

Shabbat Sukkot

Exodus 33:12-34:26; Ezekiel 38:18–39:16; Luke 2:1–14

notes by Tim Hegg

Rejoicing in the Living Torah

In the synagogue traditions that have been developed since the post-destruction era, the Festival of Sukkot, concluding as it does with the celebration of Shemini Atzeret (the “eighth day”), gives way to Simchat Torah, “Rejoicing in the Torah.” Since the yearly cycle (widely adopted by the Jewish community in the post-destruction era) concludes at the end of Sukkot, the cycle begins again at Genesis. To mark the joy that surrounds a new study of the Torah, the day is marked with special festivities centered upon rolling the Torah scrolls to their beginning.

But while this rabbinic tradition does not have Yeshua as the Living Torah in view, we as Messianic have come to realize that Sukkot may well have been the time of year when our Lord, Yeshua, was born. This is why we have chosen Luke’s narrative to accompany the traditional readings selected for the Shabbat which occurs within the week of Sukkot. And this also presents us with the opportunity to consider, once again, that Yeshua is the Living Torah, for “He is the radiance of His [the Father’s] glory and the exact representation of His nature” (Heb 1:3). Since the written Torah is, in essence, the foundational, direct revelation of God to mankind, we understand that the Living Torah, Yeshua, is “the true Light” (John 1:9) Who has given us the full and complete revelation of the Father.

Even the Torah *parashah* selected to be read on Shabbat Sukkot points to this reality. The primary subject of this *parashah* is the request of Moses that he would know God’s ways so that he might know Him and receive His favor (אֲמַצְאֶהוּן בְּעֵינַיִךָ): “Now therefore, I pray You, if I have found favor in Your sight, let me know Your ways that I may know You, so that I may find favor in Your sight.” In short, what Moses is requesting is that he might be fully assured that God has accepted him and that he might therefore rely upon God’s mercies and grace as the people of Israel begin their journey to the Promised Land.

God responds to Moses by promising that His “presence” (literally, “face”) will go with them, and that He would give them rest, that is, that He would guarantee that their journey would be successful, that He would bring them to the Land where they would

have rest from their enemies. Moses responds to God's promise by emphasizing the utter necessity of God's "presence" with them, for only when God's "presence" is manifest among Israel would the nations know that God had chosen them as a distinct people among all the nations:

Then he said to Him, "If Your presence does not go with us, do not lead us up from here. For how then can it be known that I have found favor in Your sight, I and Your people? Is it not by Your going with us, so that we, I and Your people, may be distinguished from all the other people who are upon the face of the earth?" (Ex 33:15-16)

Here is a most important point: Israel is to be identified as God's chosen people by His "presence," His "face," dwelling among them. But what is meant by the "face" of God—His "presence"? It means the sum total of His greatness; the evident providential care and merciful blessings that belong to those with whom He is pleased to dwell. And in a final or complete sense, God's dwelling among His people is fully vested in the incarnation of His Messiah, Yeshua, Who came to save His people from their sins.

But note carefully how our Torah *parashah* continues: after God has clearly promised to perform what Moses requests, Moses asks for further confirmation. He requests to see God's glory: "Please, let me see Your glory!" (Ex 33:18). What happens next is well known, though couched in veiled narrative terms. God promises to make His glory known to Moses, but not directly. He would place Moses in a cleft of the rocks, and would pass by Him, covering him with His hand. Thus Moses would not see His glory (i.e., His "face") directly but would see the "after effects" of His passing by. When God does pass by Moses, He proclaims His Name:

The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations. (Ex 34:6-7)

What are we to make of this? We are to understand that the Name of God represents His entire being—the full outshining of His glory. His glory, therefore, is not summed in the phenomenon

of shining light, but the shining light is rather a physical representation of His infinite greatness, holiness, justice, sovereignty, love, grace, and mercy. And, once again, these are fully made known to us in the fact that He sent His Messiah to save His people from their sins. Even as Moses was instructed to bring two tablets of stone upon which the commandments would be inscribed by God Himself, thus providing the covenant of the Torah as a self-revelation of God, so the sending of our Messiah combines the revelation of God with the outshining of His glory in the Living Torah.

This aspect of God's visible glory is what caused the Sages to choose the *haftarah* text for our Shabbat Sukkot readings. Ezekiel prophesies the day when Gog, the enemy of Israel, will be utterly destroyed, so much so that it will take seven months to bury all of the dead and cleanse the Land. But note carefully why God destroys Israel's enemy by utterly devastating them:

My holy name I will make known in the midst of My people Israel; and I will not let My holy name be profaned anymore. And the nations will know that I am the LORD, the Holy One in Israel.
(Ezek 39:7)

Once again, it is the very presence of God among His chosen people that is the primary issue. When the nations see Israel as defeated and down-trodden by their enemies, they conclude that Israel's God has likewise been defeated. What value is it to have God dwelling in the midst of Israel if He is unable to defend her against those whose purpose it is to defeat, enslave, or even annihilate her? God's willingness to punish Israel by allowing her enemies to defeat her cannot forever be misunderstood by the nations. His fury against them will set the record straight: He is the all-glorious One, and He will keep His promise to His chosen people.

But Israel's enemies do not constitute the ultimate foe. The greatest enemy is death, which entered the world through sin. This enemy He has defeated through the work of His Son, Yeshua, Who, through death conquered death:

Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives. (Heb 2:14-15)

It is no surprise, then, that when our Savior came as a babe and spent His first days in the humble abode of a cow shed, His birth was announced with an angelic fanfare of praise and glory. Here, in the mystery of it all, was the “face” of God, His very presence visibly seen now by all, yet still veiled by human flesh. Only a few (on the Mount of Transfiguration) were privileged to see a glimpse of His glory. The rest, like Moses, were shielded by the “hand of God” through the humble submission of Yeshua to His Father, only to see the “after effects” as the Lord of Glory passed by.

Notice how Luke describes the scene:

And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. (Lk 2:9)

Then we hear the *mal'ach Adonai* speak these words:

But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Messiah the Lord. (Lk 2:10–11)

Note carefully the description of this baby boy: “a Savior, Who is Messiah the Lord.” It would have been sufficient for the *mal'ach Adonai* to have simply referred to Him as “a Savior, Who is Messiah.” But he adds “the Lord” (ὁς ἐστὶν χριστὸς κύριος). What language the angel was speaking is not certain, but it most likely was Hebrew or Aramaic. What would the shepherds have understood by the combination “Messiah *the* Lord”? If we may take the Lxx as giving us a clue, then the Greek *kurios* (κύριος) must stand for the divine name, for the vast majority of the time, יהוה is translated in the Lxx by the word *kurios*. The angel was announcing the Immanuel of Isaiah’s prophecy (Is 7:14), the dwelling of God among His chosen people.

The glory of God had come, not as was expected, but in truth nonetheless. And so such glory, though veiled in human flesh (cf. Phil 2:5–11), required the heavenly host to break forth:

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased. (Lk 2:14)

As we celebrate Sukkot, may we rejoice with great joy in the Living Torah Whose presence is ever with us in the Ruach, and Whose face we someday will see!