar—these bowls are mentioned in Zechariah 14:20. The water libation ceremony is linked with the flow of waters from both the Temple (Ezek. 47:1-5), and from Jerusalem (Zechariah 14).

SUKKOT CONTINUES TO BE LIFE-GIVING FOR A FAITHFUL PEOPLE

