

Why Celebrate the Old Testament Feasts?

The answer to this question, initially seems rather complicated, yet in the hind-sight of Biblical study, is rather straight-forward. Unfortunately, I have observed discussions on this matter becoming hotly debated points of contention among fellow followers of Yeshua (Jesus), since our natural penchant for traditions can often blur our understanding of differing information. It is certainly my attempt to unite believers in Yeshua (Jesus), not threaten traditions which clearly are *not matters of salvation*¹. I respectfully ask the Reader to suspend all attachment to tradition long enough to accomplish 2 tasks:

1. Study the references presented to attempt to understand the Question posed.
2. Pray for God's understanding and will regarding possible application of the points presented.

In all sincerity, I pray that any application of principles presented in this article, be a personal matter between the Reader and God. I simply wish to present the information for your prayerful consideration.

Initial Assumption:

Very few teachings are without at least one assumption. The one on which this article is predicated, is an unyielding belief of the author in the plenary accuracy of the Bible (Word of God), a miracle document preserved by God for millennia. More importantly, although *religious history* has divided the Bible into the "Old Testament" and the "New Testament", we do not view God's Word as part "Old" (and therefore outdated or "put-away") nor part "New" (and preferred and applicable). God presented His "Instruction Manual for Human Life" (Torah) in the first 5 books of our modern Bibles. The remaining 61 canonical books provide:

- detailed insight,
- application of concepts (both proper and improper),
- history of the Children of Israel,
- human spiritual musing,
- and significant additional commentary.

Indeed, the words of Yeshua (Jesus) himself in the canonical gospels demonstrate proper application of Torah principles, applicable throughout time. Therefore, if God establishes a principle in what has traditionally been called the "Old" portion, then it had application for Yeshua (Jesus) as recorded in the "New" portion, and therefore for 21st century believers. For a more detailed discussion on Bible history, please see the article, "History of the Bible".

Point 1: God instituted a Religious Calendar for the Children of Israel to Follow.

Leviticus 23:2 - "Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, 'The Lord's appointed times which you shall proclaim as holy convocations — My appointed times are these:'"

¹ Acts 16:30-32 - He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" 31 They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved — you and your household." NIV

This calendar is detailed in the books of Leviticus (the primary reference)², Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. It establishes celebratory practices for humankind *before God*, to teach and commemorate the loving actions of God with His people. It also foreshadows how His Plan of Salvation for mankind (Yeshua, His Son) will unfold throughout human history. Several significant patterns are established in these Feasts that repeat throughout the Bible, the most noticeable being the Pattern of Sevens:

- The Seventh Day Rest, or Shabbat (Sabbath), which is the first of the Feasts³
- The Seven Year Rest for the Land (Sabbatic Year)⁴
- Year of Jubilee (the year after (add 1 year) “Seven Sabbatic Years” (or 7- 7 year periods))⁵
- After Shabbat, the remaining number of annual Festivals is 7:
 - 3 Grouped together in the Spring (Passover, Unleavened Bread, First Fruits)
 - 1 occurring in early Summer (Shavuot, Hebrew for “weeks”, later known as Pentecost, in Greek)
 - 3 occurring in the Fall, during the “Seventh Month” (Day of Trumpets, Day of Atonement, Booths / Tabernacles)

Therefore, understanding the “meaning” of these Feasts of God, and what they symbolize, is key to understanding those patterns repeated throughout the rest of the Bible, including the life of Yeshua (Jesus) and His teachings.

Point 2: If you are a believer, you are a son of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Israel), and the Feasts have application in your spiritual life.

A clear concern that arises at this point in the teaching is that many will say, “I am not a son of Israel, because I am not Jewish”). My answer is, again, Biblical and not based on genealogies or national origin. As a matter of historical fact, Israel (originally called Jacob), nor his Father Isaac, nor his grandfather Abraham (originally Abram) were “Jewish”, but were sons of Eber, from whence we get the word, “Hebrew” (meaning to traverse or pass over / cross over). Eber was Jacob’s great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great grandfather. The word “Jewish” implies “from or relating to Judah”, who was the fourth son of Jacob⁶, and referred to descendants of the Southern Kingdom of Judah (including the assimilated tribe of Simeon, Benjamin, and half of the Levites). So celebrating the Feasts of God has nothing to do with being or becoming “Jewish”, although those of the Jewish Faith have kept the Feasts for Millenia.

The real point is delineated as 2 sub-points in the Pauline books of Galatians, Romans, and Ephesians:

1. Sub-Point 1:

² See Leviticus 23, Exodus Chapters 12, 23, 34, Numbers Chapters 28 and 29, and Deuteronomy Chapters 16 & 31

³ See Leviticus 23:3

⁴ See Lev. 25:1-7

⁵ Lev 25:8-16

⁶ See Genesis 35:23

- **Galatians 3:7-9 NASU** – *Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. 8 The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU." 9 So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer.*
- **Ephesians 1:4-6** - *In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.*
- **Romans 8:16-17 NASU** - *The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.*

If we, **by our Faith in Yeshua (Jesus)** are considered both “adoptive sons of Abraham” and “heirs of God”, then we are **also included as the “Children of Israel / Jacob”, by our faith in Yeshua (Jesus).** That very spiritual adoption indicates that the Feasts of God are applicable to us, as adoptive spiritual descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

2. Sub-Point 2:

- **Romans 11:17-24 NASU** - *But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, 18 do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. 19 You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." 20 Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; 21 for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either. 22 Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. 23 And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again.*

Paul’s argument in Romans 11 is that the “Goyim”, which is Hebrew for “foreigner” (or today’s translation “Non-Jew”) are “grafted in” along with those God chose to be a “kingdom of Priests”⁷, which are the sons of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob/Israel (not Judah only, which was Jacob’s fourth son).

Given Sub-points 1 and 2 (above), since we are both adopted and grafted into God’s “kingdom of priests” (those God chose to carry His message of Grace to the rest of the world) shouldn’t we pay attention to at least the potential *spiritual significance of His Calendar*? Is there **A Spiritual Pattern** that God wants to reveal in these Feasts? What application to my life does God want to teach me in observing these Feasts? I maintain the answer is a definite “Yes, and much more”.

⁷ Exodus 19:6

Point 3: God makes 2 repetitive statements about celebrations dedicated to Him.

1. The Festivals are to be a “perpetual statute in all your dwelling places throughout your generations”. Now if we truly accept the Pauline teachings that we are adopted as “sons” or “heirs”⁸ and are “grafted into his kingdom of priests”, then the phrase “... throughout your generations...” applies to today’s believers in Yeshua (Jesus).
 - (Speaking of Shavuot / Pentecost); **NASU Lev 23:14 - It is to be a perpetual statute throughout your generations in all your dwelling places.**
 - (and again speaking of Shavuot / Pentecost); **NASU Lev 23:21 - It is to be a perpetual statute in all your dwelling places throughout your generations.**
 - (Speaking of Yom Kippur/Day of Atonement); **NASU Lev 23:31 - It is to be a perpetual statute throughout your generations in all your dwelling place**
 - (Speaking of Succot); **NASU Lev 23:41-42 - It shall be a perpetual statute throughout your generations; you shall celebrate it in the seventh month.**
2. Do not worship God differently than He instructs.
 - **NIV Deut 12:29-31 - But when you have driven them out and settled in their land, 30 and after they have been destroyed before you, be careful not to be ensnared by inquiring about their gods, saying, "How do these nations serve their gods? We will do the same." 31 You must not worship the Lord your God in their way, because in worshiping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the Lord hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods.**
 - **NIV Deut 12:2-4 - Destroy completely all the places on the high mountains and on the hills and under every spreading tree where the nations you are dispossessing worship their gods. 3 Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and burn their Asherah poles in the fire; cut down the idols of their gods and wipe out their names from those places. 4 You must not worship the Lord your God in their way**

Point 4: Yeshua (Jesus) came to fulfill the Torah (law), not abolish any part of it.

Yeshua (Jesus) did not come to “put away” or “do away” with what was already established in Torah, the Prophets, and the Sacred Writings (collectively known to many today as the “Old Testament”).

- **NASU - Matthew 5:17-19 - "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. 18 "For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. 19 "Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.**

The word “Law and Prophets” (verse 17) refers to two of three categories of Scriptures available in the Temple and synagogues of Yeshua’s day: The **Torah** (translated as “Law”) and the **Prophets** (in Hebrew, Nevi’im). The third category of Scripture available to those of Yeshua’s time is the **Ketuvim** (Writings),

⁸ Romans 8:17, Galatians 3:29, Ephesians 3:6

which, when taken as a collection, is known as the Tanakh (a contraction of Torah, Nevi'im and Ketuvim). Many today call this the "Old Testament".

Yeshua (Jesus) was providing clear delineation between the true teachings of God (as found in the Torah and Prophets) and what the religious leaders of the day were advocating, which He viewed in a very severe light. The Pharisees and Teachers of Yeshua (Jesus) day were most legalistic in their practices, and demand absolute obedience to a set of oral rules appended to "Torah and the Prophets" that were passed down through history. After the 2nd century CE, these "oral laws" were codified into what is known today as the Talmud. Yeshua was criticizing their overly legalistic and spiritually superficial application of God's true teachings, which indicates He (Yeshua) thought "Torah and the Prophets" should suffice, and no additions were necessary.⁹ Notice His harsh criticism of the Pharisees and Teachers:

- **NASU Matt 5:20 - 20 "For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.**
- **NIV - Matt 23:1-5 - Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: 2 "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. 3 So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. 4 They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. 5 "Everything they do is done for men to see.**
- **NIV - Matt 12:34 - You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good?**
- **NIV - Matt 23:33-34 - "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?**

Since Yeshua was "fulfilling" the "Law and Prophets" and since He was criticizing the *additional practices imposed by the religious leaders of the day (their "heavy loads")*, it is clear that Torah's instructions (including those relating to Feasts) are to be studied and practiced today, and no additional celebratory practices are expected by God (or even desired).

Point 5 – If Yeshua celebrated the Levitical Feasts, then shouldn't we consider doing likewise?

Here is a list of Feasts that Yeshua celebrated:

- **Pesach** - (known as Passover, also included the Feast of Unleavened Bread and Early First-Fruits)
 - **NASU - Luke 2:41-43 - Now His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. 42 And when He became twelve, they went up there according to the custom of the Feast; 43 and as they were returning, after spending the full number of days, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem.**
 - **NASU - Luke 22:15-17 - And He said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; 16 for I say to you, I shall never again eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God."**

⁹ See Revelation 22:18

As a related thought, since Yeshua (Jesus) set such a committed example of observing this festival, why is it widely believed that, via his death and resurrection, he nullified it? That really does not make sense in light of the fact Yeshua (Jesus) said he came to “fulfill” and not “abolish” the “Law and Prophets”.¹⁰

- **Shabbat** (or Sabbath)
 - **NASU Mark 1:21-22** - *They went into Capernaum; and immediately on the Sabbath He entered the synagogue and began to teach.*
 - **NASU - Mark 3:1-3** - *He entered again into a synagogue; and a man was there whose hand was withered. 2 They were watching Him to see if He would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse Him.*
 - **NASU Mark 6:1-4** - *Jesus went out from there and came into His hometown; and His disciples followed Him. 2 When the Sabbath came, He began to teach in the synagogue; and the many listeners were astonished, saying, "Where did this man get these things, and what is this wisdom given to Him, and such miracles as these performed by His hands? 3 "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? Are not His sisters here with us?" And they took offense at Him.*
 - **NASU Luke 4:16-22** - *16 And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read. 17 And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book and found the place where it was written, 18 "THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES, AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED, 19 TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD." 20 And He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. 21 And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*
 - **NASU Luke 4:31-33** - *31 And He came down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee, and He was teaching them on the Sabbath; 32 and they were amazed at His teaching, for His message was with authority.*
 - **NASU Luke 6:6-7** - *6 On another Sabbath He entered the synagogue and was teaching; and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. 7 The scribes and the Pharisees were watching Him closely to see if He healed on the Sabbath, so that they might find reason to accuse Him.*
 - **NASU Luke 13:10-11** - *And He was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. 11 And there was a woman who for eighteen years had had a sickness caused by a spirit; and she was bent double, and could not straighten up at all*
- **Shavuot**

¹⁰ See Matthew 5:17-19

Although there is no record of Yeshua (Jesus) celebrating this Feast, it was one of the three times per year that celebrants appear, at the Temple, in Jerusalem (Pesach - Passover, Shavuot - Weeks, Succot - Tabernacles).¹¹

Apart from any recorded proof, do note that Yeshua (Jesus), following His resurrection, spent 40 days with His disciples (students),¹² then asked them not to leave Jerusalem in order to wait for the Holy Spirit,¹³ which came on the 50th day from Pesach (Passover), or 10 days following Yeshua's ascension. "Fiftieth" in Greek is "Pentecost."¹⁴ Although there is no recorded proof of Yeshua (Jesus) celebrating Shavuot, it was certainly important enough that he spent 40 days with them following His resurrection, to prepare them for the coming Holy Spirit. It is therefore most likely, that as a Godly man, he celebrated this Feast faithfully prior to His crucifixion and resurrection.

- **Succot**
 - ***NASU John 7:1-9 - After these things Jesus was walking in Galilee, for He was unwilling to walk in Judea because the Jews were seeking to kill Him. 2 Now the feast of the Jews, the Feast of Booths, was near. 3 Therefore His brothers said to Him, "Leave here and go into Judea, so that Your disciples also may see Your works which You are doing. 4 "For no one does anything in secret when he himself seeks to be known publicly. If You do these things, show Yourself to the world." 5 For not even His brothers were believing in Him. 6 So Jesus said to them, " My time is not yet here, but your time is always opportune. 7 " The world cannot hate you, but it hates Me because I testify of it, that its deeds are evil. 8 "Go up to the feast yourselves; I do not go up to this feast because My time has not yet fully come." 9 Having said these things to them, He stayed in Galilee.***
 - ***NASU John 7:10-13 - But when His brothers had gone up to the feast, then He Himself also went up, not publicly, but as if, in secret. 11 So the Jews were seeking Him at the feast and were saying, "Where is He?" 12 There was much grumbling among the crowds concerning Him; some were saying, "He is a good man"; others were saying, "No, on the contrary, He leads the people astray." 13 Yet no one was speaking openly of Him for fear of the Jews.***

There are no known recorded events associated with either Yom Teruah (Day of Trumpets) or Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement). Therefore, we can only speculate that Yeshua (Jesus) celebrated those Feasts, as well.

Although we do not have recorded proof of Yeshua (Jesus) celebrating each and every Levitical Feast, we do have many references indicating He "kept the Feasts of God". We even have record in John 10 that Yeshua was in the Temple (walking in Solomon's portico) during the Feast of Dedication (known today as Hanukah). Although not a Torah-instructed Feast, it was none the less important enough for Yeshua (Jesus) to be at the Temple, and teach the very accusers that would later convict Him of blasphemy.

Summary

So why should anyone celebrate the Feasts of God?

¹¹ See Exodus 23:14-17

¹² See Acts 1:3

¹³ See Acts 1:4

¹⁴ See Acts 2:1

1. God instituted a Calendar in Torah that is rich in symbolism, designed to help us understand His plan of spiritual salvation.
2. God teaches us, via the Feasts and their symbolism, of Yeshua (Jesus).
3. God told us, in Torah, not to forget these symbolic, instructional celebrations to Him; ever!
4. God warns us that celebrations to Him must not be as non-believers practice, but as He instructs.
5. Since Yeshua (Jesus) came to "fulfill" the law (and not abolish it), the Feasts still stand as necessary to the lives of believers in Yeshua.
6. Since I am a believer in Yeshua (Jesus), then I, like fellow believers, am adopted as an heir of God and co-heir with Yeshua Himself. As an heir, and child chosen to be part of a kingdom of priests to the world (to represent God and His plan), I should attempt to honor God by celebrating what He asked me to celebrate, in the way He instructed.
7. Since Yeshua celebrated most of the Feasts, and likely all of them, I should do as He did and celebrate the Levitical Feasts. In other words, "What did Yeshua Celebrate?"