

Gentiles and the Festivals of Israel

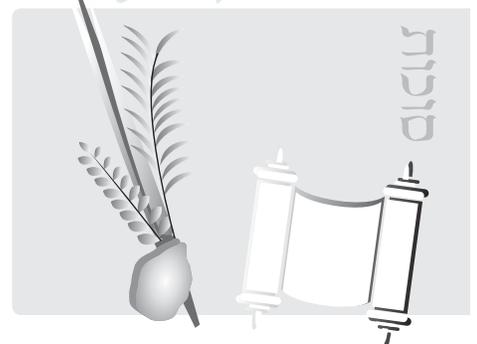
It is written that Gentile believers share in the rich heritage of Israel. But should Gentiles observe the festivals which were given to Israel? Is there any historical evidence from which we can gain further insight into this question?

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At First Fruits of Zion, we advocate the observance of the Sabbath, the festivals, and appointed times prescribed in the Torah. Whether a believer is Jewish or Gentile, he has a rich heritage in the biblical calendar. Celebrating the Jewish holy days is part of the restoration of our faith. We believe in keeping the festivals out of obedience to God's Word and in imitation of the first believers and followers of Yeshua.

However, some critics may raise a question about whether or not Gentile believers ever kept the festivals. Naturally, Jewish believers kept the biblical calendar, but how do we know that the Gentile believers kept the festivals?

The Jerusalem Council deliberated the question, "What should be required of Gentile believers in Messiah?" The apostles decided that "no greater burden" should be laid on the Gentiles believers than the four essentials: "abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality" (Acts 15:28-29). The four essentials are a bare minimum of ceremonial concerns, and not necessarily an end in themselves. For example, one can assume that Gentile believers participated in the festivals of Israel.



In Honor of the Lord

Acts 15 makes no mention of the festivals, but we do find several references to Gentile believers celebrating Jewish festivals in the writings of Paul. In the book of Colossians Paul is clear that Gentiles are not to be judged or condemned on the basis of their festival observance.

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Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.

These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. (Colossians 2:16–17)

Paul's instructions, however, should not be seen as forbidding a Gentile from observing the appointed times of the Torah. In his essay, *Christians Observing Jewish Festivals of the Autumn*, Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra points out that Paul “does not prohibit observing Jewish festivals but only *coercing* Gentiles to observe these festivals.”¹ Paul's instruction prohibits coercing a Gentile believer to keep the holy days and it prohibits judging a Gentile regarding the manner in which he did keep the holy days. Stökl Ben Ezra reads the same concern for Gentile observance of the festivals and holy days in Paul's letter to the Romans:

One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day,

observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. (Romans 14:5–6)

From Stökl Ben Ezra's interpretation, these instructions should be understood as addressed to Gentile believers in Rome and not to Jewish believers. In Romans 14, Paul adds that one who does choose to “observe the day” does so “in honor of the Lord.” Stökl Ben Ezra again comments:

[Paul] assumes that some members of the Roman communities observe Jewish festivals and he gives them the freedom to do so. Paul even regards the observance of Yom Kippur and other days as worship if they are celebrated in honor of the Lord.²

So while Paul was adamant that Gentiles should not be forced to observe the Torah's festivals, at the same time he gave them complete permission and freedom to do so as worship honoring HaShem.

Pagan Festivals

For the apostles, the larger concern was not whether to coerce the Gentiles to keep the Torah's appointed times, but whether or not the Gentiles had ceased participating in their former pagan practices, which included idolatrous festivals and holidays. One of the four prohibitions placed on the Gentiles was to “abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols” (Acts 15: 29), which in essence included all forms of pagan practice. Paul instructs the Gentile Corinthians to “flee from idolatry.”³

Idolatry in Hebrew is called *avodah zarah* (עבודת זרה), and literally means “foreign worship.” It includes both the worship of actual idols and images as well as participating with and imitating the practices of pagan religions. Life outside of first-century Judaism was rooted

in idolatry. Many Gentile believers probably found breaking completely with idolatry to be a major hurdle. Their new faith required them to remove themselves from everything with which they had been familiar.

Paul explicitly prohibits participation in pagan festivals in his letter to the Galatians.

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years! (Galatians 4:8–10)

While some commentaries are tempted to interpret Galatians 4:8–10 as referring to the Jewish festivals, that interpretation raises difficulties. For example, Paul was writing to Gentiles who were formally pagans.⁴ Mark Nanos writes:

This interpretation of Paul's reference to pagan timekeeping schemes related to the observation of local and imperial cults makes sense of the fact that Paul has identified the addressees as former idolaters in this context, not former righteous Gentiles or Jews.⁵

If the Galatian Gentiles were returning to anything, it would have been pagan celebrations which they had recently left and not to Jewish festivals with which they had no previous familiarity. Why would they want to return to former pagan ways? Nanos points out that because these Gentiles were not proselytes nor candidates for conversion, they would not have been “protected from their pagan civic responsibilities by the authority of Jewish communal identity.”⁶ Therefore they would have had to face consequences, often harsh, for not participating in these required pagan festivi-

ties. More than just the practice of a religion, participation in the pagan holy days was their civic duty to the state. Rather than suffer for the cross, the Galatians were tempted either to convert, taking on the legally protected status of Jews, or to simply fulfill their duty by going through the motions of the pagan rituals.

If Gentiles did not celebrate the feasts of the Torah, what would they celebrate?

In the absence of any of their former holidays and special occasions, Gentile believers would naturally want to participate with the rest of Israel in the festivals of the Torah. Absence of any festivals or holy days would have created a serious spiritual vacuum.⁷ If they did not celebrate the feasts of the Torah, what would they celebrate? Gentiles in Messiah had been “brought near” to the covenants and promises of Israel which included its festival calendar.⁸ An organic outcome of that inclusion was to want to take on, at some level, the observance of the Jewish festivals. As is evidenced from the book of Acts, these Gentile believers attended synagogue and were consequently celebrating the holy days in some form simply by their mere attendance at services. We find evidence of this participation throughout the Apostolic Writings as well as in church history. A few examples will suffice for Passover, Shavuot, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot.

Passover

Paul wrote the book of 1 Corinthians to a predominately Gentile audience who attended both synagogue and weekly gatherings of believers. Additionally, the timing of the letter seems to have been sometime in early spring

before the Passover season had begun. Many portions in the letter give allusions to Passover and seem to be instructions for observing it properly with the right heart attitude.

Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (1 Corinthians 5:6–8)

Paul wanted to make it to Jerusalem for Pentecost because Torah required all Israelites to make a pilgrimage to the Temple on Shavuot.

Although the imagery to “celebrate the festival” is clearly metaphorical, it could really only be understood by those who were in fact literally celebrating Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread, complete with some level of abstention from leaven. Apparently, the Gentile believers in Corinth were celebrating Passover in remembrance of Messiah.

That Gentile believers originally celebrated Passover is further supported through the Quartodeciman controversy in the early church. When the Roman church sought to limit the celebration of Passover to the first Sunday after Passover, other Christians, especially in Asia Minor, insisted on celebrating

the festival according to the Jewish practice on the 14th of Nisan as they had always done. The venerable Bishop Polycarp, a disciple of the apostle John, insisted that the Jewish observance of Passover had been transmitted to them through the apostles.⁹ As the church at large began to adopt the Sunday practice instead, the Quartodecimans (“fourteeners,” those who observed the fourteenth of Nisan) separated into their own sect. They existed up until the fifth century.

In the *Syriac Lectionary* (fifth century CE), the week before Easter is called the Week of Unleavened Bread.¹⁰ The *Canons of Hippolytus* (third to fifth century CE) instructs:

The week during which the Jews celebrated Passover must be observed by the Christian people with the greatest earnest, they must be careful to abstain from all eagerness.¹¹

Although this text is not advocating Passover observance in the Torah sense per se, it does indicate that the early church retained traditions based upon Passover observances found in the Torah. It indicates that, at some earlier point, the church was indeed observing the actual Jewish feast.

Shavuot

The Apostolic Writings highlight the festival of Shavuot as the time of the outpouring of God’s spirit in Acts 2, but another reference in Acts 20 gives us some more evidence of Gentile believers celebrating the Torah’s festivals.

For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus, so that he might not have to spend time in Asia, for he was hastening to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost. (Acts 20:16)

Paul wanted to make it to Jerusalem for Pentecost because Torah required all Israel-

ites to make a pilgrimage to the Temple on Shavuot.¹² While this gives clear evidence that Paul himself observed Shavuot, we can further speculate that this is evidence that Luke, the writer of Acts, did as well. Luke was a Gentile.¹³ According to Stökl Ben Ezra and other scholars, Luke's readers were "Christian God fearers," i.e., Gentile believers in Yeshua.¹⁴

It seems unlikely that Luke would mention their trip to Jerusalem for Shavuot if the observance of that festival meant nothing to him or to his readers. The same could be said for Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 16:8: "But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost." As we noted above, the letter to the Corinthians was written to a mixed community of Jews and Gentiles.

Additionally, from the context in Acts 20:16, we see that Paul brought Gentile believers with him to Jerusalem for the festival of Shavuot. For example, it is during this time that he was accused of bringing uncircumcised Greeks into the Temple because of his being seen with Trophimus the Ephesian in the city.¹⁵ By bringing Gentiles with him to Jerusalem for Shavuot, Paul was encouraging them to celebrate the holy day in the holy city.

Church history contains abundant testimony to the celebration of Shavuot, even down to the present day. One of the earliest references is found in the apocryphal book *Acts of Paul* (second century CE):

*While in prison, the brethren, since it was Pentecost, wept neither did they bow the knee, but they stood and prayed.*¹⁶

Irenaeus also mentions Pentecost as a special day equal in holiness to the Lord's Day,¹⁷ while Tertullian records it as one of the most joyful times.¹⁸ Certainly Christian observance of the day varied from the customs of Judaism, but it is obvious that the Christian practice evolved from the celebration of the Feast of Weeks along with greater Judaism.

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High Holy Days

Yom Kippur is to Judaism as Christmas is to Christianity; just as almost all Christians go to church on Christmas, so too most Jews fast on Yom Kippur and attend synagogue services. It is a cultural and spiritual landmark. Not surprising then, we find a passing reference to this fast in the book of Acts:

Since much time had passed, and the voyage was now dangerous because even the Fast was already over, Paul advised them, saying, "Sirs, I perceive that the voyage will be with injury and much loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives." (Acts 27:9–10)

"The Fast" referenced here is Yom Kippur. Stökl Ben Ezra assumes that Luke would not have used the term "the fast" as a calendaric reference unless he himself was keeping the fast and assumed that his readers were as well:

*I cannot help but draw the conclusion that Luke himself and his implied readers observed Yom Kippur. Why else would Luke use a "Jewish calendaric reference for a secular problem?" He clearly presumes that his readers will understand what he is referring to.*¹⁹

Scholars speculate that the readers of Acts were Gentiles like Luke himself. In order for Luke's readers to understand such a passing reference, they must have been observing Yom Kippur.

Indirect evidence can be found in the book of Revelation. The book of Revelation is packed with allusions to the rituals and themes of the high holidays. The apocalyptic imagery—the day of judgment, the books of judgment, the blast of trumpets, the Temple scenes, and so forth—are all borrowed directly from the traditional observance of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. John addressed the book of Revelation to seven communities in Asia Minor, constituted predominantly by Gentiles. If those communities were not celebrating the high holidays along with the Jewish community, they would have been as ill-prepared to decipher the book of Revelation as Christianity is today.

Gentile observance of Sukkot is simply assumed in the book of Revelation.

Records of Gentile believers celebrating Yom Kippur appear in later church literature. The late second-century *Epistle to Diognetus* rails against Christians who observe Jewish laws such as “the Fast.”²⁰ Origen mentions Christians fasting on Yom Kippur:

Whence also we must say something now to those who think that in virtue of the commandments of the Law they must practice the fast of the Jews. (Homily on Leviticus 12:2 [Barkley])

He mentions another case, again involving Caesarean Christians, in his *Homilies on Jeremiah*, proving that this is not an isolated instance; there must have been at least several groups of Gentile Christians in the third century still celebrating this major feast day of Judaism.²¹ In the late fourth century, John

Chrysostom is still denouncing those who “join the Jews in keeping their festivals and observing their fasts.”²²

Further witness to this phenomenon can be found in the fifth-century medieval church practice of the Fast of the Seventh Month. This fast formed part of the Ember Days and was one of the most solemn days of the church’s liturgical year. Scholars see this fast as the result of the Christianization of Yom Kippur.²³ In other words, because many Christian Gentiles were celebrating Yom Kippur, as the church began to split it from Judaism, Christianity slowly transformed it into a solely Christian fast in the month of September. This is similar to the transformation of Passover into Easter. The fifth century theologian Leo the Great wrote:

We proclaim the holy Fast of the Seventh Month, dearly-beloved, for the exercise of common devotions, confidently inciting you with fatherly exhortations to make Christian by your observance that which was formally Jewish. (Sermon 90:1 [Fletoe])

In this we once again see that many Gentile believers celebrated Yom Kippur, so much so that it remained even after the parting of the ways began to take place between Judaism and Christianity.

Sukkot

Gentile observance of Sukkot is simply assumed in the book of Revelation. Chapter seven describes a scene where all nations are appearing before Messiah:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs

to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" ... Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. (Revelation 7:9–10, 15)

This motif clearly evokes the prophetic utterances of Zechariah in which everyone from the nations will come up to Jerusalem "to keep the Feast of Booths."²⁴ Here, in Revelation, the nations come up to the throne of God in the Temple with palm branches in their hands which are the *lulav* (לולב) that the Torah commands to be waved on Sukkot.²⁵ Later on in verse 17 we find mention of "springs of living water," which appears to be a veiled reference to the water-pouring ceremony that took place in the Temple each morning of Sukkot,²⁶ thus reflecting major imagery of Sukkot.²⁷

The Sukkot imagery in Revelation is intelligible only if it were written to a community of believers that was actually participating in the festivals of Israel. The communities reading Revelation were most assuredly made up of both Jewish and Gentile believers who celebrated Sukkot with the anticipation that the entire world would do so in the Messianic Age. Gentiles in Messiah celebrating it now are the first fruits of that glorious time.

Some scholars also see a connection between Sukkot and the later Feast of Encaenia ("Church Dedication"), both of which took place in the same season, lasted eight days, and are a time of pilgrimage to Jerusalem (with Sukkot to the Temple and with Encaenia to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre). Goudoever writes that "from the fourth century on, the Feast of Dedication is kept as a continuation of the third great Israelite feast [i.e., Sukkot]."²⁸ There also appears to be a veiled reference to Gentiles observing Sukkot in John Cyrsostom's rebuke of those who along with the Jews had "tents ... pitched among them."²⁹

From the evidence, it appears that the early believers, both Jew and Gentile, were celebrating the feasts of Israel.

Conclusion

Early church historian Jean Danielou points out that the earliest Christian documents contained no reference to a new liturgical calendar or list of holidays. Instead Jewish and Gentile believers kept the Torah's appointed times as their holy days:

*The Jewish liturgical year did clearly hold an important place in their eyes. The New Testament records the life of Christ in the setting of the Jewish feasts, and the importance attributed to this setting leads one to suppose that it still had some meaning for the communities to which the Gospels were addressed.*³⁰

From the evidence, it appears that the early believers, both Jew and Gentile, were celebrating the feasts of Israel.

Although Gentile believers were not to be judged regarding the feasts of the Torah, there is every reason to believe that in the early believing community, Gentile participation in the festivals and holy days was widespread. Unlike today, Judaism was the only game in town, and if Gentile believers chose not to celebrate these God-appointed holidays along with the rest of Israel, they would have been left with no special days of remembrance or joy.³¹ Instead, we see evidence in the Apostolic Writings that Gentile believers celebrated the holy days along with the rest of Judaism. Early church literature provides evidence that many

continued to do so even long after the majority of the church had rejected Torah observance.

For Messianic Gentiles today, the early believing community is an example and source of encouragement. The first-century Gentile believers participated in the biblical feasts out of a love for the God of Israel, his only son Yeshua, and a desire to join in fully with the people of Israel on God's appointed times. 🕊

Endnotes

- 1 Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, "Christians Observing 'Jewish' Festivals of Autumn," in *The Image of Judaeo-Christians in Ancient Jewish and Christian Literature* (ed. Peter J. Tomson and Doris Lambers-Petry; Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 53–73.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 60.
- 3 1 Corinthians 10:14.
- 4 Stökl Ben Ezra also states, "It is difficult to explain the observance of 'special years' in the Diaspora since the Jubilee and the Sabbatical year are valid only for the Land of Israel" ("Christians Observing 'Jewish' Festivals of Autumn," 59).
- 5 Mark Nanos, *The Irony of Galatians: Paul's Letter in First-century Context* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 268.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Furthermore, Rambam in his *Mishneh Torah* writes, "[Gentiles] are not allowed to originate a new religion or create mitzvot for themselves based on their own decisions" (*Melachim* 10:9 [Touger]). Although we cannot be sure, it would seem that a similar sentiment would have been present in the Second-Temple period and that the apostles would have frowned on the Gentiles creating new festivals.
- 8 Ephesians 2:12–13.
- 9 "Quarterdecimanism," *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* 1364–1365. See also J. Van Goudoever, *Biblical Calendars* (Leiden, Brill, 1961), 155–163.
- 10 Goudoever, *Biblical Calendars*, 176–181.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 178.
- 12 Exodus 34:23 and Deuteronomy 16:16.
- 13 Compare Colossians 4:10–11 and 4:14.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 63.
- 15 Acts 21:27–29.
- 16 Goudoever, *Biblical Calendars*, 182.
- 17 *Fragments of Irenaeus* 7.
- 18 *On Baptism* 19.
- 19 Stökl Ben Ezra, "Christians Observing 'Jewish' Festivals of Autumn," 62.
- 20 *Epistle to Diognetus* 4.
- 21 Stökl Ben Ezra, "Christians Observing 'Jewish' Festivals of Autumn," 69.
- 22 *Against the Jews* 1:5.
- 23 Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, "Whose Fast is It? The Ember Day of September and Yom Kippur," in *The Ways That Never Parted* (ed. Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed; Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 259–282.
- 24 Zechariah 14:16–19.
- 25 Leviticus 23:40. See m.*Sukkah* 3:1ff.
- 26 m.*Sukkah* 4:9.
- 27 Hakan Ulfgard, *Feast and Future: Revelation 7:9–17 and the Feast of Tabernacles* (Lund: Wallin and Dalholm, 1989). Also see Hakan Ulfgard, *The Story of Sukkot: The Setting, Shaping, and Sequel of the Biblical Feast of Tabernacles* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 274–279 for a detailed discussion of later church fathers' eschatological interpretations of Sukkot.
- 28 Goudoever, *Biblical Calendars*, 214, see also 210–213.
- 29 *Against the Jews* 9:2.
- 30 Jean Danielou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity* (John A. Baker, trans.; Philadelphia, PA: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1978), 343.
- 31 In fact, Louis Feldmen points out that one of the major attractions of non-Jews to Judaism was the celebration of Jewish festivals. See Louis Feldmen, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 376–377.

Make Sense of the Sacred Text

"Hey, That's Not in the Bible!" is a crash course in extra-biblical literature that will help you make sense of the various sources surrounding the sacred text, like the Talmud, Mishnah, and Jewish sages throughout the centuries. Resource: **DVD Video**

