

**ENDTIME ISSUES NEWSLETTER No. 111:
MEL GIBSON'S FILM ON "THE PASSION OF CHRIST" AND
THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES IN JOHN 7**

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Greetings from London, England, one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world. In spite of the rain and the chilly temperature of an early February, the center of London is crowded with people from many parts of the world. The famous Regent Street and Oxford Street are so crowded with tourists and shoppers, that one is forced to slow down and walk at the pace of the crowd. The shops are filled with people like in America at Christmas time, in spite of the fact that most goods are far more expensive than in the USA.

Our weekend rally was held on February 6-7-8, 2004 at the ADVENT CENTER, located right in the center of London. The building is rather impressive, with an upper and a lower chapel, both of which are used each Sabbath by the English and Brazilian congregations. The sanctuary and its balcony was packed with over 400 people, representing about 40 nationalities. It was indeed one of the most cosmopolitan congregation I have ever ministered to. The reception and response was marvellous. In fact, several other churches represented at the rally, have already booked me for later this year.

HOW DO I DECIDE ON THE TOPIC OF THE NEWSLETTER

Were you to ask me: "What topic do you plan to address in the next newsletter?" My honest answer would be: "I do not have any idea in this moment." The reason is that I try to be sensitive to the comments and suggestions from our readers as well to significant events that deserve to be considered from a biblical perspective. I must confess that my good intentions do not always materialize. For example, I started preparing an article dealing with the recent controversy over the display of the Ten Commandments, but I never found time to finish it.

The two essays I posted in the last newsletter came together unexpectedly. Somebody asked me to comment on the problematic

statement found in John 5:17, where Jesus justifies His Sabbath healing of the paralytic on the Sabbath, by saying: “My Father is working until now and I am working.” The story and the text were part of the Sabbath School Lesson for January 31–February 6, 2004. In view of the popular use of this text by Sundaykeeping scholars to defend their abrogation view of the Sabbath, I felt it would be helpful to share the highlights of my research on the Sabbath in John.

In the meantime I received Pastor Lloyd Grolimund’s article “Fire in the Church.” I felt the article would be of interest to many of our readers, because it provides a penetrating analysis of the transformation in worship experienced by many of our Australian churches as a result of Pentecostal influences. Indeed, the article was warmly received and I will post the last instalment when Pastor Grolimund emails it to me. Many have written to express appreciation for the article and voiced their distress over what is happening in their local church. Some told me that they are no longer attending their local church because they are deeply offended by the night club atmosphere created by heavy beat music, drama, dancing, and Pentecostal-style of shouting for the Spirit.

The concerns expressed by these fellow believers are legitimate, but the solution to stay away from church is hardly commendable. Running away from a problem does not contribute to its resolution. Constructive ways must be found to discuss the new worship styles being introduced in our churches. We need to address the real need to bring new life into the worship experience of our congregations, without giving in to extremes.

One of our greatest challenges our Adventist church faces today, is to call upon our musicians to produce new songs with contemporary melodies that embody the uniqueness and beauty of our message. The most recent Adventist hymn that I know of is “We Have this Hope”—a hymn that was composed over 30 years ago and still stirs my heart. It is hard to believe that during the past thirty years the musical vein has dried up in the Adventist church, in spite of the hundreds of music professors and performers we have in our church today. We seem to have become totally dependant for our Praise Worship on the simplistic choruses produced by evangelical musicians who lack the glorious vision of the Adventist message. The time has come to challenge our Adventist musicians to compose new songs to be tested at annual ADVENTIST

MUSIC FESTIVALS –songs which can be published and eventually enrich the worship experience of our congregations.

HOW THIS NEWSLETTER CAME TOGETHER

The two essays of this newsletter came together in a similar fashion to the last newsletter. Several subscribers encouraged me to comment on the much-publicized film “The Passion of Christ,” by Mel Gibson. The film is scheduled to be released in few days on February 25, 2004. My first reaction was negative, because I am not interested in movies. The last movie that I watched (I rented the video) was *LEFT BEHIND*. Half way through the movie I stopped the VCR and turned off the TV, because I was deeply offended by the deceptive attempt of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins to portray their fiction as prophetic fact. I found the film dishonest and deceptive.

After reading a dozen of reviews from reporters and church leaders who were offered the opportunity to preview the *The Passion*, I decided to comment, not on the artistic qualities of the film which I have not seen, but on the biblical legitimacy of portraying the trial and execution of Christ in a gruesome and bloody manner.

The bleeding body of Jesus shown in the few snapshot of the film shown in the TV advertisements, suggest to me that Gibson, a traditional Catholic, is influenced more by the Catholic devotion to Christ’s Passion, than by the Gospels’ narratives. There is no “blood” in the Passion narrative. The reason is that the Evangelists were not writing a novel for a bloodthirsty market, but were witnessing to the awesome character of Christ as revealed in the final hours of His life.

The second essay was inspired by the theme of the Feast of Tabernacles examined in the Sabbath School lesson for February 14-20, 2004. The two major ceremonies of the Feast of Tabernacles were the water procession and the illumination of the Temple. In the context of these ceremonies, Christ made two significant pronouncements: “If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink” (John 7:37). “I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). Due to its limitations, the Sabbath School Lesson offers a limited historical setting to these pronouncements.

To help Sabbath School teachers and any fellow believer eager to understand this lesson more fully, I have excerpting few paragraphs from my book on *THE FALL FESTIVALS*, which deal specifically with the Feast of Tabernacles in John 7 and 8. If you are interested to read the whole study on the Feast of Tabernacles in the OT and NT, feel free to contact me for a copy of the book.

A THANK YOU NOTE

Thank you for informing your friends about this ENDTIME ISSUES NEWSLETTERS. As a result of your endeavors, over 25,000 persons are now receiving this newsletter. If you have friends who have not yet subscribed , let them know that they also can benefit from these timely studies. All what they need to do to subscribe is to email me a message at <sbacchiocchi@biblicalperspectives.com> , saying: SUBSCRIBE ME.

MEL GIBSON'S FILM ON "THE PASSION OF CHRIST"

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Several subscribers to our newsletter have asked me to comment upon the much-publicized film "The Passion of Christ" by Mel Gibson. The film is scheduled to be released on Ash Wednesday, February 25, 2004. On that day the film will be shown in 2000 theaters across America and in countless others cinemas overseas. Evangelical congregations are booking showings, and religious leaders are urging believers to view the film's opening days. In London, England, where I am in this moment, there is considerable interest even among our Adventist members for viewing the film. This past Sabbath I was asked by several members to comment on the film.

The dozen of reviews that I have read indicate that the film dramatizes in gruesome details the last 12 hours of Christ's bloody trial and crucifixion. Since I have not seen the film, my comments are based on reviews and the few snap-shots I have seen in the commercials advertizing the film. My remarks will focus on the reaction of some Jewish leaders who have viewed the film and on the legitimacy to impersonate the Divine Son of God by a movie star.

Is it Biblically Correct to Impersonate Christ?

Is it biblically correct for a movie artist to impersonate and dramatize the last twelve hours of Christ's suffering, by portraying His body splattered with blood on the way to Calvary? Can such dramatization be biblically justified? Or does it represent a sacrilegious act condemned by the Second Commandment?

The question of the biblical and ethical legitimacy of dramatizing in a movie the final hours of Christ's agony and death, is never addressed in the reviews that I have read. The comments of movie critics and church leaders who have previewed the film, focus primarily on the artistic qualities and historical accuracy of the film. The problem is that a film about Christ's agony and death, may be artistically brilliant, but biblically flawed, because of its attempt to impersonate the Divine Son of God, reducing Him to a mere mortal human being. Any attempt to impersonate Christ, in a movie or in actual life, cannot be biblically justified. Paul condemns the impersonification of Christ in 2 Thessalonians 2 as an endtime sign of the Antichrist.

No mortal human being can understand and experience what it means to suffer as the incarnate Son of God. Any attempt by an artist to act out Christ's suffering and death, may ultimately lead many simple-minded believers to a veneration of the movie-Christ they have seen, rather than of the biblical Christ they have not seen. The temptation to worship a visible and objective Christ can be seen in dominant Catholic countries, where the only Christ devout Catholics know and worship is the One they touch, see, and often wear as jewelry. Statues, crucifixes and pictures of the bleeding Savior, abound in devout Catholic homes. Instead of worshipping the invisible Lord in Spirit and Truth, they worship an idol that they can see, touch and feel.

God's Precaution to Prevent Objectification of Christ

We can hardly blame God for the attempts to objectify the three members of the Godhead through movies, statues, painting, statuettes, and religious jewelry. The Lord took utmost precaution to prevent human beings from materializing and objectifying His spiritual nature. This is evidenced, for example, by the fact that when the second Person of the Godhead became a Human Being for about thirty-three years, He re-

frained from leaving a single material mark that can be authenticated as His own. Christ did not build or own a house; He did not write books or own a library; He did not leave the exact date of His birth or of His death; He did not leave descendants. He left an empty tomb, but even this place is still disputed. He left no “thing” of Himself, but only the assurance of His spiritual presence: “Lo, I am with you ‘always, to the close of the age’” (Matt. 28 :20).

Why did Christ pass through this world in this mysterious fashion, leaving no physical footprints or material traces of Himself? Why did the Godhead miss the golden opportunity provided by the incarnation to leave a permanent material evidence and reminder of the Savior’s life, suffering, and death on this planet? Why do the Gospel writers minimize the suffering of Christ’s final hours? Why is the “blood” factor, which is so prominent in Gibson’s “Passion,” largely missing in the narrative of the Passion? Is this not clear evidence of God’s concern to protect mankind from the constant temptation of reducing a spiritual relationship into a “thing-worship”?

It was because of this same concern that God chose the Sabbath—a day rather than an object—as the symbol of a divine-human belonging relationship. Being time, a mystery that defies human attempts to define it, the Sabbath provides a constant protection against the worship of objects and a fitting reminder of the spiritual nature of the covenant relationship between God and His people. If Gibson was to accept the message of the Sabbath regarding the spiritual nature of God, he might consider withdrawing the film before its release. Such a courageous decision would prevent the adoption by million of Christians of a distorted view of Christ’s suffering and death—a view that, as we shall shortly show, is conditioned by the Catholic teachings regarding the imitation of Christ’s Passion, rather than by the biblical account of Golgotha.

CONTRASTING REACTIONS

During the past few months Gibson has shown a preview of the film to selected groups of Christian leaders (not to Jewish leaders), including the Pope and Billy Graham. The reactions to the sneak-peek rounds have been either shock or awe. There has little middle ground among the viewers. It is hard to imagine a movie provoking such contrasting reactions among selected religious audiences.

Pope John Paul is reported to have approved the film “as it is,” that is, as a factual representation of the events leading to the Crucifixion. This is not surprising in view of the traditional Catholic teachings regarding the imitation of Christ’s Passion. To quell the growing debate over the Pope’s alleged comment, later on Vatican officials denied it, saying the pontiff was not in the habit of making artistic opinions public.

Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls confirmed that the Pope has seen the film, which in his view is “a cinematographic transposition of the historical events of the Passion of Jesus Christ according to the Gospel.”

Similar praises for the film have been expressed by numerous Protestant church leaders and newspaper reporters. They feel that the film shows in gruesome but factual details, how Jesus died to redeem mankind. “The Passion of the Christ,” Billy Graham has said, is “a lifetime of sermons in one movie” (*Newsweek*, February 16).

NO BLOODY DETAILS IN THE GOSPELS

The problem with such positive evaluations of the film is their failure to recognize that there are no gruesome, bloody details in the Gospels’ narrative about Christ’s trial, mocking, and crucifixion. As I took time to reread the four accounts of Christ’s trial and crucifixion, I was impressed by the absence of “blood” in the stories. The only reference to “blood” is found in John 19:34 where we are told that one of the soldiers pierced Jesus’ side to find out if He was dead. “A sudden flow of blood and water” came out. In view of the fact that Christ was already dead, his legs were not broken, like in the case of the two thieves standing next to Him. If the focus of the narrative was on “bloody details,” then the amputation of the thieves’ leg, would have received far greater coverage.

But, the focus of the four Evangelists is not on the “Passion,” that is, on the bleeding Christ, but on the nobility of His character, which is revealed in the dignified way he handled Himself before His accusers, mockers, and executioners. Crucifixions were common in those days. Thousands of Jews were crucified at various times by the Romans because of their constant uprising. What makes Christ’s crucifixion unique, is not

the unusual harsh treatment He received, but His willingness to suffer silently “like a lamb led to the slaughter and as a sheep before her shearer” (Is 53:7).

The focus of *The Passion* is notably different. According to *Newsweek*: “The arrest, the scourging and the Crucifixion are depicted in harsh, explicit detail in the R-rated movie. One of Jesus’ eyes is swollen shut from his first beating as he is dragged from Gethsemane; the Roman torture, the long path to Golgotha bearing the wooden cross, and the nailing of Jesus’ hands and feet to the beams are filmed unsparingly. The effect of the violence is at first shocking, then numbing, and finally reaches a point where many viewers may spend as much time clinically wondering how any man could have survived such beatings as they do sympathizing with his plight.”

Gibson’s focus on the violent means in which Jesus was murdered, may reflect his commercial concerns as well his traditional Catholic beliefs. Commercially, it is a known fact that “blood” sells movies. Film producers and promoters know that snap-shots of the bleeding Christ appeal to some bloodthirsty elements of our society.

BLOOD SELLS MOVIES

Popular films contain a generous (sickening) dosage of violence and bloodshed. This I know, not from viewing films, but from being confronted during the evening news with the snap-shots of shooting and bloodshed, used to advertize the latest films. The marketing industry know too-well that “blood sells” and this applies to religious films as well.

Frederica Matthewes-Green perceptively notes, “It’s a mark of our age that we don’t believe something is realistic unless it is brutal. But there’s another factor to consider. When the four evangelists were writing their own accounts of the Passion, they didn’t take Gibson’s approach. In fact, the descriptions of Jesus’ beating and crucifixion are as minimal as the writers can make them. Instead of appealing to our empathy, they invite us to awesome wonder, because they had a different understanding of the meaning of his suffering.”

Apparently Gibson has a reputation for directing and/or producing films like *Braveheart*, where blood flows freely. Gregg Easterbrook

writes in *The New Republic* that “Gibson has a reputation for movies that revel in gore, so there's legitimate worry that *The Passion* will depict an over-the-top, splatter-movie Hollywood version of Christ's final hours; and Gibson will sell this as historically accurate ‘truth’ when it is just one of many possible interpretations of an event no one can be sure about.”

In a lengthy and penetrating analysis of the *Passion*, published in *Newsweek* (February 16, 2004) Jon Meacham, who previewed the film, raises important questions about the historical accuracy of the film. Like other reviewers, Meacham feels that Gibson “makes ‘the Jews’ look worse than the Romans.” He writes: “To take the film’s account of the Passion literally will give most audiences a misleading picture of what probably happened in those epochal hours so long ago. The Jewish priests and their followers are the villains, demanding the death of Jesus again and again; Pilate is a malleable governor forced into handing down the death sentence. . . . [In reality] Pilate was not the humane figure Gibson depicts. According to Philo of Alexandria, the prefect was of ‘inflexible, stubborn, and cruel disposition,’ and known to execute troublemakers without trial.”

The sad reality is that millions of Christians will accept as truth Gibson’s fictitious misrepresentations of Christ’s suffering and death, instead of taking time to read and reflect upon the mysterious wonder of the Passion as cryptically portrayed in the Gospels.

HISTORICAL CATHOLIC ANTI-JUDAISM

Gibson’s film may be conditioned not only by our violent culture that accepts bloodshed as a form of entertainment, but also by the traditional Catholic teaching that the Jews as a people are guilty of murdering Christ. Historically, the Catholic church has promoted anti-Jewish policies and practices by blaming the Jews for the death of Christ.

During the First Crusade in the eleventh century “Christian” soldiers massacred European Jews while they were on their way to expel Muslim from the Holy Land. Numerous church councils strongly condemned the Jews as murderers of Christ and even passed anti-Jews legislation, depriving them of civil rights and forcing them to go into hiding during the Easter week. Numerous books have been written on the

historical manifestations of Catholic anti-Semitism. For example, some Church Councils decreed that any Jew found walking in the street during Easter week, could be killed with impunity.

Pope Innocent III (1160-1216) said that “the blasphemers of the Christian name, are forced into the servitude of which they made themselves deserving when they raised their sacrilegious hands against Him who had come to confer true liberty upon them, thus calling down His blood upon themselves and their children.”

After the horror of Hitler’s attempt to liquidate the Jews, the Roman Catholic Church has reconsidered her historical position against the Jews as the murderers of Christ. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) issued a thoughtful and compelling statement on the charge of deicide levelled against the Jews: “True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today . . . in her rejection of every persecution against any man, the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved . . . by the Gospel’s spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.”

The Pope himself has apologized to the Jews for the past Catholic persecution of their people. But Catholic traditionalists disapprove the action taken by Vatican II in absolving the Jews as people for the death of Christ.

Mel Gibson most likely belongs to the traditional wing of Catholicism which does not accept the new Catholic admission that sinners in general, and not the Jews in particular, share in the responsibility for Christ’s death. Gibson’s father, Hutton, told *New York Times* that “a Masonic plot backed by the Jews” influenced Vatican II to change the Catholic position. According to some reviewers, *The Passion of Christ* reflects the historical Catholic anti-Jewish position, by depicting the Jews as a sinister people.

The legitimate concern of some Jewish and Christian leaders is that *The Passion*, may rekindle historic antisemitism. Jon Meachan aptly

notes: “Four decades after the Second Vatican Council repudiated the idea that the Jewish people were guilty of ‘deicide,’ many Jewish leaders and theologians fear the movie, with its portraits of the Jewish high priest Caiaphas leading an angry mob and of Pilate as a reluctant, sympathetic executioner, may slow or even reverse 40 years of work explaining the common bonds between Judaism and Christianity” (*Newsweek*, February 16, 2004).

JEWISH REACTION

Some prominent Jewish leaders who have secretly previewed the film, have been quick to point out the way the film defames the Jews. For example, after viewing the film, Rabbi Marvin Hier, the founder of the *Simon Wiesenthal Centre* in Los Angeles, said: “I can tell you this is a terrible film, a terrible portrayal of Jews and will cause tremendous harm and be a delight to all the enemies of the Jewish people. . . . The film makes the Jews look as bad as possible. . . . The Jews are not only contrasted badly against the new Jews, the Christians, but also against the Roman hierarchy, which with the exception of the four whippers of Christ appear as pleasing, thoughtful and sensitive.”

Rabbi Hier objects to the physical images of the Jews in the film, saying, “I was embarrassed by their evil look, their sinister faces—they all look like dark-eyed Rasputins and their faces are in stark contrast to the wonderful expressions on the faces of the Jewish Christians.”

Abraham Foxman, the President of the Jewish Anti-Defamation League, was able to see the film in a secretive way at a special gathering of Christian leaders, which was supposed to be restricted to Christians. He said: “The sad part is that this film is made by a man who declares himself to be a man of God and truth. Yet he is predetermining who can see the film. . . . The film is as bad as it can be. It portrays the Jews as bloodthirsty. . . . He takes every opportunity to [blame] the Jews. . . . What makes this dangerous is that he is a genius of his art and by making it as painful as it is, your catharsis and anger rise. . . . The Vatican may have absolved the Jews of the responsibility for the death [of Christ], but Mr Gibson has not.”

THE LEGACY OF ANTI-JUDAISM

As one who has spent several years researching the role of anti-Judaism in leading many Christians to abandon biblical truths such as the Sabbath and Passover, I am very sensitive to the above comments by Jewish leaders. What many Christians ignore is that heresies like the observance of the weekly Sunday and of the annual Easter Sunday, are the outgrowth of the development of a theology of contempt toward the Jews that began early in the second century.

For example, Justin Martyr, a leader of the Church of Rome at about A. D. 150, rejects the Sabbath as a trademark of Jewish depravity. He maintains that God gave to the Jews the Sabbath and circumcision as a sign of their wickedness, because they are a murderous people who killed the prophets and crucified Christ. The Jews deserve to be punished by the Romans and Sabbathkeeping provides to the Roman authorities an easy way to identify who are the murderous Jews. This subject is discussed at length in chapter 7 of my dissertation *FROM SABBATH TO SUNDAY*.

On a similar vein the Emperor Constantine urged Christians to abandon the Jewish (biblical) Passover date and adopt instead the Easter-Sunday date promoted by the Bishop of Rome, in order “to have nothing in common with the detestable Jewish crowd.” It is shocking to learn how some popular Christian beliefs and practices were inspired more by hate for the Jews than love for Jesus Christ.

Many Christians ignore that the Jews in general were quite receptive to the teachings of Jesus and later to the Messianic proclamation of the Apostles. Those who were hostile to Christ were primarily some of the Jewish leaders such as the Pharisees and the priests. For example, we read in John 11:45-47 that “Many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary and had seen what Jesus did [in resurrecting Lazarus], put their faith in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin.”

The plotting for Christ’s death was done by the Sanhedrin, not by the Jewish people in general. An indication of the Jewish positive

response to Christ, can be seen in the thousands of Jews who accepted Him as their expected Messiah on the Day of Pentecost and afterwards. In Acts 21:20 James tells Paul that “myriads of Jews have believed and they are all zealous for the law.” On the basis of the figures provided by Acts, it is estimated that about half of the Jewish population living in Jerusalem accepted Jesus of Nazareth as their expected Messiah. On the basis of this fact it is inaccurate and misleading to make the Jewish people as a whole guilty of Christ’s death. This means that to the extent that Gibson’s “Passion” places the blame for Christ’s death on the Jews as a people, to the same degree it perpetrates the historical Catholic anti-Jewish beliefs and practices that have prevailed until recent times.

CATHOLIC IMITATION OF CHRIST’S SUFFERINGS

Gibson’s interest to reenact in his movie “The Passion of Christ,” may also be influenced by traditional Catholic teachings regarding the value of imitating Christ’s suffering as a means of penance and salvation. I have seen Catholic FLAGELLANTS participating in the Easter procession on the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem. They scourge themselves or are scourged by others. This voluntary flagellation is seen as form of exalted devotion to Christ, in imitation of His Passion.

Flagellation has been promoted among the various monastic orders. “Cardinal Pietro Damiani advocated the substitution of flagellation for the recitation of the penitential psalms, and drew up a scale according to which 1000 strokes were equivalent to ten psalms, and 15,000 to the whole psalter.”

The exaltation and imitation of Christ’s Passion as a form of popular devotion, is promoted today in the Catholic Church, especially by the religious order of the *Passionists*, that was founded by Paul of the Cross in 1720. They take a vow to promote Christ’s Passion by word and deed.

Gibson, being a traditional Catholic, may well wish to promote in a subtle way through his “Passion” film, the Catholic devotion to Christ’s Passion as a means of penance and salvation. Such teaching is foreign to those Protestants who accept the biblical view of salvation as a divine gift of grace, and not a meritorious human achievement. Yet, the film could

favorably predispose Protestants to accept the Catholic devotion to the Passion as a way of salvation.

ENDTIME SHOWDOWN OVER WORSHIP

Gibson's "Passion" could well be part of the prophetic endtime showdown over worship. The three angel messages of Revelation 14, summons endtime believers to worship the true God and abandon the false worship promoted by spiritual Babylon. The false worship of God is promoted today in a variety of ways, which transcend the Sabbath/Sunday controversy. A common characteristic of false worship is the attempt to objectify God by bringing Him down to the level where people can see Him, touch Him, feel Him, and use Him.

The objectification and manipulation of God is accomplished in a variety of ways such as the veneration of images and relics, the attribution of divine prerogatives to church leaders like the Pope, the physical and emotional apprehension of God through the stimulus of beat music (as discussed in the previous newsletter by Pastor Lloyd Grolimund), the impersonification of God through drama and films, the collocation of God in "sacred" shrines to which devout believers make pilgrimages.

The outcome of all the human divisings to objectify God is to make Him part of our human experience. The ultimate result is that people end up worshipping visible and tangible gods created after their own imagination, rather than worshipping the transcendent and invisible God of biblical revelation, whom we can approach only in "spirit and truth."

THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

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The Sabbath School Lesson for February 14-20, 2004 includes a brief discussion of the Feast of Tabernacle in John 7 and 8. For the benefit of those who appreciate additional background information, I am posting few excerpts of my research on the Feast of Tabernacles, published in my book on *THE FALL FESTIVALS*.

Incarnation as the Feast of Tabernacles

To introduce the nature and mission of Christ, John in his Gospel employs the metaphor of the “booth” of the Feast of Tabernacles. He explains that Christ, the Word, who was with God in the beginning (John 1:1), manifested Himself in this world in a most tangible way, by pitching His tent in our midst: “And the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, as of the only Son from the Father” (John 1:14).⁴

The Greek verb *skenoo* used by John means “to pitch tent, encamp, tabernacle, dwell in a tent.” The allusion is clearly to the Feast of Tabernacles when the people dwelt in temporary booths. In his article “The Feast of Tents: Jesus’ Self-Revelation,” published in *Worship* (1960), David Stanley notes that this passage sets the stage for the later self-revelation of Jesus at the Feast of Tabernacles in John 7 and 8. Stanley writes: “The most basic clue to the mystery pervading this entire narrative [John 7 and 8] is provided by the symbolic action that gives this feast its name: the ceremonial erection of little bowers, made with branches of trees, in which every Jew was expected to live during the festival. These shelters were commemorative of the forty years’ wandering in the desert when Israel had lived as a nomad in such intimate union with her God. For John this dwelling in tents is a primordial symbol of the Incarnation: ‘Thus the Word became a mortal man: he pitched his tent in the midst of us’ (John 1:14). It is this insight which presides over the composition of John’s narrative which we are considering [John 7-8]. All that happened, all that Jesus said on this occasion has some reference to the Incarnation.”¹

In seeking to describe the Messiah’s first coming to His people, John chose the imagery of the Feast of Booths since the feast celebrates the dwelling of God among His people. This raises an interesting question on whether or not John intended to link the birth of Jesus with the Feast of Tabernacles.

The Birth of Jesus and the Feast of Tabernacles

The connection between Christ’s birth and the Feast of Tabernacles may at first appear astonishing, but it has been proposed not only by modern authors² but also by early Christian Fathers. In his classic study

The Bible and Liturgy, Jean Daniélou discusses the connection between the Feast of Tabernacles and that of the Nativity in the writings of some Church Fathers.³ He notes, for example, that in his *Sermon on the Nativity*, Gregory of Nazianzus (A. D. 329-389) connects the Feast of the Nativity of December 25th with the Feast of Tabernacle: “The subject of today’s feast (25th December) is the true Feast of Tabernacles. Indeed, in this feast, the human tabernacle was built up by Him who put on human nature because of us. Our tabernacles, which were struck down by death, are raised up again by Him Who built our dwelling from the beginning. Therefore, harmonizing our voices with that of David, let us also sing the Psalm: ‘Blessed is He Who comes in the name of the Lord’ [Ps 118:26. This verse was sung during the procession of the Feast of Tabernacles]. How does He come? Not in a boat or in a chariot. But He comes into human existence by the immaculate Virgin. It is He, Our Lord, who has appeared to make the solemn feast day in thick branches of foliage up to the horns of the altar.”⁴

In the last sentence, Gregory alludes to the ancient Jewish custom of erecting a canopy over the altar during the Feast of Tabernacles by tying branches to the four horns of the altar. For Gregory, this ceremony finds its fulfillment in the Incarnation. Commenting on this text, Daniélou writes: “The coming of Christ, His birth, thus is seen to be the inauguration of the true Feast of Tabernacles. Here appears a new harmony: the *scenai* [the tent], the human dwelling at the beginning, have been struck by sin. . . . Christ comes to raise them up, to restore human nature, to inaugurate the true Feast of Tabernacles prefigured in Jewish liturgy. And the beginning of this *Scenopegia* [Feast of Tabernacles] is the Incarnation itself in which, according to St. John, Christ built the tabernacles of His own Body (John 1:14). It does indeed seem as if it were this term of St. John which makes the connection between the feast of the *scenai* [Tabernacles] and the feast of the Birth of Christ.”⁵

What contributed to make the connection between the birth of Jesus and the Feast of Tabernacles, was not only John’s representation of the Incarnation as Christ pitching His tent among us, but also the Messianic understanding of Psalm 118:26-27, a psalm that was sung by the Jews during the processions of the Feast of Tabernacles and that was used by the Fathers to link the two feasts. The Psalm announces “He who comes in the name of the Lord” (Ps 118:26)—a clear allusion to the

coming of the Messiah—in the context of the Feast of Tabernacles: “The Lord is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar!” (Ps 118:27).

Church Fathers saw in these passages a representation of the coming of the Messiah through the typology of the Feast of Tabernacles. Gregory of Nissa (about A. D. 330-395) remarks that “The prophet David tells us that the God of the universe, the Lord of the world has appeared to us to constitute the solemn Feast in the thick branches of foliage.”⁶ “The thick branches of foliage” refer to the Feast of Tabernacles which was celebrated in booths made of leafy branches. The booths are seen as foreshadowing the Incarnation which made it possible for Christ to dwell among us.

Daniélou finds that traces of the patristic connection between the Feast of Tabernacles and that of the Nativity still survive in the current use of the Messianic verses 23, 28, 29 of Psalm 118 during “the Gradual of the Second Mass of Christmas” celebrated in the Catholic Church. He concludes: “It is indeed at Christmas that the eschatological tabernacle was built for the first time, when the Word ‘established His dwelling amongst us’ and the unity of men and angels was restored when the angels visited the shepherds.”⁷

The Date of Christ’s Birth

Unfortunately, the connection between Christ’s birth and the Feast of Tabernacles was gradually lost as the pagan symbology of the sun displaced the Biblical typology of the Feast of Tabernacles. The attempt of the Fathers to connect the Feast of Tabernacles with Christmas was not successful because the two feasts differ in origin, meaning, and authority. By adopting the date of December 25th, which was the pagan feast of the birthday of the Invincible Sun (*dies natalis Solis Invicti*),⁸ the Christological meaning of the Feast of Tabernacles was gradually lost—as indicated by the fact that today nobody thinks of Christmas as being the Christian Feast of Tabernacles.

It is a recognized fact that the adoption of the date of December 25th by the Western Church to commemorate the incarnation of the Messiah, was influenced by the pagan celebration of the return of the sun

after the winter solstice. Such a date is not only devoid of Biblical meaning but also inaccurate as far as the actual time of Christ's birth.

If, as it is generally agreed, Christ's ministry began when He was about thirty years of age (Luke 3:23) and lasted three and one-half years until His death at Passover (March/April), then by backtracking we arrive much closer to the Feast of Tabernacles (September/October) than to December 25.⁹ Indirect support for a September/October dating of Christ's birth is provided also by the fact that from November to February shepherds did not watch their flocks at night in the fields. They brought them into a protective corral called a "sheepfold." Hence, December 25 is a most unlikely date for the birth of Christ.¹⁰

The overcrowded conditions at the time of Christ's birth ("there was no place for them in the inn"—Luke 2:7) could be related not only to the census taken by the Romans at that time, but also to the many pilgrims that overrun the area especially during the Feast of Tabernacles—the last and most important pilgrimage of the year. Bethlehem is only four miles from Jerusalem. "The Romans," notes Barney Kasdan, "were known to take their censuses according to the prevailing custom of the occupied territories. Hence, in the case of Israel, they would opt to have the people report to their provinces at a time that would be convenient for them. There is no apparent logic to calling the census in the middle of winter. The more logical time of taxation would be after the harvest, in the fall,"¹¹ when people had in their hands the revenue of their harvest.

The only festival pilgrimage in the Fall was the Feast of Tabernacle. In view of the Messianic themes of the Feast of Tabernacles, it would have been logical for Christ's birth to coincide with this feast. Important events of the plan of salvation are consistently fulfilled on the Holy Days that prefigured them. Christ died on the Cross at the time when the Passover lamb was sacrificed (John 19:14). Christ arose at the time of the waving of the sheaf of barley as the first fruits of the coming harvest (1 Cor 15:23). The outpouring of the first fruits of God's Holy Spirit took place "when the day of Pentecost was fully come" (Acts 2:1, KJV). By the same token, Christ could well have been born at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles, since the feast typifies God's coming to dwell among us through the incarnation of His Son.

It is noteworthy also that the Feast of Tabernacles was called “the season of our joy” and “the feast of the nations.” Such themes relate perfectly to the terminology used by the angel to announce Christ’s birth: “Behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people” (Luke 2:10). As “the season of our joy,” the Feast of Tabernacles provided the ideal settings for breaking “the good news of a great joy” for all the people, since, as we have seen, the feast was also a celebration for all the nations (Zech 14:16).

A final interesting sideline supporting the possibility that Christ was born at the very time of the Feast of Tabernacles, is the reference to the wise men that came from the East to visit Christ (Matt 2:1). The land of the East is most likely Babylon, where many Jews still lived at the time of Christ’s birth. Only a remnant of the Jews returned from the Babylonian exile to Palestine during the Persian period. The wise men, most likely, were rabbis known in Hebrew as *chakamin*, which means wise men.

We are told that the wise men made their journey from the East to Bethlehem because they had seen “the star in the East” (Matt 2:1). Watching the stars was associated especially with the Feast of Tabernacles. In fact, the roof of the booth was built with leafy branches carefully spaced so that they would screen out the sunlight without blocking the visibility of the stars. The people watched for the stars at night during the feast because of the prophecy “a star shall come out of Jacob” (Num 24:17). It is possible that it was during the Feast of Tabernacles, the special season of star watching, that the wise men saw the Messianic star and “rejoiced exceedingly with great joy” (Matt 2:10).

In the light of the foregoing considerations, most likely Christ’s birth coincided with the Feast of Tabernacles. Being the feast of thanksgiving for God’s willingness to protect His people with the tabernacle of His presence during the wilderness sojourning, it could serve fittingly to celebrate Christ’s willingness to become a human being and pitch His tent among us in order to become our Savior.

The implications of this conclusion are self-evident. The Feast of Tabernacles in September/October provides Christians today with much more accurate Biblical timing and typology for celebrating Christ’s birth, than the pagan dating of December 25th. The latter date not only is removed from the actual time of Christ’s birth, but is also derived from the

pagan celebration of the return of the sun after the winter solstice. Why celebrate the birth of Jesus at the wrong time of December 25th,—a date derived from pagan sun-worship—when the Feast of Tabernacles provides us with Biblical timing and typology for commemorating such an important event?

The Feast of Tabernacles in the Time of Christ

The allusions to the Feast of Tabernacles that we find in the Transfiguration and in Jesus' triumphal entry in Jerusalem, that I have examined in the *FALL FESTIVALS*, set the stage for the greater self-disclosure of Christ at the Feast of Tabernacles reported in John 7 and 8. It was in the context of this feast that Christ proclaimed Himself to be the source of living water (John 7:37-39) and the light of the world (John 8:12). Since these proclamations were made in the setting of the two important ceremonies of the water drawing and of the illumination of the Temple, I attempt a graphic description of these ceremonies which by the first century A. D. had been recognized for their Messianic import. This should help us to appreciate more fully how Christ used the Feast of Tabernacles to reveal His nature and mission.

Jerusalem was more crowded at the Feast of Tabernacles than at any other time of the year. Pilgrims arrived from different parts of the empire for this festive celebration. They erected booths on the roofs, in the courtyards, in the streets and squares, as well as in the gardens. The city and neighboring hillsides had a most picturesque appearance. When the evening of Tishri 15th arrived, the priests blasted their trumpets on the Temple Mount to announce to Israel the opening of the Feast of Tabernacles.

During the first night-watch, explains Alfred Edersheim, "the altar of burnt-offering was cleansed and the gates of the Temple were thrown open immediately after midnight. The time till the beginning of the ordinary morning sacrifice was occupied in examining the various sacrifices and offerings that were to be brought during the day."¹²

The Water-Drawing Ceremony

While the morning sacrifice was being prepared, a special procession was organized for the joyous water-drawing ceremony which was

rich in symbolism and high drama. The procession of faithful worshippers began at the Temple, led by a priest who carried a golden pitcher. A band of liturgical flutists enhanced the wonder of the ceremony with their cheerful music. When the Temple procession reached the pool of Siloam, the priest filled his golden pitcher with water. Journeying back to the Temple, the cortege would pass through the Water Gate (its name being derived from the ceremony). The Water Gate had special eschatological significance because it was identified by some rabbis as the south gate of Ezekiel's Temple through which the water of life would flow to all the land (Ex 47:1-5).¹³

The procession was timed to arrive back at the Temple just in time for the morning sacrifice on the altar of burn-offering. A threefold blast of trumpets welcomed the arrival of the priest who was joined by another priest who carried the wine for the drink-offering. The two priests ascended together the 'rise' of the altar and placed two magnificent silver basins on the southwest corner of the altar. One of the bowls was used for pouring the water from the pool of Siloam and the other for pouring the wine. Both bowls had a hole which allowed the water and wine to flow to the base of the altar.

As soon as the priests began pouring the water and the wine, the Temple music began. The people chanted "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation" (Is 12:3). Then the 'great Hallel,' consisting of Psalms 113 to 118, was chanted antiphonally to the accompaniment of flutes. Edersheim explains that "As the Levites intoned the first line of each Psalm, the people repeated it; while to each of the other lines they responded by *Hallelu Yah* (Praise ye the Lord'). But in Psalm 118 the people not only repeated the first line, 'O give thanks to the Lord,' but also 'O then, work now salvation, Jehovah' (Ps 118:25), 'O Lord, send now prosperity' (Ps 118:25); and again at the close of the Psalm, 'O give thanks to the Lord.' As they repeated these lines, they shook toward the altar the *Lulavs* which they held in their hands—as if with this token of the past to express the reality and cause of their praise, and to remind God of His promises."¹⁴

The morning service closed with a procession around the altar by the priests, who chanted 'O then, work now salvation, Jehovah! O Jehovah, send now prosperity' (Ps 118:25). On the seventh and last day of the Feast, the priests made the circuit of the altar seven times, each time

chanting the Psalm and crying *Hosheanah* (save now"). This is why the last day was called "the Great Hosannah."

The Last Great Day of the Feast

The drama of the water-drawing ceremony took on new meaning when Jesus attended the Feast of Tabernacles and offered His living water: "On the last day of the feast [of Tabernacles], the great day, Jesus stood up and proclaimed, 'If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water'" (John 7:37-38).

Most probably it was right after the symbolic rite of the water-pouring ceremony at the altar, after the people had chanted some of the verses of Psalm 118 praying for the Lord to send salvation, that the voice of Jesus was heard loud and clear throughout the Temple: "If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink" (John 7:37).

Christ's offer of His living water takes on added significance when we realize that His words were uttered most probably when the deeply stirring rites had just concluded and the song of praise and the prayers for salvation had scarcely died out. The previous days, the people had been sharply divided about Christ and the authorities had attempted to capture Him. On that day, however, as Edersheim keenly observes, "He is not only in the Temple, but, at the close of the most solemn rites of the Feast, asserting, within the hearing of all, His claim to be regarded as the fulfillment of all, and the true Messiah! And yet there is neither harshness of command or violence of threat in His proclamation. It is the King, meek, gentle, and loving; the Messiah, Who will not break the bruised reed, Who will not lift up His voice in tone of anger, but speaks in accents of loving, condescending compassion, Who now bids, whosoever thirstiest, come unto Him and drink. And so the words have to all time remained the call of Christ to all that thirst."¹⁵

In a similar vein Ellen White notes the connection between the Messianic meaning of the water ceremony and Christ's offer of the water of life. "The priest had that morning performed the ceremony which commemorated the smiting of the rock in the wilderness. That rock was a symbol of Him who by His death would cause living streams of salvation

to flow to all who are athirst. There in the presence of the assembled multitude He set Himself apart to be smitten, that the water of life might flow to the world.

“The cry of Christ to the thirsty soul is still going forth, and it appeals to us with even greater power than to those who heard it in the Temple on that last day of the feast. The fountain is open for all . . . Jesus is still crying, ‘If any man thirst, let him come unto Me, and drink.’”¹⁶

To appreciate the Messianic significance of Christ’s offer of His living water, it is important to remember Zechariah’s vision of the coming of the Lord when “living waters will flow out of Jerusalem.” On that day, all the nations will come to Jerusalem “to keep the feast of booths” (Zech 14:8, 16). Similarly, Ezekiel sees the coming of a Messianic “Prince” who will celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles (Ez 45: 25) and then water will flow from the threshold of the Temple to all the land (Ex 47:1-11).

The rabbis saw in the water-libation of the Feast of Tabernacles a representation of the wilderness miracle of the water from the rock, a ceremony which pointed to the coming of a redeemer like Moses who would bring forth new water from the rock. This theme of the water is present in the closing visions of Revelation where the Temple is identified with Christ Himself (Rev 21:3) from whose throne flows the river of life (Rev 22:1). In the light of this Messianic understanding of the water ceremony of the Feast of Tabernacles, Christ’s offer of His living water at the conclusion of the water ceremony of the Feast of Tabernacles represents a most impressive self-revelation of His Messianism.

“Their prayers for water,” writes Raymond Brown, “had been answered in a way they did not expect; the feast that contained within itself the promise of the Messiah had been fulfilled. Zechariah 14:8 had predicted that living waters would flow out of Jerusalem, and Ezekiel 47:1 had seen a river flow from the rock underneath the Temple. But now Jesus says that these rivers of living water will flow from His own body, that body which is the new Temple (John 2:21).”¹⁷

In the context of the rich prophetic background of the Feast of Tabernacles as a celebration of faith in the Messiah to come, Christ’s self-revelation as the source of living water has enormous significance. Gale

Yee observes, “Jesus becomes the new temple from which the waters of life will burst forth. Jesus becomes the new rock in the wilderness that quenches the people’s thirst. Jesus invites those who believe in Him to satisfy their thirst now with the water he provides. The outpouring of water signals that the Messianic age has arrived in His own person as the new Moses. John will symbolize this living water from Jesus’ pierced side (John 19:34). It is only after Jesus is glorified in his death and resurrection that the Spirit (which the water represents) will be dispatched.”²⁸

Water Theology

In a land as arid as Israel, it is easy to see why water became the symbol of the life to be offered by the expected Messiah. This in turn helps us to understand why in the Gospel of John water is one of the major themes that reveals the nature and mission of Christ. The connection between water and Spirit first appears in John 1:33 where the Spirit descends upon Christ when John the Baptist baptizes Him with water. The same link is forged in John 3:5 where Jesus explains to Nicodemus that “unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”

In John 4:14, Jesus offers the living water to the Samaritan woman, saying: “Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” In John 5, the limited power of the water of the pool of Bethzatha is contrasted with the life-giving power of Christ, the Water of Life (John 5:7-8). In chapter 6 Jesus explains that it is by believing in Him that one receives His living water: “He who believes in me shall never thirst” (John 6:35). Jesus also makes a link between the living water and His blood, by saying: “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:54).

In John 7:37-39, we find the major “water theology” passage of the New Testament. We have seen that Christ offers living waters to those who believe in Him (John 7:38) in the context of the water ceremony of the Feast of Tabernacles. Water also is used literally by Christ in John 13 symbolically to cleanse the hearts of His disciples: “If I do not wash you, you have no part in me” (John 13:8). Finally, water and blood flow from the wound in Christ’s side on the Cross (John 19:34). This suggests that

ultimately the living water flows from Christ Himself who is the source of life to all who believe in Him.

The rich water imagery that we find in the Gospel of John was inspired by the water libation service that took place daily during the Feast of Tabernacles. We noted that while the priests poured water and wine in two silver bowls placed on the altar, the people chanted “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation” (Is 12:3). “This liturgical act,” Frederick Powers points out, “was both a commemorative symbol and a dramatized hope. It recalled the miraculous water that gushed forth from the rock of Horeb beneath the rod of Moses, and it was a figure of the outpouring of graces proper to Messianic times.”¹⁹

The water of the rock of Horeb, commemorated by the water libation of the Feast of Tabernacles, pointed to Christ. “For they all drank the same supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ” (1 Cor 10:4). As the rock of Horeb was struck for water, Christ, too, as the Rock would be struck so that living waters might flow from Him to anyone who believes. God has always provided *for* the life to His people, but now He provided His own Son *as* the Life of His people.

“By sacrificing Himself the redeemer would cause the Spirit to flow and to open up the ‘fountain of living water.’ And this would happen when at the death of the Messiah His heart would be pierced with a lance. The life-giving power of the living waters would find its source in the Blood of Christ as it gushed forth from the wounded Heart of Christ.”²⁰

In Gethsemane, Jesus spoke of the “cup” He must drink (Matt 26:39) in the context of the Paschal Supper He had partaken only a few hours before. But now it was the “cup” of the crucifixion that He must drink so that life might flow for all believers. Thus, in a sense when we partake of the cup of wine at the Lord’s Supper we receive the living water that flows from Christ. “Drinking of Christ’s cup is not a preservation of this life so much as it is a *reservation* of the life to come.”²¹

Drinking the Living Water

The meaning of Christ’s invitation to come to Him and drink His living water is explained by the Lord Himself as representing believing in Him. “He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart

shall flow rivers of living water” (John 7:38). To drink Christ’s living water means to believe in Him as our Savior and source of eternal life. The ministry of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believers causes the living water to flow as they become channels through which the blessings of salvation flow unto others.

John explains that Christ’s reference to “rivers of living water” was to the ministry of the Spirit that was to be manifested fully after Christ’s glorification. “Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not glorified” (John 7:39). Through His sacrifice, Christ made it possible for the Holy Spirit to be poured out so that the fruits of the Spirits (Gal 5:22-24) could be manifested in the lives of believers.

Jesus’ teaching reflects the belief that the Holy Spirit would be poured out like water at the coming of the Messiah. Several prophets link together or allude to a relationship between water and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit (Joel 2:23; Zech 13:1). Ezekiel predicted that God would cleanse the people with water from all their filthiness and would pour out His Spirit so that they would walk in His statutes (Ezek 36:24-27). “Indeed,” writer Edersheim, “this is expressly stated in the Targum which thus paraphrases Isaias 44:3: ‘Behold, as the waters are poured on arid ground and spread over the dry soil, so I will give the spirit of My Holiness on my sons, and My blessing on thy children’s children.’”²²

Jesus, then, offered to the pilgrims at the Feast of Tabernacles the promised blessings of the Messianic age—the cleansing and restoration through the outpouring of the living water of His Spirit. Some of the people recognized and accepted the Messianic implications of Christ’s invitation, and said: “This is the Christ” (John 7:40). Others, however, wanted to seize Him (John 7:44), because in their view the Messiah could not possibly come from Galilee (John 7:41).

The controversy grew so severe that the Pharisees started arguing among themselves. At great personal risk, Nicodemus, who probably at this time was a secret believer, put a stop to the debate by saying: “Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?” (John 7:51). This statement had the desired effect of temporarily bringing to an end the controversy.

The Illumination of the Temple

The two major ceremonies of the Feast of Tabernacles were the water procession and the illumination of the Temple. We have just considered how Jesus capitalized on the water-pouring ceremony to proclaim Himself the source of living water. Now we wish to look at how Jesus revealed Himself to be the Light of the world (John 8:12) in the context of the illumination of the Temple. “I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).

Most commentators maintain that the setting of Jesus’ self-proclamation as the Light of the World is the nightly illumination of the Court of Women that took place during the Feast of Tabernacles. The Mishnah offers us this graphic description of the ceremony. “There were there golden candlesticks [in the Court of Women] with four golden bowls on the top of them and four ladders to each candlestick, and four youths of the priestly stock and in their hands jars of oil holding a hundred and twenty logs which they poured into all the bowls. They made wicks from the worn out drawers and girdles of the priests and with them they set the candlesticks alight, and there was not a courtyard in Jerusalem that did not reflect the light of the Beth ha-She’ubah [Court of women].”²³

The festivities lasted all night with singing and playing of harps, lyres, cymbals, and trumpets. The climactic moment came at sunrise when two priests reached the gate that led to the east (the beautiful gate) while blowing their trumpets. Once through the gate with a multitude of worshippers, the priests turned their faces toward the west and chanted this ancient prayer: “Our fathers when they were in this place turned with their backs toward the Temple of the Lord and their faces toward the east, and they worshiped the sun toward the east; but, as for us, our eyes are turned toward the Lord.”²⁴

The meaning of the illumination of the Temple was similar to that of the pouring of the water. The light shining out of the Temple into the darkness around, was seen “as a symbol not only of the Shekinah [God’s glory manifested in the Most Holy above the ark] which once filled the Temple, but also of the ‘great light’ which ‘the people that walked in darkness’ were to see, and which was to shine ‘upon them that dwell in the land of the shadow of death’ (Is 9:2).”²⁵ It seems most probable that it was

in the context of this illumination ceremony that Jesus said: “I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).

Christ the Light of the World

By proclaiming Himself as the light of the world, Christ revealed Himself to be the fulfillment of the Messianic pillar of fire that guided the Israelites through the wilderness. The enormous candelabra burning in the Court of Women reminded the people of the light which had guided their ancestors. Jesus had spoken of Himself as “the bread of life” (John 6:25) and “the rivers of living water” (John 7:38), now He reveals Himself as “the light of the world” (John 8:12). Whereas the light of the candelabra placed in the Court of Women brightened all of Jerusalem, the light emanating from Christ enlightens the whole world.

The symbols of light and water serve to reveal a twofold aspect of Christ’s mission. The figure of living water typifies Christ as the Savior, while that of the Light represents Jesus as the Revealer of God’s will for mankind. As the Light, Christ “enlightens every man . . . coming into the world” (John 1:9) by revealing the way they should walk (1 John 2:9-11). Jesus said: “I have come as light into the world, that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness” (John 12:46).

Growth in the Christian life occurs through the progressive illumination by the Holy Spirit (John 6:40; 12:44-46; 14:7-9) which enables the believer to understand and follow the will of God (John 14:26). As the Light of the world, Jesus imparts through the Holy Spirit wisdom to the ignorant, holiness to the impure, gladness to the sad. Moreover, to those who follow His light, He grants the privilege to become “sons of light” (John 12:36).

To follow the light of Christ means to trust and obey Him. In the wilderness, the Israelites followed the pillar of light. Now as Christians we follow the light of Christ. “The symbolism of the Feast of Tabernacles (now in progress or just ended),” writes William Hendriksen, “reminded the audience of this light which the ancestors had enjoyed as a guide. Those who had followed it and had not rebelled against its guidance had reached Canaan. The others had died in the desert. So it is here: the true followers not only will not walk in the darkness of moral and spiritual

ignorance, of impurity, and of gloom, but will reach the land of light. Nay more: they will *have* the light! The Antitype is ever richer than the type. Physical light—for example, that of the pillar of light in the desert or that of the candelabra in the Court of Women—imparts *outwards* illumination. *This* light, Jesus Christ as the object of our faith, becomes our *inner* possession: we *have* him, and this abidingly (cf. John 4:14).³⁷

The brilliance of the gloriously lit Temple paled in the presence of Christ. He was more glorious than Herod's Temple for He embodied the fullness of God's glory (Col 1:19). In Jesus people saw the Father, for God had come to tabernacle with mankind through the person of His Son.

Christ's self-proclamation as the Light of the World caused another controversy with the Pharisees who argued that Christ's witness was false simply because He was bearing witness of Himself (John 8:13). Jesus responded, "The Father who sent me bears witness to me" (John 8:18). The truth of Christ's statement is proven dramatically in the healing of the blinded man reported in John 9 where we find allusions to the water and light ceremonies of the Feast of Tabernacles.

Before healing the blind man, Jesus explained the divine rationale for what He was about to do. He told the people that neither the man nor his parents were guilty of specific causative transgressions, "but that the works of God might be manifest in him" (John 9:3). Then Jesus stated: "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world" (John 9:5). This statement is a possible reference to the ceremony of the illumination of the Temple during the Feast of Tabernacles, especially since Jesus made a similar statement in John 8:12 in the context of the feast. After this, Jesus spat on the ground, made clay, and applied it to the eyes of the blind man, saying, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (John 9:7). The blind man obeyed and was healed. This action reminds us of the ceremony of water drawing from the pool of Siloam which the people had witnessed earlier during the Feast of Tabernacles. The two remarkable claims that Jesus made at the Feast of Tabernacles were validated by the healing of the blind man.

In his discussion of this passage, Elwood McQuaid notes that "the theme of the Feast of Tabernacles was to become the foundation for what Jesus was to do. After he had made clay from saliva and applied it to the beggar's eyes, He sent the blind man away with specific instructions.

‘And said unto him, Go, wash in the pool of Siloam (which is by interpretation, Sent). He went his way therefore, and washed, and came seeing’ (John 9:7). Siloam was, you will recall, the place where the priest bearing the golden pitcher dipped up the water that so significantly portrayed God’s spiritual and physical supply for His land and people. The pool was now to be crowned with the distinction of being associated with Jehovah’s Sent One as an affirming sign to Israel. The themes of water and light would coalesce in a pointedly literal fashion as the blind beggar groped to the water’s edge, knelt, and applied the cool liquid to his sightless eyes. Slowly, he lifted his head, tiny droplets beading on brows and beard. He opened his eyes and a torrent of light flooded his being. Water and light mingled together as the man blinked away the watery mist and light began to clarify objects, faces, reflections. Jubilantly, he rose to his feet as curious onlookers marvelled at what they had witnessed—a man came to the pool blind, had washed, and walked away seeing!”²⁶

The Profound Meaning of the Feast of Tabernacles

The rich typology of the Feast of Tabernacles finds in the New Testament both a Christological and an eschatological fulfillment. Christologically, the feast serves to reveal the Incarnation and mission of Christ. Jesus is God’s ultimate tabernacle for in Him God tabernacled among men (John 1:14). He is the living water (John 7:37-38) typified by the water ceremony of the Feast of Tabernacles. He is also the Light of the World (John 8:12) typified by the night illumination of the Temple during the feast. Indeed, through Christ the blessings typified by the Feast of Tabernacles have become a reality for every believer.

Eschatologically, the Feast of Tabernacles serves to represent God’s protection of His people through the trials and tribulation of this present life until they reach the heavenly Promised Land. There God will shelter the redeemed with the booth of His protective presence (Rev 7:15) and dwell with them for all eternity (Rev 21:3). As the ancient Israelites “rejoiced before the Lord” (Lev 23:40) at the Feast of Tabernacles by waving palm branches, singing, playing instruments, and feasting, so the countless multitude of the redeemed will rejoice before the throne of God, by waving palm branches (Rev 7:9), singing anthems of praise (Rev 7:10; 14:3; 15:2-4; 19:1-3), playing harps (Rev 14:2), and participating in the great marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:9).

The Feast of Tabernacles reminds us that we are pilgrims journeying to the Promised Land. As God protected the Israelites on their journey through the wilderness to Canaan, He will protect us through the tribulations of this present life as we journey on our way to the Kingdom. The feast challenges us to look forward to the final ingathering of God's people in their harvest home. At that time God will shelter His people with the "booth" of His presence for all eternity (Rev 21:3).

As the people of Israel rejoiced at the Feast of Tabernacles "in the consciousness of pardon and acceptance, through the service of the day of atonement, just ended," so, Ellen White reminds us "the redeemed will rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory. Christ's great work of atonement for men will then have been completed, and their sins will have been forever blotted out."²⁷

Ellen White alludes to the spiritual meaning of the Feast of Tabernacles for our Christian life today. She writes: "Well would it be for the people of God at the present time to have a Feast of Tabernacles—a joyous commemoration of the blessings of God to them. As the children of Israel celebrated the deliverance that God had wrought for their fathers, and His miraculous preservation of them during their journeying from Egypt, so should we gratefully call to mind the various ways He has devised for bringing us out from the world, and from the darkness of error, into the precious light of His grace and truth."²⁸

The Feast of Tabernacles challenges us not to invest present religious or political institutions with permanent value and functions because they are not the method by which the Kingdom of God is to be established. It challenges us to recognize that when Jesus comes, all our human institutions, including our Christian ones, will come to an end. We must build for future generations while recognizing that the future does not belong by right to what we build. The ultimate effect of living looking forward to the eschatological Feast of Tabernacles is to view all our institutions and personal decisions in the light of the glorious appearing of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

ENDNOTES

1. David M. Stanley, "The Feast of Tents: Jesus' Self-Revelation," *Worship* 34 (1959-60), p. 20.
2. See, for example, Edward Chumney, *The Seven Festivals of the Messiah* (Shippensburg, PA, 1994), pp. 178-184; Barney Kasdan, *God's Appointed Times* (Baltimore, MD, 1993), pp. 95-99.
3. Jean Daniélou, *The Bible and Liturgy* (South Bend, IN, 1956), pp. 343-347.
4. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Sermon on the Nativity*, *Patrologia Graeca* 46, 1129 B-C, translated by Jean Daniélou (note 7), p. 345.
5. Jean Daniélou (note 3), p. 345.
6. Gregory of Nissa, *Pychnazomena*, Psalm 118:27, translated by Jean Daniélou (note 7), p. 344.
7. Jean Daniélou (note 3), p. 347.
8. For a study of the influence of sun-worship on the Christian adoption of December 25 for the celebration of Christ's birth, see my dissertation, *From Sabbath to Sunday. A Historical Investigation of the Rise of Sunday Observance in Early Christianity* (Rome, Italy, 1977), pp. 256-261.
9. See A. T. Robertson, *A Harmony of the Gospels* (New York, 1992), p. 267.
10. See, Adam Clark, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* (New York, 1956), vol. 5, p. 370.
11. Barney Kasdan, *God's Appointed Times* (Baltimore, MD, 1993), pp. 95-99.
12. Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple, Its Ministry and Services* (London, 1984), p. 241.
13. See, *M. Sequal* 6:3, *m. Mid* 2:6; *Talmud Sukkah* 3:3-9.
14. Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1959), p. 159.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 160.
16. Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA, 1948), p. 454.
17. Raymond E. Brown, ed., *Anchor Bible: John* (Garden City, NY, 1966), vol. 1, p. 327.
18. Gale A. Yee, *Jewish Feasts and the Gospel of John* (Wilmington, DE, 1989), p. 80.
19. Frederick Power, "Living Waters," *Review for Religions* 19

(1960), p. 6.

20. Ibid., p. 9.

21. Ralph F. Wyman, "The Feast of Tabernacles," A paper presented in partial fulfillment for NTST 689 (Andrews University, 1981), p. 16.

22. Alfred Edersheim (note 14), p. 161.

23. Mishnah, *Sukkah* 5, 3.

24. Mishnah, *Sukkah* 5, 4.

25. William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1964), p. 42.

26. Elmwood McQuaid, *The Outpouring: Jesus in the Feasts of Israel* (Chicago, IL, 1986), p. 108.

27. Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, CA 1958), p. 542.

28. Ibid., pp. 541-542.