

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

THIS UNNAMED FEAST—WHAT WAS IT?¹

ST. JOHN V. I.

No question has a more important bearing on the chronology of the public life of Christ than that as to the festival to which the Apostle here refers, but no question has received a greater diversity of answers. The claim of almost every one of the Jewish festivals has been advocated in turn; while many expositors have been inclined, with Tholuck, to suppose that the particular festival in question can no longer be determined with any degree of certainty. On the other hand, it cannot be doubted that we have here to do with a distinct chronological *datum*, since the Apostle, who is in every other case so explicit in his references to time and place, could have no motive for expressing himself less definitely in the present instance. His readers, familiar with the expression he employs, must have perfectly understood *what* festival was intended. The only question is whether we can still determine its date with the same degree of certainty, since conjecture is here entirely worthless, or even misleading.

First, as regards the true reading. Several of the oldest MSS., C E F H J L M Δ, read, with the Sinaitic, ἡ εἶσθη ("the feast"); while others of equal antiquity read, with the Vatican, εἶσθη ("feast") without the article. The manuscript authority is thus about equally divided. The balance, however, inclines in favour of retaining

¹ The weight of chronological authority inclines heavily against Mr. Evans's theory. But it is well that his theory should be stated, and I do not know that it could be more ably and succinctly stated than in the following pages.—EDITOR.

the article, inasmuch as it is quite explicable that a copyist, uncertain what festival was intended, should omit the article, in order to render the expression as general as possible, but not at all explicable that he should insert one where it did not previously exist, and thus render the expression more definite than it was before. The authority of the Coptic version likewise is in favour of the article.

In any case it is certain that one of the great festivals is meant. Nor is it difficult, by the process of elimination, to shew that *only one* of these festivals can satisfy the conditions of the narrative.

1. In the first place, it cannot have been *Passover*. The ministry of Christ began in the fifteenth year of Tiberius (Luke iii. 1, ff.). Tiberius died 16th March, A.D. 37, after a reign of twenty-three years. So Philo (*τρία πρὸς τοῖς εἴκοσι ἔτη γῆς καὶ θαλλάττης ἀναψάμενος τὸ κράτος*)¹ and Quintilian. So also Eusebius and Epiphanius. Tacitus says, "Obtinuit arbitrium rei Romanæ tribus *ferme* et viginti annis."² His regnal years are thus usually counted from the beginning of A.D. 14, and Christ's ministry begins with A.D. 28. That ministry terminates with the Passover of A.D. 30. This date is established by the fact that the Paschal full moon appeared A.D. 30 on the evening of Friday, whereas in the previous year it appeared on the Monday evening, and in the following (A.D. 31) on the Tuesday evening, or—since Nisan of A.D. 31 was in all probability preceded by an intercalary month—on the Thursday evening. In A.D. 32 it appeared on the

¹ In the account of the embassy to Caligula, in which Philo himself occupied a principal place.

² *Ann.* vi. 51.

evening of Monday. To the same year does the Chronicle of Phlegon point. This writer, who lived under Hadrian and is quoted by Eusebius, records the occurrence of a darkness at mid-day (ὥρα ἕκτη) in the fourth year of the 202nd Olympiad. The fourth year is here given, by an error, for the *second*. The three Passovers, however, which intervened between the beginning of A.D. 28 and the close of A.D. 30 are all expressly mentioned by the Apostle (John ii. 13; vi. 4; xi. 55). Passover is therefore of necessity excluded.

2. Nor can the claim of *Pentecost* be urged with any degree of probability. It is never called *the* festival of the Jews, and would thus be only just possible in case the word ἑορτή were here anarthrous.

3. The feast of *Dedication* has nothing in its favour. It is, moreover, known by the Apostle as τὰ ἐγκαίνια, and not as ἡ ἑορτή.

4. *Purim* has in its favour the fact that in A.D. 29 it fell at the close of the Sabbath. In support of its claim have accordingly been ranged some of the most distinguished names of the last thirty-five years. Nevertheless, the objections derived from the moral character of this festival are fatal to the supposition that its observance could have been sanctioned by Christ's presence.

5. There remains thus only the festal month of Tisri. That from the time of the Captivity this month as a whole was regarded as a time of festival (*ha-chag*), is evident from 2 Chronicles v. 3. *Bē-chag, hū ha-chōdesh ha-shibi'i*—“At the festival, which is the seventh month.” The LXX. accordingly, closely following the Hebrew text, reads in Ezekiel xlvi. 25,

“And in the seventh month, in the fifteenth day of the month, *at the festival* (ἐν τῇ ἑορτῇ), thou shalt do the same, seven days.” To this period, I believe, Josephus *invariably* restricts the sense of ἡ ἑορτῇ, wherever the article does not contain a manifest reference to a festival mentioned shortly before. The πρώτη τῆς ἑορτῆς ἡμέρα of *Ant.* v. 1 § 5 forms no exception to this rule (*cf.* § 4); nor does the ἐνστάσης τῆς ἑορτῆς of *Ant.* viii. 8 § 5 afford it any support, because here the festival is more nearly defined. Josephus employs the expression *absolutely* in *Ant.* xiii. 13 § 5—τῆς ἑορτῆς ἀγομένης—where, from the description given, there can be no question as to its denoting the autumnal festival of the Jewish year. Again, in *Ant.* xiv. 11 § 5 (ἐνστάσης τῆς ἐν Ἱεροσολύμοις ἑορτῆς), where we learn from the following section that the festival to which he alludes is that immediately preceding the battle of Philippi. The battle of Philippi was fought in October, B.C. 42. It is thus the autumnal festival which is meant.

Again, *B. J.* ii. 12 § 3 (πολλῶν ἀναβαινόντων Ἰουδαίων ἐπὶ τὴν ἑορτήν), where the term ἀναβαίνειν necessarily has reference to one of the three *great festivals* enjoined by the law, and, as we see from § 6 (compared with *Ant.* xx. 7 § 1), denotes in this case the last before the Passover of A.D. 52. The autumnal festival of A.D. 51 must therefore be intended by Josephus.

The usage of Josephus with regard to this expression is thus established, nor is there any reason for supposing that the practice of the Apostle was at all different in this respect.

This festival properly began with the Day of Atone-

ment (ἡ ἑορτὴ τῆς νηστείας), on the tenth day of the month, which bore a character wholly unique among the days of the Jewish year. As the thrice holy day of Convocation, it was a day peculiarly sacred in the estimation of the devout Jew; and for the Messiah of Israel the appointed rites of this day must, beyond those of any other, have proclaimed "the things concerning himself."

The Jews were wont to go up to Jerusalem about a week before the main festivals (John xi. 55; Josephus, *B. J.* vi. 5 § 3), and in the year 28 there were special reasons for desiring "to go up to *this* feast," inasmuch as the pilgrims would otherwise be delayed on their way by the intervention of the Sabbath, as well as the Day of Atonement, which began on the evening of the Sabbath. It is difficult therefore to resist the conclusion that in the year 28 the Lord went up to Jerusalem before the Day of Atonement; and, if so, that on the eve of this day He healed the paralytic at the Pool of Bethesda.

As a certain result of the above examination, we arrive at the fact that the Apostle here refers, in language which does not admit of ambiguity, to the autumnal festival of the Jewish year, the *whole* of which was often included under the term "Feast of Tabernacles." What is in a high degree probable, is that the day on which the Lord wrought the miracle at the Pool of Bethesda was the Sabbath immediately preceding the Day of Atonement, apparently the *first* Sabbath of his sojourn in Jerusalem at that time. It was this ἑορτὴ to which Christ in the following year declared He would not go up (John vii. 8), and to which He did not go up after A.D. 28.

In this way John vii. 8 receives its most natural explanation, and the mind is relieved of the perplexing question, Why the Lord during his public ministry should not have attended the most sacred of all the solemnities of the ancient law, and the one which most strikingly represented the redemption of his people by his own sacrifice and death? It is due to the memory of Chrétien Caspari to say that the *έοπη* of this place was originally understood by him to denote the autumnal festival in general, *including* the Day of Atonement, and that he only yielded to the urgent request of the translator in restricting its meaning to that of "the Day of Atonement." This day is not indicated by the expression employed, but is inferred from its proximity to the Sabbath, and apparently the first Sabbath of Jesus' stay in Jerusalem at that time. That, however, this season and no other is meant, appears to me to be incontrovertibly established. And the season being established, the claim of the Day of Atonement to be "the feast" stands incomparably higher than that of any other specific date which can be assigned.

MAURICE J. EVANS.
