

Jewish Festivals

There were seven major holidays in the ancient Jewish religious calendar. Before the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem (AD 70), three of them involved an obligation for Jews to travel to Jerusalem to celebrate them. These three pilgrimage feasts were:

1. Feast of Passover and Unleavened Bread (March/April)* commemorating the exodus from Egypt and marking the beginning of the grain harvest.
2. Feast of Weeks or Pentecost (May/June) marking the conclusion of the grain harvest.
3. Feast of Booths (September/October) commemorating the experience of the wilderness generation of the Israelites who lived in tents during their 40-year wandering from Egypt to Canaan. The festival included living in temporary shelters (sukkot, "booths").

The remaining holidays were:

4. Feast of Trumpets or Rosh Hashanah ("beginning of the year"; September/October) marking the New Year and the end of the vine harvest (grapes and olives).
5. Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur; September/October), the holiest day of the year for Jews, occurring eight days after Rosh Hashanah. It is not a feast, but a fast, embodying national repentance and atonement for sins.
6. Hanukkah (also called the Feast of Dedication or Feast of Lights; November/December) commemorating the liberation of Jerusalem and rededication of the temple by Judas

Maccabeus (164 BC) after its desecration for three years by the Syrian tyrant Antiochus IV Epiphanes.

7. Purim (February/March) commemorating God's deliverance of Israel from destruction in Persia during the time of Esther.

We could write much more about each of these Jewish holy days. But it is easy to see that they commemorated God's salvation of His people, Israel (as in the exodus out of Egypt, reenacted in the Feasts of Passover and Booths) or God's providential care for them (as in the "harvest" celebrations of Weeks and Trumpets).

* The broad dating is necessary because of the way days fall differently in the ancient lunar calendar used by Jews than in the Gregorian (solar) calendar still in use today.

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