

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 16

Jewish Holy Days

One of my closest friends is a Jewish lawyer in our New York office. That office was closed recently in honor of the Jewish holiday *Rosh Hashanah*. I had a chance to discuss various Jewish holidays and festivals with him in a telephone call last week. I asked him,

“Which of the Jewish holy days ranks in highest importance?”

Rick answered me without hesitation,

“Yom Kippur definitely, but there is a close second in the High Holy Days leading up to Yom Kippur with Rosh Hashanah and the ten Days of Repentance.”

He then detailed to me a number of other important holidays, including Purim, Hanukkah, Succoth and others.

I asked him about the significance of each holy day, and at one point he told me,

“As a general rule, most Jewish holidays follow a simple formula—they tried to kill us, they didn’t succeed, let’s eat.”

Through the humor of his comment, which I admire because so many of these events truly were tragic, and I know he takes them seriously, I saw glimpses of the current practice of Judaism. But my conversation with him pushed deeper, as it does for us in this class. While many Jewish holidays come from later efforts to stamp out Judaism and Jews (for example, *Purim* and *Hanukkah*), many are also direct holidays the LORD set out during the exodus period and the giving of the Law. A set of those holidays falls in rapid succession during each autumn, beginning with the Jewish New Year (*Rosh Hashanah*¹) and ending with the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*²).

It is to those fall holidays God to Moses authorized that we turn our attention today. As we do so, we will examine not only the biblical basis for the holidays, but also any references by the New Testament and the practice of Jesus, as well as the current practices of Jews and implications for Christians today.

¹ ראש השנה literally, “Beginning of the Year” or “Head of the Year.”

² יום כפור literally, “Day of Covering Over” or “Day of Appeasement.”

Today, Jews' refer to these holidays as "High Holy Days" (*Yamim Noraim*³). They are "the most important Jewish holy days" when "even many laxly observant Jews attend synagogue for the...services, crowding synagogues to bursting."⁴

NEW YEAR (*ROSH HASHANAH*)

New Year's Day, and in fact, the entire calendar might seem arbitrary to a 21st century American – as we have learned that the earth rotates through the heavens around the sun, we determined that a certain position in that rotation we will call "January 1" the "New Year." Because our years have only 365 days, and because the earth actually takes a bit longer than a calendar year to reach its "New Year's" destination in the heavens, we add an extra day to the calendar every four years. Failure to do so would, over time, make winter in July and summer in January.

Each civilization has maintained a calendar, and in history, these calendars were no arbitrary matter. Calendars were labeled appropriately for the necessary counting that enabled life to exist. Calendars would let even the most primitive societies know when to plant and when to prepare for winter.⁵ Some civilizations built their calendars off cycles of the moon ("lunar calendars") while others built theirs off the sun ("solar calendars"). Ultimately, most societies combined both lunar and solar calendars to better keep track of not only the months (lunar cycles) but also the years (solar cycles). These are called "lunisolar calendars."

While it is beyond the scope of this lesson to delve into the development of months and seasons, we note that months were already in place by the time of the exodus. To best place the Israeli calendar into its historical and cultural context, we consider the development in the peoples nearby.

In Mesopotamia (the region around and between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers), months were used to mark off lunar cycles. Each year normally contained 12 lunar months, generally named after different festivals or tasks (such as sheep

³ ימים נוראים literally, "Days of Awe." Scripture does not use this term, but it has developed over time to reference the group of holidays and distinguish them from "lesser" holidays of Jewish practice.

⁴ Neusner, Jacob, *et al.*, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Judaism* (Brill 2005) Vol. 1 at 329.

⁵ Scholars infer that even pre-civilized man maintained some sort of calendaring system to help in hunting and gathering. The evidence for this, and a thorough history of calendars is well documented in Richards, E. G., *Mapping Time: The Calendar and its History* (Oxford 1998).

shearing) that took place in the month. The start of each month was determined by sighting of a new moon.⁶

Egypt developed a lunisolar calendar, looking both to the moon for months and also to the astronomical heavens for annual placement of a certain star (Sirius), which indicated that flooding of the Nile was about to take place. Annual Nile flooding was the seminal event for all of Egypt and dictated farming, harvesting, and most every other aspect of life. This meant that occasionally Egypt would need to insert an extra month into a year to keep the months appropriate for the seasons.

We know from the Biblical account of the exodus that Israel also had a calendar. Unlike the civilizations around Israel, however, Israel's calendar took definition and shape from its relationship with the LORD. Both as a feature of the interactions of God with his people, and at God's instructions, the Israelite calendar evolved around markers of holy significance.

Israel maintained a lunisolar calendar using the moon for months and the heavens for years. Israel's development of names for its calendar progressed through time. Early Israel numbered the days (first, second, *etc.*) and gave a name only to the last day of the week (the "Sabbath"). To name the months, Israel used both names adopted from Canaanite neighbors as well as names from the Babylonian calendar.⁷

So, when was the Israelite New Year? If one were going simply off Scripture, then one would read Exodus 12:1-2:

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, "This month shall be for you the beginning of months. It shall be the first month of the year for you."

From there, continued reading gets to Ex. 13:4 which tells the month's name:

Today, in the month of Abib, you are going out.

Surely, then, one might conclude that New Year's Day in the Jewish calendar is the first day of Abib, yet that conclusion would be wrong, or more precisely, only half right!

⁶ Richards at 147.

⁷ For example, in Exodus we have references to the "month of Abib" (a Semitic name) as the month of the Passover (Ex. 13:4; 23:15, 34:18; Dt. 16:1), yet the same month is called "Nisan" after the exile in Babylon (Neh. 2:1; Est. 3:7) which comes from the Babylonian name Nisanu.

The Jewish people celebrate two different New Year's Days – one in the month of Abib (also called “Nisan”) and one in the month of Tishri.⁸ To explain we need to first look at an ancient Jewish calendar:

Month	Hebrew names*	Babylonian names	Modern times	Bible References
1	Abib/Nisan	Nisanu	March/April	Ex. 13:4; Neh. 2:1
2	Ziv/Iyyar	Ayaru	April/May	1 Kgs. 6:1
3	Sivan	Simanu	May/June	Est. 8:9
4	Tammuz	Du'uzu	June/July	Ezek. 8:14
5	Av	Abu	July/August	Not mentioned by name in Bible
6	Elul	Ululu	August/September	Neh. 6:15
7	Ethanim/Tishri	Tashritu	September/October	1 Kgs. 8:2
8	Bul/Heshvan	Arahsamnu	October/November	1 Kgs. 6:38
9	Kislev	Kislimu	November/December	Neh. 1:1
10	Tevet	Tebet	December/January	Est. 2:16
11	Shevat	Shabatu	January/February	Zech. 1:7
12	Adar	Adaru	February/March	Ezra 6:15

* Israel used Babylonian names for months after their exile. We do not know all of the pre-exile names for months, but have a few listed in Scripture as noted above. The Babylonian names are given for comparison, and to indicate which names are likely from post-exile usage. The transliterated Jewish names follow that of the *Encyclopedia Judaica*.

Over the last few weeks, the world has celebrated *Rosh Hashanah* as the Jewish New Year. It is a holiday that always falls during the month of Tishri, the *seventh* month in the Jewish calendar.

The Jewish sages have determined that two celebrations are in order. The first New Year's Day is *Rosh Hashanah*, deemed the beginning of creation and time itself. The second New Year's Day is based on Exodus 12:2 and is seen as the beginning of humanities' response to God, as explained in the exodus and

⁸ There are actually four days in the Mishnah (a written account of the Jewish oral traditions recorded around 220AD) designated as *Rosh Hashanah*. In addition to the two set out in the lesson there is the first of Elul for tithing animals and the first of Shevat for trees.

Passover which is scheduled that month as per God's instructions. The Nisan New Year's Day is also the one that the Jews used to date their kings' reigns.⁹

***Rosh Hashanah* in Scripture**

Looking in Scripture, one does not find *Rosh Hashanah* as a New Year's celebration by name.¹⁰ In Scripture the celebration of today's Jewish world is known as the Feast of Trumpets and is found in Numbers 29:1-6.

On the first day of the seventh month you shall have a holy convocation. You shall not do any ordinary work. It is a day for you to blow the trumpets, and you shall offer a burnt offering, for a pleasing aroma to the LORD: one bull from the herd, one ram, seven male lambs a year old without blemish; also their grain offering of fine flour mixed with oil, three tenths of an ephah for the bull, two tenths for the ram, and one tenth for each of the seven lambs; with one male goat for a sin offering, to make atonement for you; besides the burnt offering of the new moon, and its grain offering, and the regular burnt offering and its grain offering, and their drink offering, according to the rule for them, for a pleasing aroma, a food offering to the LORD.

It is similarly discussed in Leviticus 23:23-25.

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the people of Israel, saying, In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a day of solemn rest, a memorial proclaimed with blast of trumpets, a holy convocation. You shall not do any ordinary work, and you shall present a food offering to the LORD."

This type of celebration was set out in Scripture for the new moon of each month, but it is more extensive in the "seventh month" celebration. Most scholars reckon that an indicator of the special role the number seven played in Old Testament thought.

There is little note of celebration of this festival in the New Testament, although some reckon that it heralds the second coming of Jesus. This idea comes from Scriptures that indicate Christ returns with a trumpet blast (*e.g.*, 1 Thes. 4:16 "For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice

⁹ Neusner at 317-318.

¹⁰ The phrase *rosh hashanah* itself is found in Ezekiel 40:1 ("In the twenty-fifth year of our exile, at ***the beginning of the year***, on the tenth day of the month, in the fourteenth year after the city was struck down, on that very day, the hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me to the city"), but it is not referring to the *Rosh Hashanah* celebration of today.

of an archangel, and with the sound of the **trumpet** of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.”)

This seems a minority view, for trumpets were used in countless Jewish holidays and festivities, as well as in battle. Numbers 10:1-10 sets out the LORD’s instructions regarding trumpets. They were by no means exclusive to the feast of trumpets!

Rosh Hashanah Among Jews Today

Somewhere by the time of writing the oral traditions of Jewish law (the “Mishnah”) around 220AD, *Rosh Hashanah* began to take on some of the character and significance it has for Jews today. *Rosh Hashanah* is seen as the “Day of Judgment.” It is “when the deeds of each person over the past year are weighed, and his or her fate is decided for the coming year.”¹¹

The background theology for this involves God working his judgment on a calendar basis. Because Dt. 11:11- 12 says,

But the land that you are going over to possess is a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water by the rain from heaven, a land that the LORD your God cares for. The eyes of the LORD your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year.

Jewish sages believed that the LORD made his decisions annually about what would happen each year. Some rabbis thought God decides how much money people will make in the coming year; others thought God decided who would live and who would die in the coming year.

It is interesting to follow the reasoning for assessing this when the Bible is silent on any such matter. The Jewish scholars considered passages like Amos 3:6 which states in the ESV,

Is a trumpet blown in a city, and the people are not afraid?

The Jewish Publication Society translates the passage:

Shall the horn be blown in a city, and the people not tremble?

The idea is that trumpets were blown in the cities to call people to war.¹² The Jewish sages decided that since horn blowing was ordered for the feast, even

¹¹ Eisenberg, Ronald, *The JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions* (Jewish Publication Society 2004) at 185. See also the Mishnah tractate *Moed* (covering festivals), in the section on *Rosh Hashanah* 1:2.

¹² There are two types of signals blown on the *shofar* horn. A long note called in Hebrew *tekiah* signals that all is clear. A series of short notes blown in rapid succession (not unlike a siren

though there was no real call to war, God meant to indicate “an atmosphere on this day that stimulated the tension and terror of battle, a sense of imminent crisis and pending calamity.”¹³ This was a time to fear God and his coming judgments.

As Jews celebrate this holiday today, they include not only blowing the *shofar* horn, but also readings and prayers. The readings include the birth of Isaac (Gen. 21), the birth of Samuel (1 Sam. 1), both indicating newness and birth.¹⁴ The second day of *Rosh Hashanah*¹⁵ has the reading of the binding of Isaac (Gen. 22) by Abraham.¹⁶ This signals both God’s rescue of Isaac from imminent danger as well as the full trust of Abraham in God’s divine will.¹⁷

Customary greetings for Jews at this time include *leshanah tovah tikatevu*. This comes from the idea that God will use this time to judge whose name goes into the Book of Life and whose does not! This Hebrew greeting translates roughly, “May you be inscribed for a good year” meaning you get your name written in the Book of Life with good things to come!

When I was growing up in the southern United States, we had a New Year’s tradition of eating black-eyed peas and corn bread. The peas were supposed to reflect the success we would have in the coming year—the more you ate, the greater the success. I could pack away those nasty peas! There is a better custom for eating at the Jewish New Year—apples dipped in honey! The eating precedes a prayer that God would renew the eater to a “good and sweet year.”

There are a great many other eating traditions as well as other practices, but they go beyond the scope of this lesson. The core message of this holy day in Jewish practice for the last almost two thousand years, is a time of cautious preparation for the season of repentance and the coming Day of Atonement. The prayers are penitential in nature and seek God’s forgiveness for sins over the last year. They

today) called *teruah* was a warning of imminent danger. It is this second kind of blowing indicated in Numbers 29 for the feast of trumpets.

¹³ Eisenberg at 187.

¹⁴ Davis, Arthur and Adler, Herbert, ed., *Synagogue Service for New Year*, (Hebrew Publishing Co. 1959)

¹⁵ At some point, likely over concern that the holiday be properly observed in the outreaches of the dispersed Jews who might not get the same view of the new moon that signals the start of the month, the holiday was stretched into two days to make sure all would celebrate it properly.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* at 219.

¹⁷ Eisenber at 187.

also set the stage for the next period in the High Holy Days, the Ten Days of Repentance.

Ten Days of Repentance

After *Rosh Hashanah* on the first day of the month, come the ten days before *Yom Kippur*. Scripture does not assign any particular significance to these ten days, but Jewish tradition has made these holy days of repentance. The reasoning is that on Rosh Hashanah, God judges the world, then ten days later on Yom Kippur, the verdict on his judgment is sealed. These ten days are seen as the chance to repent and change one's outcome!

During these High Holy Days, one's dress and mannerisms are to reflect attitudes of contrition, humility, and forgiveness. No jewelry should be worn, services should be attended, and time awake should be spent in self-examination and personal renewal. Sins against God are confessed to God with a repentant heart and then there is an assurance of God's forgiveness. God does not simply forgive sins against others, however. For sins against others confession with a request for forgiveness to the wrong party is required along with attempts at restitution. Should the wronged party refuse to grant forgiveness, then that is the sin of the wronged party.

During these ten days, it is common for Jews to visit the cemetery asking their departed loved ones to "intercede on their behalf in an attempt to influence God to respond favorably to their pleas for a good and healthy year."¹⁸

Sermons in synagogue services are based on repentance, frequently echoing the words of Hosea 14:1-2

Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity. Take with you words and return to the LORD; say to him, "Take away all iniquity; accept what is good, and we will pay with bulls the vows of our lips."

While the Bible does not speak to the ten days between the Feast of Trumpets and the Day of Atonement, the ten days are noted in the passages setting out the Atonement rituals. Both in Leviticus and Numbers, immediately following the instructions for the Trumpets come the ten-day passage as setting the stage for the most devout and important Jewish observance—*Yom Kippur*.

¹⁸ Eisenberg at 205.

***Yom Kippur* in Scripture**

Our English Bibles do not use the Hebrew term *Yom Kippur* instead using the English translation, "Day of Atonement." Leviticus 23:26-32 sets it out in abbreviated form:

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Now on the tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. It shall be for you a time of holy convocation, and you shall afflict yourselves and present a food offering to the LORD. And you shall not do any work on that very day, for it is a Day of Atonement, to make atonement for you before the LORD your God. For whoever is not afflicted on that very day shall be cut off from his people. And whoever does any work on that very day, that person I will destroy from among his people. You shall not do any work. It is a statute forever throughout your generations in all your dwelling places. It shall be to you a Sabbath of solemn rest, and you shall afflict yourselves. On the ninth day of the month beginning at evening, from evening to evening shall you keep your Sabbath."

Leviticus 16:1-34 gives much fuller instructions:

- This was the only day each year when Aaron (or after Aaron, the High Priest) was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies. The LORD would appear above the mercy seat, and no one was allowed in the presence of the LORD except under very specific circumstances and in a very particular manner. (16:1-2).
- Aaron had to wear special garments and wash himself before entering into God's presence. To enter God's presence dressed as an ordinary man or in an unclean status would make a High Priest unfit for being before the presence of the Almighty (16:3-4).
- Aaron was to offer two sets of sacrifices, one for himself/household and one for the people. The sacrifice for Aaron and his household was for a ceremonial cleansing for Aaron before Aaron could seek cleansing for the people (16:5-6).
- Aaron was to have two goats to atone for the Israelites. After casting lots, Aaron was to slaughter one goat as an atoning sacrifice for the people (16:7-10). The slaughtered goat and the bull slaughtered for Aaron and his household were brought through their blood into the Holiest place and the blood from the sacrifices was sprinkled on the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant. This was to set the blood before the very presence of God himself (16:11-16).

- Aaron then went back to the main altar and offered a further sacrifice to cleanse the altar from the uncleanness of Israel (16:17-19).
- Aaron then took the second goat and placed his hands on it, symbolically placing the sins of the people onto the goat.

And Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins. And he shall put them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness. (Lev. 16:21).

- The goat was driven out from the midst of the people to die alone outside the camp in a solitary place in the desert (16:20-22). (From this developed the term "scapegoat.")
- The final work then began with Aaron taking off his special clothing, bathing again, and then a final atoning offering for all now that the sacrifices for uncleanness were complete (16:23-28).

This was an annual practice of atonement that was performed, while Israel and Judah obeyed the Lord, as long as the Tabernacle (and later the Temple) was standing. Israel was told, that in this way, on this day, “shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you. You shall be clean before the Lord from all your sins” (Lev. 16:30).

These sacrifices were done in the New Testament time period also up until the destruction of the Temple in the rebellion of 68-70AD. In the New Testament, this holy day was termed “the Fast” (e.g., Acts 27:9).

Yom Kippur Among Jews Today

Obviously, Jews today do not sacrifice any animals at the Temple. No High Priest makes atonement wearing special clothing or casting lots on two goats. The reading of the Leviticus passage is deemed to have some effect of the actual practice that was done when the Temple and Tabernacle made such sacrifices possible.

Jews today see this as the day God signs his judgment that was made on *Rosh Hashanah*. Final prayers of repentance are offered along with a day of self-denial. Generally, this self-denial involves fasting, no bathing for pleasure (hygienic needs are okay, so you may wash your hands after going to the restroom!), no leather shoes,¹⁹ and no sexual relations.²⁰

¹⁹ Actually, if Moses was required to remove his shoes before the burning bush because the ground was holy, a good number of Jewish sages believe that no one should wear any shoes,

All of this works together in mainstream Jewish thought for reaching atonement before God. Eisenberg explains,

...fasting is not sufficient in itself to secure atonement. To gain divine forgiveness, there must be sincere repentance combining contrite confession and a solemn resolve to abandon the ways of evil.²¹

Generally, synagogues have five different services on *Yom Kippur*. Services include readings of the Leviticus 16 passage as well as the Isaiah 57:14-58:16 passage that speaks of the difference between good and false fasting. Frequently read later in the day is the entire book of Jonah, holding up as an example the entire city of Nineveh whose repentance turned the heart of God.

Yom Kippur in the Church

More so than any other book in the New Testament, the Book of Hebrews calls upon the Day of Atonement as a picture of Christ as the true atoning sacrifice before God. Even beyond that, Christ fits into several different roles found in the Atonement ritual. Among the points made in Hebrews are:

- Christ is the ultimate High Priest (Heb. 4:24).
- Christ goes behind the curtain separating the Holy of Holies and goes into the ACTUAL presence of God (not just an earthly image) (Heb. 6:19-20).
- Christ himself is pure and clean before he approaches God, not needing a sacrifice, special clothes, or ritual bathing before performing his tasks (Heb. 7:26).
- Christ himself is the actual sacrifice for the people (Heb. 7:27).
- Christ also functions as the scapegoat who has the sins of the people on his head and is driven out from the camp and the people (Heb. 13:12-13).
- Christ's blood goes before the very throne of God. (Heb. 9:12).
- God's justice is met fully once and for all by the death of Christ (Heb. 9:23-28; 10:10). Because Christ is the perfect sacrifice, there is no perpetual need of killing a bull, a goat, or any other animal as a representative of the people. This is no longer an annual ritual, it is finished.

whether leather or not, on the Day of Atonement. That day sanctifies the entire earth making all ground "holy." Eisenberg at 207.

²⁰ Eisenberg at 206.

²¹ Eisenberg at 207.

- The curtain secluding the Holy of Holies is ripped by Jesus (Heb. 10:19-20; Mk 15:38). This wall of separation between God and man is totally gone so that, through Christ, humanity is in direct relationship with God the Father.
- Our fellowship with God is fully restored by the death of Christ. (Heb. 10:22-23).

CONCLUSION

There is much in common between the Jewish celebrations and those of the Christian church, yet there is also a very important difference.

Both the Jew and Christian view the relationship with God as one that is marred by sin. There is true moral guilt that needs forgiveness. Both Jew and Christian recognize the need to confess honestly to God, to repent and turn from sin, and to seek the forgiveness that can come only from God.

But, the Christian believes that a sacrifice was not merely a cultural event. That it was a real necessity for real justice, and hence for real forgiveness. While there was no real inherent value in the blood of bulls or goats who have no morality and thus no sin, there was and is inherent value in the presentation of a human life without blemish. It is the exact life (and “living sacrifice”) that God deserves, that He has always desired even more than animal sacrifices, and that now, in Jesus Christ, He has received once for all.

While the Jews admirably take a period of time each autumn to contemplate their sins to make amends and seek forgiveness, both from others and from God, the justice of such forgiveness is perceived differently. All the fasting in the world, all the self-denial, all the humility and begging for forgiveness does not truly pay the price for sin. The price for sin is death, plain and simple. That death was pictured in the rituals God gave Israel, and it was fulfilled in the death of Christ for the sins of the world.

Therefore, Christians celebrate this sacrifice, coming with contrite hearts, with lips bearing confession and with humble spirits, yet the celebration draws its validity from the sacrifice of God, not the sacrifices of sinful men.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. “...*you shall have a holy convocation.*” (Num. 29:1).

The Lord set Israel to a number of celebrations. They included times of rest from work, of fasting and feasting, of family and community. These times were for holy reflection upon God, his character, and his deeds. These times are important for believers today. As Jesus said of the Sabbath, man was not made to follow it. The Sabbath was made because man needed it! So, we are to zealously look for the times where we set aside the busy work of life, gather together as family and community, and give time to worship our God.

2. “*Take with you words and return to the LORD.*” (Hos. 14:2).

Confession does not merit forgiveness, but we are called to confess our sins. It reflects a mind with two directions. One is the recognition of our failures and shortcomings with true regret. The second is recognition of God’s mercy and forgiveness. This, like fasting, can be true or false. One can confess with no more than lip service, or one can set sins before God regretting with true moral guilt. Only one draws us closer to the Father.

3. “*You shall be clean before the LORD from all your sins.*” (Lev. 16:30).

The core behind any of this lesson is relationship with God. God made us to be in fellowship with him, but sin brought that fellowship to an end. How does the story have an ending of restored fellowship? Through a forgiveness of sins! That does not come simply from an apology, but through a fair and just punishment. It is the sacrifice of Christ that provides God’s justice in passing over sins.

WANT MORE?

Next week, we work through the laws of the Old Testament in one fell swoop. SO, if there are any you find particularly perplexing (food rules?), then email them to me at wantmore@Biblical-Literacy.com. We will try to cover those that bother you!