

The Feast of Tabernacles— Its MEANING for New Testament Christians

God gave seven annual festivals to ancient Israel to preserve for New Testament Christians. But ancient Israel did not understand the meaning of these days. We do. Why?

By Herman L. Hoeh

Have you assumed that ancient Israel understood the plan of salvation because God gave to them, through Moses, His seven annual festivals? Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Ancient Israel as a whole never did understand God's plan of salvation. Only the few in ancient Israel — those whom God called to a spiritual knowledge of His way — ever understood. The rest were blinded spiritually. Read it for yourself, in Romans 11:7-8, Revised Standard Version:

"What then? Israel failed to obtain what it sought. The elect obtained it" — those whom God called to a knowledge of salvation — "but the rest were hardened ["blinded" — King James Version], as it is written, 'God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that should not see and ears that should not hear, down to this very day.'"

Think of it! Ancient Israel, even when they observed the Holy Days, still did not understand their meaning. Only the elect — the few — were able to understand why they were to keep God's days holy. As Paul himself wrote the Corinthians: "But their minds were hardened; for to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day when-

ever Moses is read a veil lies over their minds; but when a man turns to the Lord the veil is removed" (II Cor. 3:14-16, RSV).

If you think that impossible, then look at the modern history of God's people. How many who were among us, who for years assembled on God's hallowed time with us, have now gone because they did not understand what they were doing? As it is written in Hebrews 4:2, "For good news came to us just as to them; but the message which they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united in faith with those who heard" (RSV footnote, which translated the correct original Greek text).

God's Holy Days do reveal the plan of salvation. But they are a revelation, an unveiling, only to those who are "united in faith with those who heard" and understood — such as Joshua and Caleb, and (today) Herbert W. Armstrong. The Holy Days were *preserved* by the Jews even though they as a nation did not — and even today do not — understand their spiritual significance.

The professing Christian world is taught just the opposite. They assume the festivals of God were meant only for the Jews and have been understood by them. Of course the reason they believe that is they too do not understand the meaning of the an-

nual Holy Days. But we do — because we keep them and have God's gift of faith.

What the Jews did — and didn't — know

Out of all the tribes of ancient Israel only the Jews preserved the Hebrew Scriptures. The Jews knew the will of God because they preserved the Book of God. "Then what advantage has the Jew? . . . Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews are entrusted with the oracles of God" (Rom. 3:1-2, RSV).

In those oracles are the annual festivals of God. Among them, the Festival of Tabernacles. The Jewish nation knew God commanded His people to observe this Festival at the time of the giving of the law at Sinai.

God's first instruction about the Festival is found in Exodus 23:16, RSV, "You shall keep the feast of ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labor." The Festival is here first revealed under the name "feast of ingathering." It is a harvest festival celebrated at the close of the agricultural year in the northern hemisphere. The ancient Israelites focused in on the literal harvest of crops. They did not see its significance as a type of a final spiritual harvest of human beings. Only the

few, whom God was calling to salvation, understood.

Later that summer at Sinai God commanded through Moses, "And you shall observe the feast of weeks, the first fruits of wheat harvest, and the feast of ingathering at the year's end" (Ex. 34:22, RSV).

Or, as the Jewish Publication Society translation more specifically renders it, "the feast of ingathering at the turn of the year." The original Hebrew for "turn of the year" is *tekufah*, meaning the (autumnal) equinox. This was not to be a mid-summer festival, celebrated before the grapes and fruits were fully ripe. It is to be celebrated at its proper season, at the beginning of autumn. In contrast, the Feast of Weeks (Firstfruits or Pentecost), is to be celebrated at the end of spring at the completion of the barley, wheat and spelt harvest.

Through the centuries the Jews have known of these two harvest festivals. Yet they have not grasped the spiritual significance of the two harvests — that this is not the only time of salvation.

It was at the beginning of the following spring (compare Ex. 40:17 with Lev. 1:1) that the Lord revealed to Moses the name by which we commonly know the festival. In the King James translation of Leviticus 23:34 we read of "the feast of tabernacles" and in the Revised Standard Version "the feast of booths" — "tabernacles" in the footnote. And — you guessed it! — the Jews by New Testament times had focused on the literal booths, rather than on their purpose and meaning.

Sacrifices added — why?

For the first time also God temporarily imposed, in Leviticus 23:36-37, special burnt offerings on each of the seven days of the Feast of Tabernacles. When He initially revealed the Festival of Ingathering or Tabernacles, God did not command any burnt offerings (see Ex. 23:16 and 34:22).

The prophet Jeremiah makes this clear. "For in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to your fathers or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices" (Jer. 7:22, RSV). It was only when the nation sinned again

and again that first year after the Exodus that God imposed the sacrifices of the law to remind them of their sins and to teach them that the coming Messiah would shed His blood for them. But here too the Israelites focused on the details of animal sacrifices and completely overlooked their purpose.

It was not until well into the 40th year after the Exodus that God commanded Moses additional sacrifices during the Feast of Tabernacles for a special purpose. We read the account in Numbers 29:12-34. Upon entering the promised land the Israelites were to offer as burnt offerings 13 young bulls on the first day of the Feast, 12 on the next day, 11 on the third day, then 10, nine, eight and finally seven on the seventh and last day of the Feast. That makes 70 young bulls.

Why 70? The Jews searched the scriptures to find a meaning to these unusual 70 offerings. They knew that to offer a young bull was no ordinary sacrifice. When Israel as a nation sinned and sought forgiveness a young bull was offered (see Lev. 4:13-21). The sacrifice of a bullock was required of the nation or its leaders. Ordinary citizens could offer lambs or goats or doves. Here, then, were sacrifices during the Feast of Tabernacles representing nations or their leaders or progenitors.

The Jews found an answer to the number 70 in Genesis 10. You can, too. The sons of Noah were three. Their sons, grandsons and later descendants listed in Genesis 10 as progenitors of tribes (nations) were 67. That is a total of 70 about the time of the tower of Babel. Thus we read in the Talmud, "To what do those seventy bullocks [that were offered during the seven days of the Festival] correspond? To the seventy nations" (*Sukkah* 55b). A footnote to this quotation reads, "Seventy is the traditional number of Gentile nations, and the seventy bullocks are offered to make atonement for them."

Yet even Jesus' apostles did not grasp this great spiritual truth until God revealed His will through Peter at the time of the conversion of the uncircumcised Italian Cornelius (Acts 10). When the other apostles and the brethren heard Peter's account, "they glorified God, saying, 'Then to the Gentiles also God has

granted repentance unto life' " (Acts 11:18, RSV).

When this event in the history of the early Church of God occurred, shock waves rolled throughout the organization. Remember, at Pentecost in A.D. 31, when so many people were speaking different languages, they were all Jews (Acts 2:5) or Jews and (circumcised) proselytes (verse 10). There were no uncircumcised gentiles converted that day. But the conversion of Cornelius was different. All God's feasts now took on new meaning.

The Millennium revealed

We take for granted today, in the Church of God, the knowledge of the Millennium — the 1,000 years of God's rule over the earth through His Son Jesus Christ. But there was a time when this great truth was not fully revealed.

Not one of the prophets of old defined the length of the Messiah's rule over the nations, bringing them salvation. They knew there would be a coming spiritual harvest of human beings. They prophesied the gentiles would seek the Messiah. They knew the Feast of Tabernacles pictured that coming day. But all they could say was that it would be fulfilled "in that day."

Jesus' apostles asked Him in their day if the time had come for the fulfillment of the Feast of Tabernacles, when the Kingdom would be restored to Israel. Every Jew knew the week ended with the seventh-day Sabbath. They knew the Feast of Tabernacles fell in the *seventh* month of the year on God's calendar. Moses and Peter were both inspired to compare a day to a thousand years with God (Ps. 90:4 and II Pet. 3:8). But it was not until Christ revealed to John the book of Revelation that the picture became clear (Rev. 20:4, 6). The Feast of Tabernacles in the seventh month pictures a *millennial* Sabbath (1,000 years) of rest from sin, following 6,000 years under the government of Satan.

This final revelation of the rule of Christ in the seventh 1,000 years of human experience came to the Church of God because it is a commandment-keeping Church and observes the Holy Days of God and His Christ! □