

## 245: Story of Judaism

### The development of Jewish religion

During the time of the Maccabean Wars the two main Jewish parties which feature prominently in the New Testament began to emerge.

#### Pharisees

The Pharisees came from those who had supported the Maccabean Revolt because they loved the Jewish law. They were glad when the Maccabees won religious freedom, because the Jews could now obey their law without fear of persecution. But when the Jewish kings became more interested in military conquest than in religious observance, they lost their support.

The Pharisees tried to live in obedience to all the details of

A Jewish rabbi and his son. The father wears the round, fur-bordered hat and both have the side curls characteristic of strict orthodox Jews.



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the God of Israel.  
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## Jewish festivals

The Jews, like most people, loved celebrations. Every year they had three great 'pilgrimage festivals', for which people travelled to Jerusalem from all over Palestine. Travelling in groups, they would sing psalms such as those collected in Psalms 120-134. Each of these psalms is called 'a song of ascents', because it was used by people ascending (going up) to Jerusalem, the city in the hills of Judea. This psalm expresses their joy at being present for the festival:

I was glad when they said to me,  
'Let us go to the house of the Lord!'  
Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem!

(Psalm 122:1-2)

The way in which festivals were celebrated developed over the centuries. During the time of the kings of Judah (about 900-600 BC) the festival calendar included the following major events.

### The Feast of Passover and Unleavened Bread

*Exodus 12; Leviticus 23:5-8; Numbers 28:16-25*

This festival occurred every spring (March-April). Like other festivals, it was both a celebration and a commemoration of God's acts in Israel's history. The Jews gave thanks for the beginning of the barley harvest, and for God's deliverance of their ancestors from slavery in Egypt.

On the evening of the full moon, each family had a year-old lamb sacrificed at the temple in Jerusalem. They then took it home - or to their lodgings, if they were pilgrims from other parts of Palestine. There they ate it, with bitter herbs and unleavened bread (bread made without yeast), at the Passover meal.

Next day the Feast of Unleavened Bread began. Any

old, leavened bread (bread with yeast in it) which remained in the house was destroyed. For seven days they ate only unleavened bread, using the grain from the new harvest. The unleavened bread also reminded them of the haste in which the Israelites had eaten on the first Passover night, before their escape from Egypt.

### The Feast of Weeks

*Exodus 34:22; Leviticus 23:15-21*

This took place in May-June, seven weeks after Passover: hence its name. Later it was also called Pentecost. (*Pentecoste* is Greek for 'fiftieth' - the fiftieth day after Passover.) But it was also called simply Harvest (*Exodus 23:16*), because it marked the end of the wheat harvest. Two loaves were made of new wheat-flour and baked with yeast, then offered to God in the temple.

It was only after the Old Testament period that the Jews connected this festival with God's action in their history. Not long before the time of Jesus, they began to include in the Feast of Weeks a celebration of the covenant God made with Moses at Mount Sinai.

### The Feast of Tabernacles

*Leviticus 23:33-43; Numbers 29:12-38; Deuteronomy 16:13-15*

In Old Testament times the most important festival was that of 'Ingathering' (*Exodus 23:16, 34:22*) or 'Tabernacles' (*Leviticus 23:34, Deuteronomy 16:13*). It celebrated the completion of the fruit harvest in September-October. It was an occasion for dancing in the vineyards, and for great rejoicing. A later proverb said: 'The man who has never seen the joy of the night of this feast has never seen real joy in all his life.'

For seven days and nights the pilgrims stayed in Jerusalem in makeshift huts or tents (which is the meaning of the old word 'tabernacle'). Even the



The Passover was one of the most important Jewish festivals and orthodox Jews, like the family in the picture, still celebrate it today. It is a reminder of the way in which God rescued the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt.

permanent inhabitants of the city erected temporary huts outside their normal homes. These huts reminded them of the temporary shelters built of branches in the vineyards and orchards while the grapes and fruit were being gathered in. But the huts reminded them too that the Israelites had lived in tents in the desert when Moses led them out of Egypt to Canaan.

On each day of the festival bulls, rams, lambs and goats were sacrificed in the temple, and portions of wheat-flour and wine were offered to God. The final, eighth day of the festival was marked by a grand assembly at the temple, before the pilgrims departed to their homes.

Apart from pilgrim festivals developed in the Old Testament, the three great festivals were celebrated

### The Day of Kippur

*Leviticus 16*  
This festival, September-October, is the Feast of the Day of Atonement. It is a day of solemn repentance. The high priest asked God to forgive the sins of the people. The high priest sacrificed for his own sins and for the sins of the people. The most sacred part of the temple (the Holy of Holies) was cleansed. There he sacrificed the bull and the goat. The presence of



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Apart from the three great pilgrim festivals, other feasts also developed during the Old Testament period. These, like the three great feasts, are still celebrated by Jews today.

**The Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur)**

*Leviticus 16*  
This festival occurs in September-October, just before the Feast of Tabernacles. It was a day of solemn fasting and repentance, when the Jews asked God's forgiveness for the sins of the last year. The high priest sacrificed a bull for his own sins and for those of the other priests, and a goat for the rest of the people. He entered behind the curtain which shut off the most sacred place in the temple (the 'holy of holies'). There he sprinkled the blood of the bull and the goat on the 'mercy-seat', where God's presence was believed to rest.

This was the only day of the year when anyone was allowed to enter the-holy of holies.

Afterwards, another goat was brought to the high priest. He placed his hands on its head, as if to transfer to it all the sins of the people. The goat was then led off into the desert, carrying with it the sins of the Israelites. In this vivid way they acted out their belief that God forgives those who sincerely confess their sins to him.

**The Feast of Purim**

*Esther 9:20-32*  
The book of Esther in the Old Testament tells how the Jews of Susa in Persia got their revenge on enemies who had planned to kill them. Haman, the chief minister to the Persian king, wanted to murder all the Jews in Persia. Being a superstitious man, he cast lots to discover when he should do it. (The name, 'Feast of Purim', comes from the

use in Esther 3:7 of *pur*, an Assyrian word meaning 'lot'.) But thanks to the bravery of Esther – a Jewish girl whom the Persian king had married – and her cousin Mordecai, the plot was discovered. Haman was hanged on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai, and the Jews were able to destroy the men sent to kill them.

This story may have its historical origin in events during the fifth or fourth century BC. In any case, the Feast of Purim which celebrated this remarkable deliverance of the Jews arose much later than the other festivals of the Old Testament. And it was more of a carnival than a solemn religious festival. A day of fasting was followed by two days of rejoicing during February-March. The book of Esther was read in the synagogue, and the congregation shouted and boomed every time Haman was mentioned. People gave presents to each other, and enjoyed banquets and all kinds of entertainment.

**The Feast of Hanukkah**

*1 Maccabees 4:36-59; John 10:22*  
This festival – often called in English the Festival of Dedication – was introduced in 164 BC, when the temple in Jerusalem was reconsecrated. This followed the victory by Judas Maccabaeus over the Syrian oppressor Antiochus Epiphanes, who had desecrated the temple by offering pigs in sacrifice to the Greek god Zeus. It was a joyful feast, lasting eight days in December. There were sacrifices in the temple, and palm-branches were carried in procession. Hymns – especially Psalms 113-118 – were sung. Another prominent feature was the use of lights. Lamps were lit in front of each house, the number being increased by one each day until the last day of the feast. Even today, it is one of the most popular and splendid Jewish festivals.