Sukkot, the Temple and the Messianic Controversy

“הרחמן הוא יקים לנו את סוכת דוד הנופלת – May the All-Merciful One reestablish the fallen sukkah of [King] David.”  *Birkat Hamazon*

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The association between Sukkot and Jerusalem Temple goes all the way back to the Bible’s first descriptions of the holiday in Deuteronomy 16. In this chapter, God commands the Israelites to go to the Temple to celebrate the three primary Temple festivals – Pesah, Shavuot, and Sukkot.

Yet Deuteronomy 16 links the Temple to Sukkot more strongly than to the other two festivals by implying that the Israelites must remain in Jerusalem throughout the duration of the holiday. According to Deut. 16:7, the Israelites should return to their tents on the morning following the eating of the Passover sacrifice, whereas in Deuteronomy’s proscription regarding how to celebrate the holiday of Sukkot, there is no comparable command for Israelites to return to their huts:

דברים טז:טו שִׁבְעַת יָמִים תָּחֹג לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בַּמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר יְהוָה כִּי יְבָרֶכְךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכֹל תְּבוּאָתְךָ וּבְכֹל מַעֲשֵׂה יָדֶיךָ וְהָיִיתָ אַךְ שָׂמֵחַ.

Deut 16:15 You shall hold a festival for YHWH your God seven days, in the place that YHWH will choose; for YHWH your God will bless all your crops and all your undertakings, and you shall have nothing but joy. (NJPS)

This article will first argue that the Temple and the holiday of Sukkot share a special connection, and as the Temple became a symbol of messianic hope for Jews in ancient times, the holiday of Sukkot became linked to that messianic image as well. The second section of this article will argue that individuals who claimed leadership over the Jews on the Temple site during Sukkot, individuals such as Jonathan the Maccabee, King Alexander Jannaeus, and Jesus, were viewed by the Jews around them as making a bold claim and thereby as instigators of controversy. Finally, the third section of this article will describe the reaction of the rabbis to this appropriation of the Sukkot and Temple imagery.

The Biblical Connection between Sukkot and the Temple

The holiday of Sukkot played a major role in the processes of building both the first and second temples. 1 Kings 8:2 recounts how Solomon intentionally dedicated his newly built Temple during the holiday of Sukkot, thereby imbuing the nationalistic meaning that Sukkot already held for the Israelites with renewed significance. Similarly, in Ezra 3:4 the Second Temple was dedicated on Sukkot, and in Nehemiah 8:18, the celebration over the completion of the wall and the public reading of the Torah ends with a Sukkot celebration.

The connection between Sukkot and the Temple was not lost on the prophets. Zechariah’s description of the messianic era, which is the *haftarah* for first day of Sukkot, focuses on the universal temple worship within the framework of Sukkot, proclaiming that those members of all nations who have survived the period of destruction that will precede the messianic era will unite to serve God and come to the Jerusalem Temple to celebrate the holiday of Sukkot (Zech. 14:14-17).

Similarly, the prophet Haggai exhorts the people on the twenty-first of the seventh month (the last day of Sukkot) not to despair about the state of the Second Temple, because God promises that it will eventually be even greater than the first (Hag. 2:1-9). Like Zechariah, this passage is located within a context that is describing the ultimate restoration of the Temple’s glory during the messianic era.

The Time and Place of Messianic Claims: Sukkot and the Temple Revisited

The Hasmonean period saw a sharp rise in Jewish apocalyptic and messianic literature. By the end of the Second Temple period, more and more Jews believed that they were living on the cusp of the messianic era.[1] Some Jewish leaders made use of their positions to seek opportunities to present themselves in a messianic role.

At least three such leaders selected the Temple and Sukkot as the time and place to declare their leadership, since the Temple and Sukkot had been linked in the Bible with Israel’s glorious monarchic past, and with the possible restoration of the Davidic dynasty. Recognizing the Temple’s biblical association with Sukkot, and understanding the Temple’s importance as a romantic signifier of Israel’s glorious past and magnificent future, help us to appreciate the import of certain controversial individuals who claimed leadership on the site of the Temple and during the holiday of Sukkot.

Jonathan the Maccabee and Alexander Jannaeus

In the book of 1 Maccabees, a book that was likely written sometime in the 2nd century BCE and survives in the collection of books known as the Apocrypha, Jonathan the Maccabee donned the priestly vestments on Sukkot upon regaining control over the Temple. The passage reads:

1 Macc 10:17 [King Alexander] wrote a letter and sent it to [Jonathan], in the following words: 10:18 ‘King Alexander to his brother Jonathan, greetings... 10:20 ...we have appointed you today to be the high priest of your nation; you are to be called the king’s Friend and you are to take our side and keep friendship with us.’ He also sent him a purple robe and a golden crown. 10:21 So Jonathan put on the sacred vestments in the seventh month of the one hundred and sixtieth year, at the Festival of Booths. (NRSV)

Because 1 Maccabees was written by a pro-Hasmonean individual, perhaps even someone commissioned by the Hasmonean dynasty, we are not told how the Jews reacted to Jonathan’s actions. However, it is possible that, given Jonathan’s friendly relationships with the Greek king Alexander and the Hasmonean’s later pro-Hellenist program, some Jews living in Jonathan’s time and later Jews reading this account in 1 Maccabees were not at all supportive of Jonathan’s behavior.

Indeed, Josephus tells his readers that when the reviled Hasmonean King Alexander Jannaeus went to the Temple on Sukkot and “stood upon the altar and was going to sacrifice,” thereby taking upon himself the high-priestly duties, the Jews were so horrified that they pelted him with citrons, which the Jews were using to celebrate the Sukkot holiday:

As to Alexander, his own people were seditious against him; for at a festival which was then celebrated, when he stood upon the altar, and was going to sacrifice, the nation rose upon him and pelted with citrons [which they then had in their hands, because] the laws of the Jews required that at the feast of tabernacles everyone should have branches of the palm tree and citron tree; which thing we have elsewhere related…At this he was in rage, and slew of them about six thousand (Josephus, *Ant*. XIII.13.372-373, Trans. W. Whiston).

Sukkot in the New Testament

Similarly, The Gospel of John, which stands apart from the other three canonical Synoptic gospels in its particularly anti-Jewish disposition, tells us that Jesus proclaimed Mosaic law irrelevant while standing on the Temple grounds on the holiday of Sukkot:

John 7:14 About the middle of the festival Jesus went up into the temple and began to teach. 7:15 The Jews were astonished at it, saying, ‘How does this man have such leaning, when he has never been taught?’ 7:16 Then Jesus answered them, ‘My teaching is not mine but his who sent me... 7:23 If a man receives circumcision on the Sabbath in order that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because I healed a man’s whole body on the Sabbath? 7:24 Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment.’ (NRSV)

The conversation soon turns to whether Jesus himself is the Messiah:

John 7:25 Now some of the people of Jerusalem were saying, ‘Is not this the man whom they are trying to kill?’ 7:26 …Can it be that the authorities really know that this is the Messiah? 7:27 Yet we know where this man is from; but when the Messiah comes, no one will know where he is from.’ 7:28 Then Jesus cried out as he was teaching in the temple, ‘You know me, and you know where I am from. I have not come on my own. But the one who sent me is true, and you do not know him…’ 7:30 Then they tried to arrest him… 7:31 Yet many in the crowd believed in him and were saying, ‘When the Messiah comes, will he do more signs than this man has done?’

In John’s narrative, Jesus’ invocation of Mosaic law at the Temple site on Sukkot immediately gives rise to the Jews around him asking, Is this man a king? A Messiah? An inheritor of the Davidic dynasty? Or perhaps some combination? The answer is not provided in the gospel, but perhaps all Jesus wanted was that the question be asked. He knew of those earlier individuals such as Solomon and Nehemiah who had set precedent by guiding the Jews at the Temple site on the holiday of Sukkot into a new phase of religious government, and was intentionally linking himself with them.

Rabbinic Reaction to Sukkot Messianism

It is likely no coincidence that while Jesus attempted on Sukkot to render the Temple and its service antiquated and unnecessary, the Jewish liturgical practice to read biblical passages about messianic Temple services on Sukkot placed the Temple service safely into the future and concretized its role as symbol of Messianic religious harmony.[2] The liturgy that was recited on Sukkot is associated with Temple worship during the end of days. The *haftarah*read on the first two days of Sukkot is Zechariah 14 and 1 Kings 8, both mentioned above, and the *haftarah* read on Shabbat *chol hamo’ed* of Sukkot is Ezekiel 38, which predicts the war of Gog and Magog which will be a harbinger of the Messianic era.

Other rabbinic sources similarly link the Temple and Sukkot within the framework of the Messianic period. In Midrash Leviticus Rabbah, Rabbi Levi is cited by Rabbi Berakhiah as saying that the Jews will be rewarded with the rebuilding of the Temple and with the coming of the Messiah in exchange for their observance of the Sukkot holiday (Lev. Rabbah 30:15).

Likewise, the midrash anthology *Yalkut Shimoni* on Leviticus 23 lists numerous rewards in the World to Come that the Jews will earn for observing the holiday of Sukkot in the present World. One of these rewards is God’s protection from the catastrophic war that will destroy many members of non-Jewish nations, and that will culminate in a gathering of nations at the Jerusalem Temple in harmonious worship of God (Yalkut Shimoni on Lev. 23, parsha 653).

Sukkot Past, Present and Future

Proclaiming leadership in a particular time and place – the *time* of the Sukkot holiday and the *place* of the Temple – was popularly understood in the ancient world as a bold move that linked one with past precedent of glorious leadership over the Jews. Because opponents of the Pharisaic community such as Alexander Jannaeus and Jesus made the Temple vulnerable by proclaiming leadership there on Sukkot but not adhering to Pharisaic interpretation of Mosaic law, the rabbis, the Pharisees’ successors, moved the popular frameworks of Messianic time and place – Sukkot and Temple – far into the distant future.

Sukkot brilliantly and effectively connects us with the richness of the farthest origins of our national history and with the future messianic culmination of this history. Yet an understanding of some of the history behind Sukkot reminds us that while Rabbinic theology encourages us to reenact the past and to anticipate the future, we must remain in the spiritual present.

[View Footnotes](https://www.thetorah.com/article/sukkot-the-temple-and-the-messianic-controversy)

1. This belief is evident in the many surviving texts that belong to what is known as the Pseudepigrapha, a collection of works preserved by the Catholic Church that are believed to be of Jewish origin, and generally dated to the 2nd century BCE through the 2nd century CE.
2. This placement of Temple service into the messianic future could have been reflective not only of protecting the Temple’s integrity from dissenters, but also of a desire to combat the wave of messianism in general that was popular in the early centuries CE, in which the rabbis were, for the most part, hesitant to take part. My thanks to Zev Farber for pointing this out.