

## SOME THOUGHTS ON SUCCOT

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*On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the produce of the land, you shall celebrate the feast of the LORD seven days. On the first day shall be a solemn rest, and on the eighth day shall be a solemn rest. And you shall take on the first day the fruit of splendid trees, branches of palm trees and boughs of leafy trees and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God seven days. You shall celebrate it as a feast to the LORD for seven days in the year. It is a statute forever throughout your generations; you shall celebrate it in the seventh month. You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All native Israelites shall dwell in booths, that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.*

*(Leviticus 23:39-43)*

We are moving into the most exciting time on the Jewish calendar for believers in *Yeshua*, particularly as scholars believe that this is the time of year that *Yeshua* was born as clearly expressed in the prologue of John's Gospel (John 1:14) that could be literally translated, 'The word became flesh and tabernacled with us.' Jewish people believe that when Messiah comes, it will be during this feast. At the conclusion of the feast, *Simchat Torah* is celebrated when the yearly cycle of *Torah* readings concludes and the new cycle begins. The last verses and the first verses of the *Torah* are read as a single event. It is common practice that when the *Torah* Scrolls are brought out of the synagogue (the only such occasion during the year) to much singing and dancing, the congregants will shout 'Messiah Now!'

The starting point for us to discover an authentic date for the birth of *Yeshua* begins with a look at Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. Luke relates (1:5) that Zechariah was a priest of the order of Abijah. Whilst his *mishmarot* ('division,' see 1 Chronicles 24:7-18) were serving in the Temple, an angel appeared to Zechariah and said his wife *Elisheva* (Elizabeth) would conceive and bear a son who would be called *Yochanan* (John).

According to the Mishnah, the service of the *mishmarot* commences on the first Shabbat (Sabbath) of Nisan, and each division (family) of priests would minister in rotation for one week. The 24<sup>th</sup> division, or *mishmarot*, would have served roughly twice a year. The cycle was subject to slight variation as all priests, regardless of their division, were required to attend the Temple for the three Pilgrim Festivals of *Pesach* (Passover), *Shavuot* (Pentecost) and *Succoth* (Tabernacles) as per Deuteronomy 16:16.

As the division of Abijah was numbered as eighth in rotation, Zechariah would have served his first rotation during the month of *Sivan*, to all intents and

purposes June in the Roman calendar. His second rotation would be about six months later during *Kislev*. Zechariah's service at the temple and the angelic proclamation of John the Baptist's birth could have reasonably occurred during Zechariah's first period of service at the Temple. The Jewish expectation that Elijah would come at *Pesach* also lends credence to this argument. During the *Pesach* celebration, an extra cup of wine is placed on the table in the hope that Elijah will come and drink it. Secondly in the story of the shepherds watching their flocks at the time of *Yeshua's* birth, it is during this time the lambs were still kept outdoors, while in winter they were kept indoors. An interesting aside is that the fields designated geographically at this time belonged to the temple where lambs were raised for sacrifice.

If John the Baptist were born at *Pesach*, *Yeshua* (Jesus) must have been born during *Succoth* as we are informed that he was six months younger than *Yochanan ha mabtil* (Luke 1:26,36).

In the Lukan birth narrative the proclamation of the angel is of relevance: "*Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people*" (Luke 2:10). *Succoth* is a festival of joy; the rabbis teach that it is a sin to be miserable during the feast!

*Succoth* is also known as the "Festival of the Nations". The angel proclamation should be understood as a greeting for the Festival of *Succoth* as this is the only festival where the nations are positively encouraged to participate. (Zechariah 14:16-19).

Curiously *succah* (booth) is a Hebrew term that was applied to a 'stable' or animal house in those days as it was a flimsy three sided affair with a roof that that let in starlight.

If the day of *Yeshua's* birth was the first day of *Succoth*, the day of his circumcision would be the eighth day of *Succoth* which, like the first day, is a day of sacred assembly. (Leviticus 23:39). On this day, or traditionally the day after, the Jews complete their annual cycle of Torah readings and start again from *Bereshit* (Genesis). It is called *Simchat Torah* (Rejoicing of the Law), and is considered to be a time of "fulfillment" of the *Torah*. The circumcision of *Yeshua* at this time indicates how he had come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets (Matt. 5:17-18). Also in John 1:14 we read about how "*The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us*"--another obvious reference to *Succoth*.

### **Yeshua at Succoth**

On each of the seven days of *Succoth*, the High Priest took a golden pitcher and filled it with water drawn from the Pool of Siloam. It was brought into the Temple through the Water Gate (hence the name), and poured into a bowl at

the Altar, alongside the pouring of the wine, during the daily burnt-offering (Talmud: Sukkah 4:9). This water libation was performed only during Succoth.

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). *Whoever did not see the rejoicing of (this water drawing ceremony) never saw rejoicing in his lifetime.*" (Mishnah: Sukkah 5:1)

*"Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Yeshua stood and cried out, saying, "If any man is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. 'He who believes in Me,' as the Scripture said, from his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water.' But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet given, because Yeshua was not yet glorified" (John 7:37-39).*

At the time of *Yeshua*, while the Temple existed, Jerusalem was lit with three huge candlesticks placed in the court of the women that were said to be around 75 to 80 feet high each had four bowls each bowl being approached by its own ladder. The wicks were made from the old priestly garments that burned up huge amounts of oil, estimated at around ten gallons in each bowl and were capable of lighting up the whole of the city of Jerusalem. *"There was no courtyard in Jerusalem that was not lit up with the light at the water-well ceremony"* (Talmud: Sukkah 5:3). It was a spectacular event where the men of Israel danced with torches all night, singing songs of praise to God most high accompanied by Levitical musicians.

After dancing all night, two priests at dawn would go to the Yaffa Gate on the eastern side of the Temple at dawn. Once through the gate with a multitude of worshipers, they turned their faces towards the west, facing the sanctuary. With the sun rising and the light of the menorahs paling they chanted: "Our ancestors, when they were in this place, turned with their backs unto the Temple and their faces towards the east and they prostrated themselves eastward towards the sun, but as for us, our eyes are turned toward the Eternal" That makes *Yeshua's* next statement even more startling. *Then Yeshua again spoke to them, saying, "I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life."*

The story of the transfiguration in Mark 9 also contains the overarching significance of the relationship between the Messiah and the feast as *Kefa* (Peter) wanted to build three *succahs* for *Yeshua* (Messiah), Moses (*Torah*), Elijah (Prophecy), not realising that these three were fulfilling that which the festival symbolized: they were dwelling in their own temporary tabernacles of flesh, awaiting their eternal resurrection temples.

It is customary to give to the poor during this feast as an extra offering. May we ask you to prayerfully consider making an extra offering to Ezra International during this season to help the poorest of the Jewish people living in dire, life-threatening situations worldwide.

It is considered that *Yeshua* has fulfilled in Himself the requirements of *Pesach* and *Shavout* and that *Succoth* will be fulfilled upon his return. *Aliyah* plays an important role in all of this as according to Acts 3:12 *Yeshua* is retained in Heaven until the fulfillment of all things, which is overarched by the return of the full number of Jewish people to keep their appointment with Him on the Mountains of Israel.