

COME TO ME & DRINK

JOHN 7:37-38

The fifteenth day of the seventh month of the Jewish calendar¹ was set aside as the Feast of Booths.² The feast is called *Booths*³ because the pilgrims observing the feast were to build a temporary shelter out of wood, straw, or twigs, as long as they are loose from one another; nothing bundled was considered a valid booth.⁴ This festival was also called the Feast of Ingathering because it came at the end of the harvest, when all of the crops had been gathered in (Exod 23:16).

The feast lasted seven days according to the Torah (Lev 23:36, 39-42; Deut 16:13, 15), but it really lasted eight, the eighth day being the seal on the week.⁵ The first and eighth days were designated as a “holy assembly,” and no work was to be done. There are seven major components to the Feast of Booths outlined in the Mishnah. First, all people were required to dwell in booths, or temporary shelters. The Israelites stayed in temporary lodging during the feast as a reminder of the tents the nation lived in when the Lord brought them up out of Egypt (Lev 23:43). Philo writes that it is “a reminder of the long journey of our ancestors

¹ The name of the seventh Jewish month is Tishri; the Gregorian equivalent is September – October. Five days (10th day of Tishri) before the Feast of Booths began, the Israelites observed the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 23:33, 39; 16:29).

² סוכה (*sukkah*) “thicket, booth . . . made of boughs, in which people lived at harvest-feast” (BDB, 697). The Feast of Booths was one of three festivals that the Israelites were required to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for. The other two were the Feast of Unleavened Bread which celebrated the Exodus, and the Feast of Harvest (Exodus 23:14-17; Deuteronomy 16:16). “The feast of tabernacles happened to fall at the same time, which was celebrated by the Hebrews as a most holy and most eminent feast” (Josephus, *Antiquities*, 8.100).

³ Booths / Ingathering / Tabernacles.

⁴ Tractate Sukkah 15. There are many regulations concerning the building of booths and what is permitted in them in the first two chapters of Tractate Sukkah.

⁵ “And after the festival has lasted seven days, he adds an eighth as a seal, calling it a kind of crowning feast, not only as it would seem to this festival, but also to all the feasts of the year which we have enumerated; for it is the last feast of the year . . .” (Philo, *On the Special Laws*, 2.211). “Upon the fifteenth day of the same month...the law enjoins us to pitch tabernacles in every one of our houses . . . and keep a festival for eight days . . .” (Josephus, *Antiquities*, 3.244-45). After the Maccabean revolt that recovered the temple from Antiochus Epiphanes, it is recorded that the Israelites celebrated the Feast of Booths for eight days, but it was in the month of Chislev instead of Tishri, because the recovery of the temple occurred during Chislev (2 Macc 10:6).

which they made through a wide desert, living in tents for many years at each station."⁶ The booths also served as a sign of rest from the harvest, during which they lived “in the open air, laboring at the cultivation of the land.”⁷

Second, the worshippers were required to carry a *lulav*, or palm branch. When the Mishnah refers to the *lulav*, though, it is referring to an assortment of branches consisting of myrtle, willow, and palm branches.⁸ In addition to the palms, the worshippers were required to carry a citron, or small fruit that consists mainly of a hard outer shell. The citron could not be smaller than a walnut, or egg and could not be larger than twice the size of a regular citron (Sukkah 3:7). These two items initially symbolized the fruit of the harvest, but later came to symbolize liberation when the Maccabees recovered and purified the temple from the occupation and desecration of Antiochus Epiphanes (2 Macc 10).

Third, the Hallel. The worshippers were to participate in the Hallel, or song, which consisted of the congregation gathering together and shaking the branches at the beginning and end of the psalm, “O give thanks to the Lord,” (Ps 118:1) and “Save now, we beseech you, O Lord” (Ps 118:25; Sukkah 3:9).

Fourth, the rite of the water libation.⁹ Every day an appointed priest led a procession to the pool of Siloam in southern Jerusalem and drew about one and half pints of water from the pool into his golden flagon. He then returned to the temple through the Water Gate (see below). When he reached the gate the *shofar*¹⁰ sounded three times at which the congregation went in procession once¹¹ around the altar reciting the Hallel and shaking the branches (Sukkah 4:5). The priest proceeded to ascend to the altar where two silver bowls were, one for wine and the other for water. The priest then poured the water into the silver

⁶ Philo, *On the Special Laws*, 2.207.

⁷ Philo, *On the Special Laws*, 2.206.

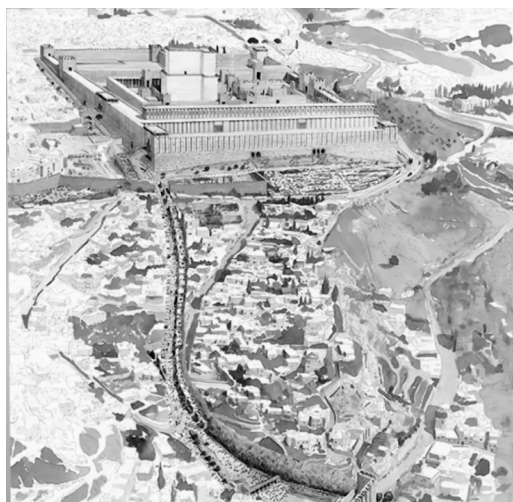
⁸ “R. Ishmael says: Three myrtle-branches [are needful] and two willow-branches and one palm-branch . . .” (Sukkah 3:4). This assortment of branches was required because of the language of Leviticus 23:40, “On the first day you must take for yourselves branches from majestic fruit trees—palm branches, branches of leafy trees, and willows of the brook.” Many additional specifications regarding valid and invalid branches are given in Sukkah 3.

⁹ Drink offering.

¹⁰ A ram’s horn.

¹¹ The congregation proceeded around the altar once on every day but the seventh, on which they proceeded around the altar seven times (Sukkah 4:5).

bowl for water which led to the base of the altar.¹² Regarding this ritual, Rabbi Ena referred to Isaiah 12:3, “Joyfully you will draw water from the springs of deliverance” (Sukkah, Gemara 48b). Deliverance here can be seen as provision from God in the form of rain for the next crop, but it can also be seen as a restoration of fellowship with God. No doubt during the 1st Century this also carried the meaning of deliverance from the oppression of the Romans.



Fifth, the lights. At the close of the first festival day golden candlesticks, which had previously been placed in the Court of Women, were lit. The light from the Courtyard was said to have lit up the whole city (Sukkah 5:2-3).

Sixth, the trumpets. No less than twenty-one and no more than forty-eight trumpet blasts were sounded from the Temple each day of the feast to mark divisions during the day (Sukkah 5:5).

Seventh, the sacrifices. On the first day of the feast the priests offered thirteen bullocks, two rams and one he-goat. On the remaining days of the feast, the priests offered fourteen he-lambs, rotating duties amongst themselves each day. On the last day, the eighth day, the priests drew lots to discern who would offer the sacrifices of the day.¹³

¹² Sukkah 4:9. The Israelites performed the drink offering in the same way every day for seven days. On the eve of the Sabbath the flagon was filled and put in a chamber for the next day so that no work would be done on the Sabbath (Sukkah 4:10). This ritual had an interesting history even before Jesus came onto the scene. The Maccabean king Alexander Jannaeus, who was a Sadducee, showing his contempt for the Pharisees, poured the drink offering onto the ground instead of into the bowl (Eedersheim, *The Temple*, 220). Josephus records the incident, “when he stood upon the altar, and was going to sacrifice, the nation rose upon him, and pelted him with citrons [which they had in their hands, because] the law of the Jews required that at the feast of tabernacles everyone should have branches of the palm tree and citron tree; which thing we have elsewhere related. They also reviled him, as derived from a captive, and so unworthy of his dignity and of sacrificing. At this he was in a rage, and slew of them about six thousand” (Josephus, *Antiquities*, 13.372).

The last and greatest day of the feast. The eighth day of the feast was different from all other days. While we do know that the sacrifices were performed, it is debated whether or not the water libation ritual was carried out.¹⁴ In either case, the Hallel in the Temple was required of the worshippers (Sukkah 4:8). So, on this particular day, as the masses crowded into the Temple for the final celebration of the feast, the *shofar* sounded three times as the priest entered through the Water Gate. The crowd erupted with singing and dancing, as they shook their palm branches they cried out to God, “Save us now!” Immediately after this climactic moment, while the last words of the psalm were being recited, the Galilean Rabbi Jesus stood above the crowd and shouted out in a loud voice, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink! Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘streams of living water will flow from within him!’” (Jn 7:37-38).¹⁵

A hush fell over the crowd as thousands of pilgrims looked toward the Nazarene. The Jewish leadership was enraged, while the crowd debated amongst themselves as to the identity of Jesus. Some said “this really is the Prophet,” while others said “This is the Christ,” and other said “No, the Christ doesn’t come from Galilee, does he?” (Jn 7:40-41). Yet, no one laid a hand on him.

Perfect timing, perfectly delivered message. At the climax of the feast which cried out for God to send rain for the crop, and for him to deliver the nation from the oppression of the Romans, Jesus stood and claimed to be that provision for true salvation, not from enemies or drought, but from sin and separation from God. The answer to the people’s cry “save us now” was standing there in their midst. Jesus offered the nation living water,¹⁶ not water from the pool of Siloam, but the water that springs up to eternal life. Jesus is offering them a restored relationship with God if they only believe on him who was sent.

This was no doubt difficult to hear for the 1st Century Jew, as is seen in the people’s response. This man from Nazareth in Galilee was doing strange things like raising people from the dead, but he was also making some very unique claims about himself. Is he the Christ, or an imposter? Is he God, or just another man? Go take a drink and find out.

¹³ Sukkah 5:6. Josephus varies a bit from the Mishnah in his account: “That the burnt offering on the first of those days was to be a sacrifice of thirteen bulls, and fourteen lambs, and fifteen rams, with the addition of a kid of the goats, as an expiation for sins; and on the following days the same number of lambs, and of rams, with the kids of the goats; but abating one of the bulls every day till they amounted to seven only. On the eighth day all work was laid aside, and then, as we said before, they sacrificed to God a bullock, a ram, and seven lambs, with a kid of the goats, for an expiation of sins. And this is the accustomed solemnity of the Hebrew, when they pitch their tabernacles” (Josephus, *Antiquities*, 3.246-47).

¹⁴ The “seven days” statement in Sukkah 4:9 is omitted in several texts. It may be that the water libation was performed on the eighth day as well.

¹⁵ Scholars debate about which passage Jesus is referring to here.

¹⁶ A metaphor for the Holy Spirit.