

ROSE GUIDE TO THE FEASTS, FESTIVALS AND FASTS OF THE BIBLE



ROSE
PUBLISHING

Paul H. Wright, Editor

FOUR CONTEXTS

We will start by peering into four contexts that help us open for our viewing the celebratory world of ancient Israel:

1. The context of climate and land
2. The context of mealtime and eating
3. The context of time
4. The context of worldview

Each provides important background information that will help bring the feasts of Israel into sharper focus.

1. The Context of Climate and Land

One of the first things we notice when we look at the geographical setting of the biblical story is that the lands bordering the southeastern Mediterranean Sea, including ancient Israel, have two distinct growing seasons. These are at opposite times of the year in what we call winter into spring roots that run deep, doubly blessed by summer dew from above. In the biblical landscape, dew was God's gentle blessing—quiet, refreshing, and always welcome in a land scorched by the summer sun (Gen. 27:28; Deut. 32:2; Hos. 14:5).



At left is what ripening wheat ought to look like (Galilee) and at right is what in the land of ancient Israel it too often was (desert areas south and east). The former says "feast," the latter, "famine." (Photos by Paul H. Wright)

Let us fear the LORD our God,
who gives the rain in its season,
the autumn [early] rain and
the spring [latter] rain,
and keeps for us
the weeks appointed for the harvest.
(Jer. 5:24)

This annual pattern, as timeless as the land itself, proved to be an effective way for its residents—Canaanites, Israelites, Philistines, Phoenicians, Arameans, Ammonites, Moabites, and Edomites—to coax food to grow based on the seasonal rainfall throughout the year. The winter wet-season crops are annuals, mostly barley needing a minimum of eight inches of rainfall to mature and wheat requiring twelve inches or more. Orchard crops are sustainable throughout the heat of the dry summer: grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, dates, and almonds, to name a few. Grain is harvested mid-March through early June—first barley and then wheat. The orchard crops are picked from August (grapes) through November (figs and olives). When the rains are plentiful, these harvests are the two best times of the year: storehouses overflow, debts can be settled, and tithes and offerings are brought to the temple (see Deut. 31:10). Harvest time is a time to plan for the future and peer with favor into the next new year:



Be glad, O children of Zion,
and rejoice in the LORD your God,
for he has given the early rain for
your vindication;
he has poured down for you abundant rain,
the early and the latter rain, as before.

The threshing floors shall be full of grain;
the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.
(Joel 2:23–24)

For the LORD your God is bringing
you into a good land, a land of brooks
of water, of fountains and springs,
flowing out in the valleys and hills, a
land of wheat and barley, of vines and
fig trees and pomegranates, a land of
olive trees and honey. (Deut. 8:7–8)

But all is not always well. Yes, Israel was
“a land flowing with milk and honey”
(Ex. 3:8) and “a land in which you will eat
bread without scarcity, in which you will
lack nothing” (Deut. 8:9). However, these
statements perhaps should be read in the context
of Israel’s forty years of wandering in the Sinai
wasteland where they had witnessed firsthand the
meaning of want.⁸ Israel’s homeland was blessed
but still subject to unpredictable disasters and strife,
and one of the first that we notice is famine.⁹

The weather patterns that carry the blessing of rain
were not always as predictable, or timely, as the
Israelites hoped they would be (Jer. 14:2–6;
Amos 4:7–8). Squeezed by the Mediterranean Sea
that only sometimes provided sufficient rainfall and
the vast expanse of the north Arabian Desert from
which the “fierce breath ... of the east wind” blows
(Isa. 27:8), ancient Israel was always susceptible to
the subtle shifts in international weather patterns
that wreaked havoc on their land between.¹⁰ More
than that, its north-south mountain ranges blocked
the prevailing rains from adequately penetrating

the entire land, creating local deserts on the leeward
side. “The earth under you shall be [as hard as] iron,”
we read in the curses of Deuteronomy 28:23–24,
and “the rain of your land [will be] powder;”
unfortunately, that was all too often the case. Other
factors such as locust plagues or marauding armies
could lengthen the biannual hungry gap between
harvests to weeks or even months, plunging people



Late winter clouds, fog, and rain bring an overabundance of life to the basalt-strewn canyons of the Golan Heights. This was a portion of the tribal inheritance of Manasseh whose father Joseph was blessed with “the choicest gifts of heaven above, and of the deep that crouches beneath ... with the finest produce of the ancient mountains and the abundance of the everlasting hills” (Deut. 33:13–15). (Photo by Paul H. Wright)

and animals alike into desperation.¹¹ Wracked by disease, wholly consumed by the daunting task of sheer survival, and left even to cannibalism or eating their own bodily waste, these, too, were part of the experience of ancient Israel (2 Kings 6:28–29; 18:27; Lam. 4:9–10).

But the Bible remains clear. In spite of the forces for good or bad that lay beyond ancient Israel's control, theirs was "a land that the LORD your God cares for. The eyes of the LORD your God are always upon it, from the beginning to the end of the year" (Deut. 11:12). Israel's land and their situation in life—as difficult as it may have been at any given time—was something that God knew and cared about. As best we can tell from available sources, Israel's neighbors held to worldviews in which their gods cared primarily only for themselves and not so much—if at all—for people.¹² This, we will see,

provides the foundational difference between *how* and *why* the feasts of ancient Israel differed from those of their neighbors, even though they shared the same arc of untamable land.

2. The Context of Mealtime and Eating

From the produce of the land, we move quite naturally to the context of mealtime and eating. Given the uncertainty of rainfall and an adequate harvest, plus the ever-present threat of famine, it is natural that mealtime—and especially feasting—was something not to be taken for granted. The idea of three square meals a day with a balanced, tasty, and diverse diet was something quite unfamiliar to most of the ancient world—and still is to large parts of our own. An Israelite life "lived in safety ... every man under his vine and under



The Beth Netopha Valley from atop Khirbet Qanah, ancient Cana of Galilee. Rich soil and ample water secure lives tied to the land and its cycle of seasons. (Photo by Paul H. Wright)

his fig tree” (1 Kings 4:25) was the ideal, though perhaps generous in terms of everyday reality.

From the Bible, other ancient texts, and archaeology we have a good idea of the kinds of foods actually available to the Israelites.¹³ We also know what was and wasn’t (or at least should or shouldn’t have been) eaten by looking at the food laws in the books of Leviticus (11:1–47; 17:10–16) and Deuteronomy (14:3–21). Often mentioned in passing, the Bible records many instances of people eating and drinking in normal circumstances; these are a valuable window into life on the ground. For instance, Boaz offered Ruth bread dipped in wine and roasted grain, a workaday meal for reapers (Ruth 2:14), and Jael gave milk and curds to Sisera, a man on the run (Judg. 4:19; 5:25).

The main meal of the day, taken late afternoon or early evening, was typically the equivalent of a bowl the size of cupped hands containing soup, gruel, or stew made of lentils, vegetables, or foraged plants, almost never with meat (Gen. 25:29–34; 2 Kings 4:38–41). Summer fruits, such as olives and grapes, together with winter grain, were staples, able to be made into oil, wine, and bread (Deut. 7:13). For most families, meat was reserved for special festive occasions (Passover, for example), for serious hospitality (Gen. 18:1–8; Judg. 6:19–20), or to enable hard workers (1 Sam. 25:11). Killing the proverbial fatted calf (or sheep or goat) depleted a family’s store of capital, while drinking milk was more like consuming only the interest earned. For protein, sheep and goat milk and their derivatives had to suffice, as well as things that scampered or hopped along the ground; at least the book of Leviticus declared locusts, crickets, and grasshoppers to be ritually clean to eat (Lev. 11:22). The Bible includes a number of menus for meals eaten on specific occasions, usually in the context of courting good will.

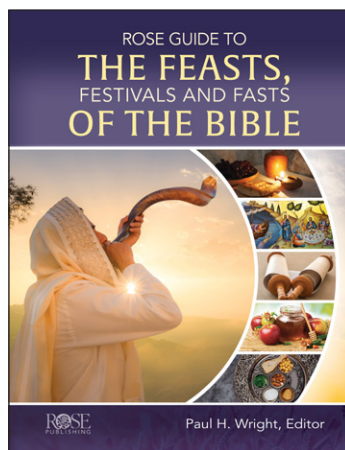
- ◆ King Solomon’s daily diet included large quantities of meat, much of it not native to his



Mansaf is a traditional Middle Eastern dish of lamb, or sometimes chicken, cooked in a sauce of fermented yogurt poured over rice. It is served on special occasions. As has been the custom for thousands of years, everyone uses flatbread and their fingers as the only utensils to eat off a common plate. In this way, the very act of eating lowers guards and builds community. Pictured here is such a meal shared by students of biblical life and culture. (Photo by Paul H. Wright)

Jerusalem home. Such foods were meant to feed (and also appease) the king’s royal court and retainers, but “fine dining” like this was surely the exception for Israel as a whole (1 Kings 4:22–23).

- ◆ The shepherd boy David hurried parched grain and loaves of bread to his encamped brothers, making sure to bring protein-rich cheeses—something even better—to their field commander (1 Sam. 17:17–18). With an all-volunteer army, care packages from home were a survival necessity.



Rose Guide to the Feasts, Festivals and Fasts of the Bible

God commanded Moses and the children of Israel to observe feasts and holy days as memorials to the great things that he had done in their lives. Understanding these times of celebration are important to help us better see God's complete picture and plan of redemption.

Featuring text from: Dr. Paul Wright explores the celebrations, festivals, observances, and feasts, Rabbi Moshe Silberschein looks at the ways the festivals and holy days of ancient Israel were celebrated, Educator Ophir Yarden describes ways Jews keep the biblical feasts today, Pastor Steven Lancaster looks at how and why the festivals and holy days of ancient Israel, Rev. Heidi Kinner presents ways the early Church interpreted the feasts of the Bible.

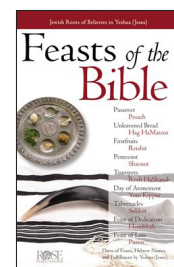
Hardcover 978-1-64938-021-0 \$34.99



Messiah in the Feasts of Israel

In this book, learn the details of each of the Feasts, their fulfillment in Messiah, and their implications for your life. Dive in for an in-depth and fascinating study that will deepen your understanding of God's Word as you see His plan in a whole new light.

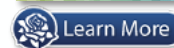
Softcover 978-0-97026-197-7 \$14.99



Feasts of the Bible, Pamphlet

Throughout the Old Testament, God commanded the people of Israel to observe feasts and holy days (holidays) to remember the mighty things that He had done in the lives of Israel's ancestors. This full-color pamphlet celebrates and explains the meaning behind the biblical feasts and why they are important today.

Pamphlet 978-1-89094-758-3 \$4.99



Kings and Prophets Time Line, Pamphlet

Easily see dozens of key people from Bible history at a glance, starting at the reigns of King Saul and King David to the prophet Malachi! This pamphlet is filled with full-color illustrations and photographs, a map of Old Testament Israel and Judah, and more. The time line follows prophets, godly kings, and bad kings across the centuries.

Pamphlet 978-1-62862-461-8 \$4.99

HENDRICKSON
Publishing Group

www.hendricksonrose.com | info@hendricksonrose.com
or call (800) 358-3111



**Money Back
Guarantee!**

ECPA
EVANGELICAL
CHRISTIAN PUBLISHERS
ASSOCIATION