

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



**ROSE**  
PUBLISHING

Paul H. Wright, Editor



## HANUKKAH (FEAST OF DEDICATION)

Hanukkah, which means “dedication,” commemorated the cleansing and rededication of the temple in Jerusalem after the Maccabean victory in the second century BC over the Seleucid (Greek) Empire that had defiled the sacred site. Interestingly, Hanukkah is nearly ignored in classical rabbinic literature. The only significant mention is a long afterthought about lighting the Hanukkah lamp in an otherwise detailed discussion about lighting the lamp on Shabbat:<sup>92</sup>

For when the Greeks entered the temple, they defiled all the oil found there; but when the kingdom of the Hasmonean dynasty prevailed and defeated them, they searched throughout the entire temple until just one cruse of oil was found bearing the seal of the high priest. However, the cruse had only enough oil to light for one day. Yet a miracle occurred: they were able to light from it for eight days. The year after, these days were established as festive days with [the recitation of] Hallel and thanksgiving.<sup>93</sup>

The miracle of the Hanukkah lights, which most people associate with Hanukkah today, is in fact not mentioned in any of the books of the Maccabees. All discussions about these lights in classical rabbinic literature appear in passages that are dated only after the Hasmonean dynasty.<sup>94</sup> The Maccabees may never have even celebrated the rededication of the temple by lighting a special lamp. And the Hasmoneans probably knew nothing about the miracle of the small vial of oil found in the temple that lasted for eight days, as mentioned in classical rabbinic literature.

How then was Hanukkah celebrated during most of the Second Temple period? What might the celebration have looked like when Jesus was in Jerusalem for Hanukkah (John 10:22–23)? The element that made the holiday special for the Maccabees and their descendants living in the first century AD was the Maccabees’ radical decision to recite the Hallel for the eight-day period of Hanukkah. Up to that time, the Hallel was only part of the liturgies of the three pilgrimage feasts that prohibited *melakhah* (work). But the Maccabees’ urgent need for a return to normalcy



Mosaic of a synagogue menorah

after a long and bloody war for independence led them to a liturgical innovation that would have been unthinkable in prior generations:

The Jews celebrated [Hanukkah] joyfully for eight days as on the feast of Booths, remembering how, a little while before, they had spent the feast of Booths living like wild animals in the mountains and in caves. Carrying rods entwined with leaves, beautiful branches and palms, they sang hymns of grateful praise [Hallel] to him who had successfully brought about the purification of his own place.<sup>95</sup>



These large stones from the Second Temple complex fell onto a street running parallel to the temple compound wall, a result of Rome's destruction of Jerusalem in the year ad 70. (Photo by Seth Aronstam/Shutterstock)

So the first Hanukkah was a make-up date for the ultimate joyous holiday of Sukkot that the Maccabees had missed two months prior while they were still at war and Jerusalem and the temple were in the hands of their enemies. When the Maccabees liberated the temple, they celebrated as if it were Sukkot. While palm branches were never again brought to Jerusalem as part of Hanukkah celebrations, a precedent was set of reciting the Hallel for eight days of thanksgiving—as it was on the seven days of Sukkot plus Shemini Atzeret, the Eighth Day of Assembly.<sup>96</sup>





## SUKKOT, HANUKKAH, AND ENCAENIA

The autumn feast of Sukkot (Booths or Tabernacles) incorporates several biblical themes:

- ✦ It celebrates the ingathering of the last harvest of the year (Deut. 16:13–15).
- ✦ It remembers God's presence and provision for Israel during their years of wilderness wandering after the exodus (Lev. 23:43).
- ✦ And it was the time when Solomon dedicated the first temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 8:1–2).

Sukkot did not enter the early Christian calendar because it was not tied directly to Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. However, later Christian celebrations echo some elements of Sukkot. For example, the agricultural aspects of Sukkot are similar to those found in the Thanksgiving or harvest festival services of many churches today. These services give thanks to God for the produce of the earth; and prayers are said for rain, the crops of the next year, and everyone involved in food production and distribution. As a tangible sign of God's love and provision, many of these church festivals include collections of food to be distributed to people in need.

Perhaps one of the most interesting early Christian feasts with a connection to Sukkot was an eight-day pilgrim celebration in Jerusalem called *Encaenia*, which means "dedication." Encaenia celebrated the inauguration of the Martyrium and the Anastasis, the two churches that together comprise the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

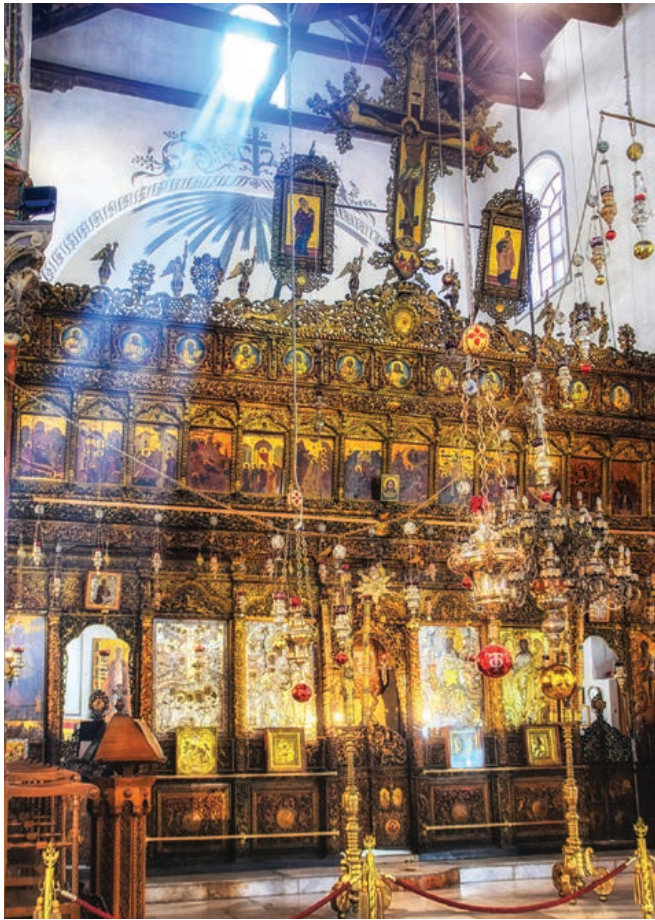


This model of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre as it looked in Byzantine Jerusalem stands on the grounds of the Saint Peter in Gallicantu ("cock's crow") Church on the southeastern slope of Mount Zion. The Holy Sepulchre was really two churches: the Martyrium Basilica (right) which enclosed the traditional site of Jesus' crucifixion and the domed Anastasis (left) which preserved the spot of his tomb. They were joined by an open courtyard between them. This view looks toward the northwest. (Photo by Paul H. Wright)

Celebrated for the same number of days and at roughly the same time of year as Sukkot, Encaenia connected the dedication of Solomon's temple with the dedication of the two churches that lay at the heart of early Christian worship. As the pilgrim Egeria noted:

You will find in the Bible that the day of Encaenia was when the House of God [the temple] was consecrated, and Solomon stood in prayer before God's altar, as we read in the Books of Chronicles [2 Chron. 6:12].<sup>60</sup>

With this feast, Christians in Jerusalem connected their faith with the Jewish temple. They also signaled that the churches built on top of the site of Jesus' death and resurrection were now the focal point of God's greatest self-revelation and provision



Gilded light illuminates the interior of the Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem. (Photo by Atosan/Shutterstock)

of salvation and life.<sup>61</sup> Christians today who choose to celebrate Sukkot should take care that it not eclipse the celebrations of Holy Week, the core expressions of the Christian faith.

In Encaenia, we also see reflections of the Jewish festival of Hanukkah, which also means “dedication.” The gospel reading on the first day of Encaenia was John 10:22–42, the account of Jesus teaching in the temple during Hanukkah, “the Feast of Dedication” (John 10:22). This Jewish festival celebrated the rededication of the Jerusalem temple by the Maccabees in 164 bc, following its desecration by the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes three years earlier.<sup>62</sup> The Martyrium and

Anastasis churches were built over the sites believed to be Golgotha and Jesus’ tomb, respectively, replacing Roman pagan temples that had been built there in the second century.<sup>63</sup> In this way, the Christian Jerusalem community claimed that just as God had won the victory over pagans in the days of the Maccabees, so he had now won victory over pagans for the church.

The feast of Encaenia did not spread very far beyond Jerusalem and is no longer observed. It remains important, however, as a testimony that Christians in Jerusalem saw the two churches of the Holy Sepulchre as a new temple, built upon the foundation of Jesus Christ. And if we take seriously Paul’s statement in Ephesians 2:19–22 that Christians are the new “holy temple in the Lord” with “Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,” then every day of our lives is a kind of Hanukkah, a dedication to him and lived in his presence.



## HANUKKAH, CHRISTMAS, AND EPIPHANY

Although Jesus came to Jerusalem for Hanukkah, the festival was not observed by the early gentile Christians, who apparently viewed it as a national Jewish holiday. Later Jewish tradition linked Hanukkah with God’s miraculous provision of holy oil to keep the lamps of the newly restored temple lit until a new supply of oil could be pressed.

As we’ve just seen, some of Hanukkah’s themes were reflected in the Christian feast of Encaenia, but there are also faint echoes of it in the celebrations of Christmas and Epiphany. Hanukkah’s theme of God’s provision of light is a key element in Christmas and Epiphany, which celebrate Jesus as the light of God in the world. These two holy days are also something of a counterpoint to the nationalism of Hanukkah, announcing that Jesus saved from sin, not one nation from a single earthly empire, but the world.



Here it is important to note the connection made by the early church between Christmas and the crucifixion. The Gospels do not provide an exact birth date for Jesus, so the church had some freedom in choosing when to celebrate the nativity. The date chosen by the western, Roman church was December 25. This may have been to compete with the Roman festival of the Invincible Sun, *Sol Invictus*, which coincided with the winter solstice.<sup>64</sup> However, it has also been suggested that this date was chosen because it was nine months after the date of the crucifixion, thereby linking Jesus' conception and birth to his atoning death on the cross and victory over sin.<sup>65</sup>

Egeria wrote about the Epiphany celebrations in Jerusalem and Bethlehem in the late fourth century.<sup>66</sup> The feast began on January 6 and combined the events of the nativity with the visit

of the magi. (In Egeria's day, the birth of Jesus was also celebrated on Epiphany.) The celebrations began at about 4:00 p.m. on January 5, the eve of Epiphany, with a service in the traditional location of Shepherds' Fields, most likely the Greek Orthodox site in Beit Sahour, east of Bethlehem. This was followed by a procession to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. There, Matthew's account of the visit of the magi (Matt. 2:1–12) was read in the cave beneath the church that was believed to be the place where Jesus was born.<sup>67</sup> Then followed a vigil service similar to the Easter Vigil, though with readings focused on prophecies about the birth of the Messiah (for example, Mic. 5:2–7; Isa. 9:6–7). The celebrations continued for eight joyous days, prompting Egeria to write:

The decorations are really too marvelous for words. All you can see is gold and jewels and



Like Hanukkah, Christmas is a festival of lights. This display celebrates the birth of Jesus at Manger Square, Bethlehem, leading pilgrims toward the Church of the Nativity. (Photo by Paul H. Wright)

silk; the hangings are entirely silk with gold stripes, the curtains the same, and everything they use for services at the festival is made of gold and jewels. You simply cannot imagine the number, and the sheer weight of the candles and the tapers and lamps, and everything else they use for the services.<sup>68</sup>

In this way, the churches in the Holy Land welcomed the King of Kings by offering their gifts of gold and silk to make the worship beautiful, and they celebrated with candles and lamps to demonstrate the coming of the true Light of the World who cannot be overcome by darkness.

Over the centuries, the celebration of Christmas on December 25 has come to eclipse Epiphany in Western Christianity. In the Eastern Orthodox family of churches, Epiphany remains an important holy day. In recent decades, Hanukkah, which is also a December event, has taken on some of the forms of Christmas decorations in many Western Jewish homes.

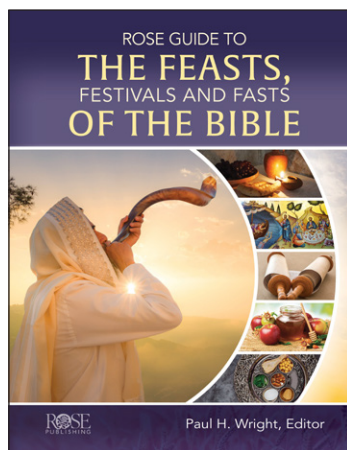
Hanukkah and Christmas are joyous celebrations that often coincide in the calendar and, for many people, have come to set the tone of a commercialized, holiday season. Of all the major Jewish feasts, Hanukkah is the one with the loosest connections to the salvation events of the life of Jesus. Christians today can be enriched by keeping their focus during this season on Christmas and Epiphany with the full, Jesus-centered joy that the early church did. During the Advent season, we can prepare our hearts with introspection and then celebrate the twelve days from Christmas to Epiphany with daily meals, candle lighting, Scripture reading, and perhaps even gift giving. In doing so, many Christians have found that this helps them move away from the commercialized version of

the season and to refocus on Jesus and his choice to dwell with and in us.

## SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

Christian worship is rooted in the Bible, so it shares a heritage out of which Jewish worship and the feasts developed. But as the church became largely gentile, Christians developed their own ways to worship and celebrate the magnitude of Jesus' incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. Over the centuries, both Christian and Jewish worship have cultivated ways that best define, reflect, and express their own identities and core beliefs. Ours are related faiths, so we must seek to learn from each other, yet take care to hold fast to what is most important in each of our understandings of God's revelation to humankind. Just as the Jewish feasts are an annual journey through key events in the history of Israel that help Jewish people remember and live out who they are as God's chosen people, so the Christian feasts are an annual journey with Jesus through the key events of his life that helps us remember who we are as God's adopted children.





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

Packed with dozens of charts, maps, and timelines, over 150 illustrations and photographs, and easy-to-understand summaries, this full-color, reproducible book on the feasts and celebrations of the Bible will help you understand key information at a glance!

With all the ceremonies, festivals, and observances in the Bible, it's hard to keep track of them all and remember why they're important to our faith! But what if you could distill all this key information across dozens of chapters of the Bible into one solid, easy-to-read handbook with images, charts, and diagrams? It's never been easier to get an expert look at the traditions, fasts, and feasts of the Bible.

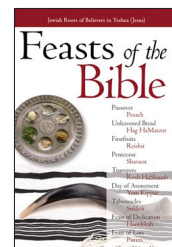
*Hardcover* ..... 978-1-64938-021-0 ..... \$34.99



## 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



## What the Bible Says about Fasting

Have you ever wondered why fasting is important? Do you want to fast, but not sure if you are doing it "right?" Fasting is a key spiritual discipline that will grow your spiritual intimacy with the Lord and refresh your prayer life. Deepen your understanding of fasting and see key information at a glance with this quick-reference pamphlet packed with charts, dozens of fasting verses, and practical tips!

*Pamphlet* ..... 978-1-62862-318-5 ..... \$4.99

**HENDRICKSON  
Publishing Group**

[www.hendricksonrose.com](http://www.hendricksonrose.com) | [csresponse@tyndale.com](mailto:csresponse@tyndale.com)  
or call 1-855-277-9400



**Money Back  
Guarantee!**

**ECPA**  
EVANGELICAL  
CHRISTIAN PUBLISHERS  
ASSOCIATION