

feasts.

This English term is often used in Bible versions without distinction for both private and public celebrations, but Hebrew typically reserves *mišteh* H5492 for the former and uses other words for the latter.

I. In the OT

A. Private feasts. The social life of ancient Israel provided many joyous occasions that were celebrated with feasts: weddings (Gen. 29:22; these celebrations might extend seven days, Jdg. 14:10, 12, 17); the weaning of a child (Gen. 21:8), the birthday of a king (40:20), and the arrival of or approaching departure of guests (19:3; 26:30). Sheepshearing was also a joyous season, and the first sheared wool went to the sanctuary (Deut. 18:4; cf. Gen. 38:12; 1 Sam. 25:4–11, 36; 2 Sam. 13:23–27). Job’s children took turns holding feasts in their respective homes (Job 1:4–5). In a monarchy, the feast could be a state occasion that extended to the whole court (2 Sam. 3:20; cf. Esth. 1:3–8; Dan. 5:1); the queen might entertain the king (Esth. 5:4, 14; 7:2, 7). Solomon celebrated his dream with a feast (1 Ki. 3:15), and Xerxes celebrated his finding of a new queen (Esth. 2:18).

Ancient Hebrews were not ascetics. Often feasts demanded no specific occasion other than gladness (Job 1:4–5; Isa. 5:12). It was a severe restriction upon participation in social life imposed by the Lord on Jeremiah when he forbade him to go to the house of feasting (Jer. 16:8).

B. Communal feasts. For public, religious celebrations, the common Hebrew terms are *mô‘ēd* H4595 (“appointed time”; also “assembly” and “meeting-place”) and *ḥag* H2504 (“round dance, festival gathering, pilgrim-feast”). Moses and Aaron in Egypt requested of Pharaoh permission to celebrate a feast in the desert (Exod. 5:1). After the exodus the communal festivals were seasons of rejoicing (Deut. 16:14). In early Israel, at the yearly feast in Shiloh, the girls danced in the vineyard (Jdg. 21:21). Elkanah annually attended the feast at Shiloh (1 Sam. 1:3). Later there were processions at the house of the Lord with songs and shouts (Ps. 42:4). There was the ever-present danger that drinking might result in drunkenness (cf. Eli’s suspicions in 1 Sam. 1:13–15). Abuse of the festivals and false trust in their efficacy brought forth denunciations from the prophets (Isa. 1:12–14). The communal festivals of Israel may be considered in temporal categories: weekly, monthly, annual, and periodic.

I. Weekly festival—The Sabbath. The seventh day, sanctified by the Lord at creation (Gen. 2:1–3), but possibly not observed until the time of the exodus, is listed among the festivals (*šabbāt* H8701, Exod. 16:23; Lev. 23:1–3). The Sabbath commemorated both the Lord’s rest at creation and the deliverance from servitude to Egypt (Deut. 5:12–15). It was a sign between Yahweh and Israel (Exod. 31:17; Ezek. 20:12, 20).

Lighting of the Sabbath candles.

The Sabbath was observed by strict cessation of work from sunset until sunset (Exod. 20:12–13; Neh. 13:15–22), so that kindling a fire (Exod. 35:3) and picking up sticks (Num. 15:32–33) were punishable by death (Exod. 31:14; 35:2). Each person was to remain in his own place (Exod. 16:29; Lev. 23:3). Forming an analogy from the distance used to measure pasture lands (Num. 35:4–5), the rabbis defined the Sabbath day’s journey to be limited to two thousand cubits

(about 3000 ft.; cf. Acts 1:12; Jos. War 5.2.3). The topic of movements on the Sabbath is treated at length in the Mishnah, tractate *‘Erubin*.

Some Jews of the Maccabean period allowed themselves to be massacred on the Sabbath rather than to profane it by self-defense, after Mattathias and those who followed him permitted self-defense on the day (1 Macc. 2:38–41; see Maccabee). Some Jews would not negotiate for peace on the Sabbath (Jos. War 4.2.3). The extent of permitted activities was a point of dispute between Jesus and the Pharisees. The latter permitted defiling the Sabbath when human life was in danger. Jesus contended that lesser cases of human need as well as animal need took precedence over the Sabbath (Matt. 12:1–14). The Qumran sectaries denied the right to aid suffering beasts on the Sabbath (CD XI, 13–14).

Special offerings were made on the Sabbath (Num. 28:9, 19), and the twelve loaves of showbread were placed on the table in the Holy Place (Lev. 24:5–8). The title of Ps. 92 has the description, “A song. For the Sabbath day.” It was a day of holy convocation (Lev. 23:3), but only after the rise of the synagogue are instruction and worship activities attested as a prominent part of Sabbath observance (cf. Lk. 4:16, 31; Acts 13:14; 18:4).

Despite its restrictions, the Sabbath was a joyous occasion (2 Ki. 4:23; Isa. 58:13–14), the cessation of which in the exile was considered a punishment from God (Lam. 2:6; Hos. 2:11). The prophets called for proper Sabbath observance (Isa. 56:4; Jer. 17:19–27).

2. Monthly festival—the New Moon. At the beginning of the month special offerings were demanded by the law (Num. 28:11–15; cf. Ezra 3:5); there was also a blowing of trumpets (Num. 10:10; Ps. 81:3). This New Moon festival was usually referred to simply with the Hebrew word for “month” (*ḥōdeš* H2544; e.g., 1 Sam. 20:5). The observance was prominent in the period of the kings. An accidental uncleanness excused one from attending, as did a conflict with a “daily feast.” One might visit a holy man on that day (2 Ki. 4:23). David’s arrangements for the Levites included service on the New Moon (1 Chr. 23:31). A cessation of activity, not demanded in the law, seems to have been observed with laxity in Amos’s day (Amos 8:5).

This day is included with others in prophetic denunciations of abuses of religious observances (Isa. 1:13–14). The exile brought a temporary cessation (Hos. 2:11 [Heb. 2:13]) but the festival continued to the end of the OT period (Neh. 10:33) and formed a part of Ezekiel’s temple description (Ezek. 45:17) and of Isaiah’s picture of the new heaven and earth (Isa. 66:22, 23). In Pauline thought, New Moon festivals and “sabbaths” are mere shadows of good things to come (Col. 2:16–17).

3. Annual festivals. Three annual seasons, requiring the appearance of all males at the sanctuary, dominated the Israelite religious year: Passover, Weeks, and Tabernacles (Deut. 16:16). These occasions, called “festivals to the Lord” (Exod. 12:14; Lev. 23:39, 41; et al.), were times in which

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Jos. Josephus

CD Cairo: Damascus (i.e., *Damascus Document*)

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freewill offerings were made (Deut. 16:16–17). Some aspects of the seasons were celebrated at night (Isa. 30:29). These days were of course interrupted by the exile (Hos. 9:5). Several other special occasions—the Day of Atonement, the New Year, Purim, and Hanukkah (the last two postexilic in origin)—are also discussed below.

a. *Passover* (*pesah* H7175). The Passover commemorated the final plague in Egypt: the firstborn of the Egyptians died, but the Israelites were spared by the blood on the doorpost (Exod. 12:11, 21–27, 43–48). Thereafter the event was observed as a feast to the Lord (12:14). The second Passover was observed in the wilderness of Sinai (Num. 9:1–5).

Passover fell in the first month (Abib, Deut. 16:1; the first month is called Nisan in postexilic times, Neh. 2:1; Esth. 3:7), on the fourteenth day at evening (Lev. 23:5). The victim was selected on the tenth day of the month (Exod. 12:3) and after slaughter on the fourteenth was boiled and eaten (Deut. 16:7). Neither the uncircumcised person nor the hired servant could eat (Exod. 12:48). None of the lamb should be left over on the following morning (34:25). Special sacrifices were made to the Lord (Num. 28:16–25). The unclean person observed the corresponding day in the second month (9:10–13).

This night was followed by seven days that made up the Feast of Unleavened Bread (*ḥag hammaṣōt*, Exod. 34:18–19; Lev. 23:6; cf. Exod. 12:31–34; Acts 12:3; Lk. 22:1). On the first and the seventh of these days no servile work was to be done, and special offerings were made upon them all. The Passover was observed at Gilgal when Joshua brought Israel into Canaan (Josh. 5:10–12). The reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah were characterized by elaborate Passover celebrations (2 Ki. 23:21–23; 2 Chr. 30:1–27; 35:1–19). Passover and Unleavened Bread were observed by the Jews of Elephantine (*ANET*, 491).

The liturgy of the Passover celebration is the subject of minute elaboration in the Mishnah tractate *Passover*. Despite the assertion of *Jubilees* 49.16 that one cannot eat the Passover outside the sanctuary, Jesus ate with his disciples in a private house as was the custom of the times (cf. *m. Passover* 5; 8:13). In addition to the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, this festival retained some features of a home celebration that reasserted themselves after the fall of Jerusalem. The Passover meal was eaten at home with bitter herbs, successive cups of wine, the blessings and reciting of the Psalms. Whether a roast was eaten or not varied from community to community (*m. Passover* 4:4). The need for each individual to feel personally that he was brought out of Egypt was stressed.

During NT times large crowds, including Greeks, attended the celebration (Jn. 12:20; Jos. War 6.9.3). Jesus was a participant in the celebration (Lk. 2:42; Jn. 2:13; 6:4; 11:5) and was himself crucified during the Passover season (Jn. 13:1). Peter's imprisonment and deliverance was also at this season (Acts 12:3). In Pauline thought the feast is treated figuratively when Christ our Passover lamb is said to have been sacrificed and when the disposing of the leaven is allegorized to signify the casting out of insincerity (1 Cor. 5:7).

ANET Ancient Near East Texts Relating to the Old Testament, ed. J. B. Pritchard, 3rd ed. (1969)

Jos. Josephus

b. *Weeks* (*ḥag šābu ʿōt*; lxx *heortē hebdomadōn*, but called *pentēkostē* [“fiftieth”], Pentecost, in the Apocrypha and the NT). This one-day festival, also called the Feast of Harvest (Exod. 23:16) and “the day of firstfruits” (Num. 28:26), is named from the fact that its date is set by counting from the Sabbath of Passover to the morrow after the seventh sabbath, thus fifty days (Lev. 23:15–16; cf. Tob. 2:1, “the feast of Pentecost which is the sacred festival of the seven weeks”). Two loaves of bread and seven lambs one year old, one bullock, and two rams made up the special offering of the day. No laborious work was to be done. A free-will offering was to be made, and there was to be rejoicing with family and with the unfortunate classes of the community: the Levite, widow, orphan, and sojourner (Deut. 16:9–12).

A memorial significance was given to the Feast of Weeks by later rabbis when they designated it as the time the law was given at Sinai (*b. Pesahim* 68b), but the connection is not made in Scripture. The book of *Jubilees* puts all the covenants it can find in the OT on the day of the Feast of Weeks, and the Qumran Community celebrated the renewal of the covenant during that festival as well.

An ambiguity in the instructions for the day was the occasion of debate between the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The former argued that “Sabbath” (Lev. 23:16) means the first day of Passover without regard to the day of the week (*m. Hagigah* 2:4). Thereby for them Pentecost could fall on any day of the week. The Sadducees (Boethusians) argued that “Sabbath” has its regular meaning in the passage and thereby Pentecost must fall on the first day of the week (cf. *m. Menahot* 10:3; *m. Hagigah* 2:4).

The outpouring of the Spirit took place on Pentecost (Acts 2), and thereby the day acquired additional meaning as the beginning day of the church. Paul hoped to extend his stay in Ephesus until Pentecost (1 Cor. 16:8), but sought to be in Jerusalem at that season in a later year (Acts 20:16).

c. *Booths* or *Tabernacles* (*ḥag hassukkôt*) or *Ingathering* (*ḥag hā ʿāsîp*). This festival fell on the fifteenth of the seventh month, five days after the Day of Atonement, and occupied seven days (Exod. 23:16–17; 34:22). The first and eighth days were days of rest. Branches of palm trees, leafy branches, and willows, along with choice fruit (Lev. 23:40), were used to make the booth in which the Israelites dwelt seven days—“so your descendants will know that I had the Israelites live in booths when I brought them out of Egypt” (23:43). There was rejoicing with family, servants, widows, orphans, Levites, and sojourners in the community (Deut. 16:13–15). Special sacrifices for this season totaled seventy bulls. Each seventh year there was the public reading of the law (31:9–13).

The returned exiles observed this feast under Darius (Ezra 3:4), at which time Ezra read the law and led the people in acts of penitence. The celebration is said to be different from anything done since the days of Joshua (Neh. 8:13–18). Zechariah envisions all nations coming up to Jerusalem year by year to keep the Feast of Tabernacles (Zech. 14:16–19). The punishment for those who neglect it is that upon them no rain shall fall, but in the case of Egypt the inundation of the Nile would fail.

A *sukkah* made from palm fronds. The Israelites built such shelters during the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths (Sukkoth).

Jesus participated in the Feast of Tabernacles (Jn. 7). Josephus calls it the holiest and greatest of the Hebrew feasts (*Ant.* 8.4.1). Both he (*Ant.* 3.10.4; 13.13.5) and the Mishnah (*Sukkah*) enlarge upon the customs of the later observance, one chief feature of which was a libation of water drawn from the fountain of Siloam. This practice furnishes a likely background for Jesus' discourse on living water (Jn. 7:37–39).

d. *The Day of Atonement* (*yôm hakkippurîm*; see Atonement, Day of). This holy celebration fell on the tenth day of the seventh month, Tishri (Lev. 23:27–32; Num. 29:7–11). Its ritual, which included the expiation for the priest and for the people and the sending away of the goat for Azazel, is described in Lev. 16:8, 10, 26. It was a day of rest and fasting.

e. *New Year*. One of the most debated questions in modern study is whether or not there was a New Year's Day celebration in ancient Israel. Beginning with an analogy with the Babylonian *Akitu* festival, which fell in the spring of the year and celebrated the renewal of creation and kingship of Marduk, some scholars postulate that Israel's God was crowned annually at the "New Year Feast of Yahweh." S. Mowinckel (*The Psalms in Israel's Worship* [1962], ch. 5) argued that the "enthronement psalms" (Ps. 47, 93, 96–99), in which the expression "Yahweh reigns" prominently occurs, were a part of the liturgy of that special day. Out of these concepts it is thought that Israel's messianic and eschatological thought developed. It is argued that Jeroboam introduced a festival in the eighth month, similar to the one held in Judah, in order that the people not be attracted to Jerusalem (1 Ki. 12:32).

Opponents of the theory point out the difficulty of explaining how a spring festival got shifted to fall. The Pentateuch points to Nisan one as the beginning of the year (Exod. 12:2). There were special offerings on the first of the seventh month, a convocation was held in which no laborious work was done, trumpets were blown, and an offering was made to the Lord (Lev. 23:24–27; Num. 29:1–6), but the text says nothing specific about the New Year's day. The postexilic gathering on the first of the seventh month is not said to be a day of high feast (Neh. 8:1), and the one occurrence of *rōš haššānâ* in Scripture (Ezek. 40:1) describes a vision on the tenth of the month and not one on the first. The observance of such a feast also goes unmentioned in the Apocrypha, Josephus, and Philo Judaeus, but is the subject of a Mishnah tractate (*Roš Haššanah*). (See further N. H. Snaith, *The Jewish New Year Festival* [1947].)

f. *Purim* (*pûrîm*). This festival has its origin in the deliverance wrought by Esther (Esth. 9:16–28) and falls on the fourteenth of Adar (February–March) for those in villages and unwalled towns, and on the fifteenth for those in fortified cities (Esth. 9:18–19; Jos. *Ant.* 11.6.13). The name is explained as coming from the "lot" (*pûr* H7052) that Haman planned to cast to destroy the Jews. The observance of the festival is first attested by 2 Macc. 15:36, where it is called the "Day of Mordecai." There is no mention of any religious observance connected with the day. In later tradition the book of Esther was read in the synagogue amidst rejoicing, and food and presents were sent to friends (see the Mishnah tractate *Megillah*). See also Purim.

g. *Hanukkah* or *Dedication* (*hănnukkâ* H2853 [cf. Neh. 12:27]; in Apocr., *ho enkainismos tou thysiastēriou* [1 Macc. 4:56]; in the NT, *ta enkainia* G1589 [Jn. 10:22]). Following the victories of Judas Maccabee in 167 B.C., a celebration of eight days commemorating the rededication of the

temple, whose worship had been interrupted three years, was instituted (1 Macc. 4:41–59; 2 Macc. 10:6–8). The festival begins on the 25th of Kislev (November–December), and one additional candle is lighted each day until a total of eight is reached (*b. Sabbath* 21b). Josephus calls it “Lights” (*phōta*, *Ant.* 12.7.7). There was no partial or total abstention from ordinary occupation nor was there a holy convocation at the beginning and end. Jesus was once in Jerusalem at this season (Jn. 10:22). (Note also the institution of Nicanor’s day on the thirteenth of Adar, commemorating the Jewish victory over this Seleucid general, 1 Macc. 13:51–52). See also Dedication, Feast of.

4. Periodic festivals. a. *Sabbatical year* (*šabbāt šabbātôn* [Lev. 25:4], “Sabbath of rest”). Each seventh year brought a cessation of agricultural activity and a release from debt. That the land might have its required rest, exile was threatened for neglect of the observance (Exod. 23:10–11; Lev. 25:1–7; Deut. 15:1). At the Feast of Booths during that year there was the public reading of the law (Deut. 31:10–13). See also sabbatical year.

b. *Year of Jubilee* (*šēnat hayyôbēl*). At the Day of Atonement of the forty-ninth year, the sounding of a trumpet (a ram’s horn, *yôbēl* H3413) marked the onset of the Jubilee Year as a period of freedom in the land. Property returned to its original owners. There was a price adjustment in sales in view of its approach. Sowing and reaping was forbidden (Lev. 25:8–17). The pseudepigraphic book of *Jubilees* is built around this custom, but uses a different system of calculation from that in Scripture. (For detailed discussions of Jewish feasts, see G. F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim*, 3 vols. [1927–30], 2:40–54; R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel* [1961], 468–517.)

II. In the NTt

A. Jewish festivals. Allusions to the Sabbath, Passover, Unleavened Bread (Matt. 26:17; Mk. 14:1; Lk. 22:1; Jn. 7:2), Feast of Tabernacles, Dedication (Jn. 10:22), and Pentecost (Acts 2) may be seen under the appropriate heading in the above discussion. The parents of Jesus observed Passover when he was a child (Lk. 2:42), and during his public ministry Jesus may have attended as many as four Passovers (Jn. 4:45; 5:1 [?]; 6:4; 12:1; Greeks would come to it, 12:20). Pilate had a custom of releasing a prisoner at the feast (Matt. 27:15; Mk. 15:6).

THE JEWISH SACRED YEAR

MONTH	SPECIAL DAYS
Nisan (April)	14—Passover 15—Unleavened Bread 21—Close of Passover
Iyar (May)	
Sivan (June)	6—Feast of Pentecost—seven weeks after the Passover (Anniversary of the giving of the law on Mt. Sinai)

Tammuz (July)

Ab (August)

Elul (September)

Tishri (October) 1 & 2— The Feast of Trumpets, Rosh Hashanah,
beginning of the civil year
10— Day of Atonement
15–21— Feast of Tabernacles

Marheshva (November) 25—Feast of Lights, Dedication, Hanukkah
n

Kislev (December)

Tebeth (January)

Shebat (February)

Adar (March) 14—The Feast of Purim

The festivals were sources of figurative interpretation for the NT writers. Christ our Passover lamb has been sacrificed (1 Cor. 5:7–8). Sabbaths, New Moon celebrations, and festival days are mere shadows of good things to come (Col. 2:16–17). The epistle to the Hebrews allegorizes the rest of the people of God to be the eternal rest (Heb. 4), and the ceremony of the Day of Atonement forms the basis for the presentation of the work of Christ as our High Priest (Heb. 8).

B. Other special occasions. Jesus denounced the Pharisees for seeking the uppermost seats at feasts (Matt. 23:6; Mk. 12:39; Lk. 20:46). Levi (Matthew) entertained Jesus and his friends at a great feast after he was called to discipleship (Lk. 5:29). Jesus suggested that the poor rather than the rich should be invited when one gives a feast (Lk. 14:13). Jesus attended the marriage feast in Cana (Jn. 2:1–11). In Corinth, because of food sacrificed to idols, a problem faced Christians as to whether or not they could attend a meal given by an unbeliever. Paul grants the right to go and eat whatever is set out asking no questions for conscience' sake (1 Cor. 10:27). Certain characters with heretical tendencies are said to be blots in the “love feasts” (Jude 12).

C. The marriage feast. The marriage feast wedding banquet is the background theme of several parables of Jesus: the ten virgins (Matt. 25:1–13), the marriage of the king's son (22:2–14), and

the great supper (Lk. 14:15–24). Jesus compared his relation to the disciples to that of the bridegroom and his friends (Matt. 9:15; Mk. 2:19; Lk. 5:34); while John the Baptist spoke of himself as only the friend of the bridegroom (Jn. 3:29). The book of Revelation climaxes with the invitation to the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:9). The background for this concept was laid in the prophets (Isa. 25:6) and is closely related to the messianic banquet of rabbinic thought at which the righteous would dine on behemoth and leviathan. A disciple's exclamation, "Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God" (Lk. 14:15), called forth the parable of the great supper. The universality of the gospel may be expressed in terms of a feast in which many from the E and the W will eat with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Matt. 8:11; Lk. 13:29). The entire Christian life may be called a feast (1 Cor. 5:8).

D. The eschatological feast. In the prophets already appears the figure of speech in which God's judgment on a people as a sacrificial banquet is expounded (Isa. 34:5–8; Ezek. 39:17–20). This inversion of the concept of a banquet in the Apocalypse, when the birds are invited to enjoy the great supper of God, is the counterpart of the messianic banquet (Rev. 19:17–21).

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¹ Moisés Silva and Merrill Chapin Tenney, *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible, Volume 2, D-G*, Revised, Full-Color Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: The Zondervan Corporation, 2009), 559-65.