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BIBLICAL FESTIVALS AND HINDU FEASTS

Introduction

Feasts and celebrations keep the human spirit happy and elevated from the material level of man's existence and brings him somehow to the divine sphere. It is such celebrations that break the monotony of human life and give man a foretaste of heavenly bliss. They help man to acknowledge the break-through of a transcendental God in his history, and thereby to come in closer contact with that benevolent God.

Biblical and Indian festivals differ and agree in many respects. Both of them participate in the same human dynamics of feasts, fasts and festivals in our life, yet explain them differently. Both follow a lunar calendar in fixing up the dates of the festivals (with a few exceptions of a solar calculation with regard to certain festivals of Dravidian origin in India) and both celebrate the liberation story and harvest seasons. But the commandment of Yahweh remains conspicuous in the Biblical narration of festivals, whereas the Indian festivals, many of which agree with the biblical festivals in essentials are a matter of a long tradition with a basis in the vedic writings or puranic narrations.

According to Mircea Eliade, festivals are something created by man, as something that emerges from his desire to transcend his limitations and to reach out to the divine sphere.¹ All people, ancient or modern, civilized or tribals, elite or illiterate, all had their own ways of celebrating various festivals. In all this, the ultimate cause of such celebrations was not a mere human desire to transcend his limitations, but a myth or history, which represented man's experience of a transcendental God in a point of time in human history. Hence we could rightly say that the festivals represent a happy combination of the divine element of a break-through of a transcendental God in human history, and the human element of man's desire to reach out to the divine sphere. In all the festival celebrations, despite the differences of cultures and nationalities, religions and creeds,

1. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (N.Y., 1956), p. 1.

these two elements can be recognized, namely, the divine element contained in a myth or history and a human element embodied in cultic rituals and celebrations. From this point of view we are now trying in this article to review some of the important festivals in the Biblical tradition, with special reference to their similarity with that of our Indian tradition.

I. THE BIBLICAL FESTIVALS

1. The Feast of Liberation: The Passover

The Bible presents the Passover as the most important feast of the chosen people of God. It reminds the Israelites of their miraculous origin as the people of Yahweh and the establishment of their nation. According to the Bible, this feast originated from a historical event of God's intervention on behalf of ancient Israel in Egypt. This feast is believed to have been instituted by Moses at the specific command of Yahweh (Cf. Ex 12). Passover means the historic event of divine deliverance of Israel from Egypt and the later recurrent institutional commemoration.²

According to many scholars, this Jewish Passover may be an adaptation of something much older than Moses. It could have been originally either circumcision ceremonial, or an anti-demonic threshold rite, or a shepherds' festival or a sacrificial attempt to enhance the vitality of the flock as well as of the celebrant, or a sacrifice of the first-born, or a common meal of communion or magic.³

Passover in the Old Testament

The most important references to the feast of Passover are seen in Ex 12:1-13, 21-27, 43-49 and Dt 16:1-8. Of these, Ex 12:21-27 is the earliest text, which is earlier than 750 B.C.

The Hebrew word "pesah" means "to pass over" or "to spare." It points to the event of Yahweh's sparing of the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, while his angel went from house to house and killed the first-born of the Egyptians (Ex 12). Only when all the first-born children of the Egyptians died, did the Pharaoh of Egypt, most probably Rameses II,

2. Cf. Mishnah: *Pesahim*, ix. 5.

3. Cf. Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel, Its Life and Institutions*, (London, 1961), pp. 488ff.

recognize in that calamity God's punishment on them, and let the people of Israel go out of Egypt under the leadership of Moses in the year 1290 B.C.

The Ritual of the Passover

According to the Priestly tradition (Cf. Lev 23:5-8; Num 28; 16-25; Ex 12), on the 10th day of the 1st month, each family has to select a one-year old lamb, a male and one without blemish from the sheep or the goats, and keep it until the 14th evening, when it will be slaughtered. Then its blood has to be taken in a basin, and dipping in it a hyssop, a foliage of marjoram plant, the blood was to be sprinkled over the lintel and the two doorposts. This blood was to serve a sign toward of the angel of destruction from the Israelite families. This is a sacrifice.

Then follows a meal. The flesh of the sacrificial victim had to be roasted and eaten with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Not a bone of the victim should be broken. What remains of this religious meal should be burnt before the morning. This ritual meal should be eaten in haste with travelling dress: loins girded, sandals on feet, staff in hand. If the family was too small to eat a whole lamb, it could join with a neighbouring family. The resident aliens and the slaves could also share in this meal provided they were circumcised.

Night was selected for this celebration. We are not sure whether this selection of the night of the full moon was due to astrological reasons, or simply out of common sense reason that on such full moon night the nomadic tribes in the desert could get more light and coolness for such a celebration.⁴ However, considering the general customs of the Oriental people of giving much importance to the full moon and to the lunar calendar, we are inclined to favour the view that this selection of the full moon night for the Passover celebration was due to astrological ground.

The Passover details in Dt 16 differs from that of Ex 12. In Deuteronomy the blood ritual disappears. The essentially domestic ceremony (according to Exodus) now becomes a more formal sacrifice at a central sanctuary. There is considerably wider choice of the sacrificial victim. Passover is more thoroughly integrated with the Unleavened Bread in

4. Cf. R. de Vaux, *op. cit.*, p. 490.

Deuteronomy than in the Exodus. This developmental change from event to institution might have taken place in the wilderness period itself. In fact, Num 9:1-14 tells us that a second Passover was instituted for those who had been Levitically unclean at the time of the first Passover.

The Celebration of the Passover

The Passover was celebrated at the full moon of the month Abib, which was later called Nissan. 15th of Nissan is the date of the first Passover. Nissan is the month of ripening ears, and considering its importance, it was made the first month of Jewish year (Cf. Ex 12:2; Dt 16:1; Lev 23:5; Num 9:1-5; 28:16).

The place of Passover celebration was the plains of Jericho during the Conquest of Palestine by ancient Israel (Josh 5:10f), the Jerusalem Temple when king Hezekiah (2 Chr 30:1-27) and king Josiah (2Chr 35:1-19), brought about a renewal in the observance of the Passover.

Thus in the later development, there was fuller participation of the secular leader, the fact of sin-offering, and a change over from family celebration to public ceremony. The victims could be bullocks, rams and kids.

In the Herodian Temple, the common people used to gather together in the outer Temple-court in companies to slaughter the Passover victims. The priests stood in two lines. In one row each one had a golden basin, and in the other row a silver basin to hold the blood of the dying victim of sacrifice. This blood was passed from hand to hand to the end of the line, where the last priest tossed the blood in ritual manner on the altar. Meanwhile they all sang the Hallel Psalms 113-118.

Passover in the New Testament

On the 1st of the Jewish month Nissan, Jews from all parts of Palestine begin to form bands and groups for the journey to Jerusalem (Cf. Lk 2:41f). On the 10th of Nissan they arrive in or near Jerusalem. On 14th Nissan before noon all leavened bread is removed from the houses. From now on they eat only unleavened bread. In the afternoon preparations are made for the eating of the Paschal meal. Between 2.30 (12.00 noon according to rabbinic interpretation) and 5.00 p.m. the Paschal lamb was taken to the Temple, where it is slaughtered, sacrificed and taken home

for further preparation. On the 15th Nisan, with the setting of the sun, the feast begins. No work is allowed on this day.

The Ritual of the Passover Meal

On the 15th Nisan, after sunset, the family or groups of 10 to 20 persons gather together in one house for the Passover meal. During the meal one person acted as the host or the father of the family. After the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D., the possibility of ritually slaughtering the Passover victim vanished, and therefore, the whole Passover celebration returned to the family as before. As a later innovation, the Passover meal rite included the taking of at least four cups of wine as obligatory.

1) In the beginning of the Paschal meal, the first cup is filled with wine and water. The host then said this prayer of blessing: "Blessed art thou, Yahweh our God, King of the world, who hast created the fruit of the vine." The first cup then was passed round and finished. The leader then washed his hands, said a prayer of thanks, and distributed some unleavened bread and green herbs. The Paschal lamb roasted as one piece, is then brought in. The guests proceed to their places.

2) The second cup is then filled with wine and water. Then the youngest of the group asks of the meaning of all these rituals, and the host explains the meaning of the feast. Then they all sing the first part of the Hallel (Ps 113; 114:1-8). Then the second cup is passed round. Again there is a washing of hands and a prayer of thanksgiving. Then follows the eating of the Paschal lamb, together with unleavened bread and bitter herbs which were dipped into a sauce of various fruits called "charosheth."

3) The third cup is then shared by all. This cup is called the cup of thanksgiving (Cf. 1Cor 10:16), because of the thanksgiving that was spoken over the meal.

4) The fourth cup is then passed round. After that, the second part of the Hallel (Ps 115-118) is sung, in which the hope of the Messianic restoration is expressed. Then the guests disperse to their own homes.

Jesus' Last Supper was, according to the Synoptic Gospels, the Passover supper (Cf. Mt 26:2, 17-19; Mk 14:12-17; Lk 22:7-14).

In the beginning of this supper, there is a word of welcome: "I desired greatly to eat this Passover with you" (Lk 22:15). The feet washing takes the place of the initial ablutions. At the filling of the second cup Jesus must have explained how the Passover symbolized his sacrificial death (Jn 14-16). The consecration of the Eucharistic bread might have taken place after the prayer of thanksgiving. Jesus there indicated the new meaning of this "bread" (Mt 26:26). The cup mentioned in Lk 22:17-19; Mk 14:22, may be the second cup. The consecration of the Eucharistic wine might have taken place at the third cup, the cup of thanksgiving. For Luke clearly distinguishes the second cup (Lk 22:17-18) and the third cup (Lk 22:20). The singing of Hallel is mentioned in Mt 26:30 and Mk 14:26. Jesus' priestly prayer (Jn 17) seems to have been the concluding prayer said at the end of the Passover meal.

Thus the new Christian Passover represents the sacrifice of Jesus, the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29), and the Eucharistic meal which takes the place of the Passover meal making the Christians conscious of their redemption and communion with their covenantal God.

2. The Festivals of Harvest

A. The Feast of the Unleavened Bread

The next day after the Passover ceremony, i.e. on the 15th of Nisan, the feast of Unleavened Bread (massoth) began. Then all the old leavened bread was destroyed, and for seven days from 15th upto 21st Nisan only unleavened bread was eaten. The first and the seventh day were days of rest from work. On the seventh day a religious meeting was to be held.

The feast of the Unleavened Bread marked the beginning of the barley harvest, which was the first crop. For the first seven days of this barley harvest, only bread made of new grains was eaten. And so it was unleavened, as nothing of the previous harvest is added in it. This new unleavened bread symbolized a new beginning. The characteristic feature of this feast was the offering of the first-fruits. This feast was, in fact, a preparation for the feast of the Weeks or Pentecost that marked the end of the cereal harvest, and was the real feast of the first-fruits.

Originally this feast of Unleavened Bread was an agricultural feast. Since it was not observed by the Israelites until their settlement in Canaan (Lev 23:10), it might have been adopted by the Israelites from the Canaanites. And then the definite Israelitic character of week and Sabbath was added to it. Since the celebration of this harvest feast depended much on the condition of the crops, its date is not precisely fixed, but given as in the month of the ears of corn, i.e. the month of Abib (Cf. Ex 23 and 34).

Deuteronomy and the reform of king Josiah connected this feast of Unleavened Bread with the feast of Passover. Both these feasts fall in the spring time and commemorate the Exodus event, namely, how Yahweh with his mighty hand delivered Israel from the slavery of Egypt. This startling intervention of Yahweh marked the beginning of Israel's history as the chosen people of God. This time of Israel's liberation reached its climax when the exodus was complete and they settled in the Promised land. This is actually commemorated in this feast of Unleavened Bread as well as in the Passover, which are celebrated in the Spring time.

B. The Feast of Weeks or the Pentecost

The feast of Weeks was the second great feast of the year. It is called sometimes the Harvest Feast (Ex 23:16), or the feast of the Wheat harvest (Ex 34:22). In Dt 16:9-10 it is called "Pilgrimage of the weeks." This feast comes seven weeks after the first cereals had been cut. Hence it is called "the feast of weeks" (Ex 34:22). It is also called "feast of the first fruits" (Num 28:26).

The ritual of this feast is given in detail in Lev 23:15-21. Seven complete weeks were reckoned from the day after the Sabbath on which the first sheaf was presented to Yahweh; thus this feast falls on the day after the seventh Sabbath, i.e. on the 50th day after the beginning of the barley harvest. Hence this feast was mentioned for the first time in 2Macc 12:31-32 and Tob 2:1 with the Greek name "pentekoste", meaning the fiftieth day, the Pentecost.

The important ceremony in this feast is the offering of two loaves, which were made out of the new flour, baked with leaven. If at the beginning of the harvest unleavened bread was eaten, this offering of the leavened bread at the end of the wheat harvest signified that the

harvest time is over, and the ordinary customs of the farming population were to be resumed. This feast of weeks by its very nature was of the farmers, who had settled life. Israel had this feast only after their settlement in Palestine. Israel might have adopted this feast from the Canaanites.

The date of the feast was not fixed until the priests connected the feast of Unleavened Bread with the Passover. The feast of Pentecost was related to salvation history. According to Ex 19:1, the Israelites reached Sinai in the third month after they had left Egypt. It was in the middle of the first month that they left Egypt. And therefore, the feast of weeks became the feast commemorating the covenant at Sinai. According to the calendar followed by the Qumran community and Book of Jubilees, the feast of Pentecost falls on the 15th of the third month. The religious meaning of the feast, that it commemorated the day on which the Law was given on mount Sinai was not accepted by the Rabbis until the 2nd century A.D.

The Christian feast of Pentecost is entirely different from the Jewish feast of the Weeks. In the Christian Pentecost there is no allusion to the giving of the Law on Sinai. Its characteristic note is the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the calling of all nations into Church. The new happenings on the day of the Jewish feast of the Weeks show that the old system of worship has passed away, and all the promises foreshadowed by the old system are now fulfilled.

C. The Feast of Tents

This is the third great feast of the Jewish religion. It is called Sukkoth in Hebrew, meaning feast of the Huts (Dt 16:13-15). In English it is often called feast of Tabernacles or Booths. This is the same feast that is referred to in Ex 23:16 and 34:22 as the feast of Ingathering (*asiph*). This was the feast of Yahweh, for which the pious Israelites came annually to the sanctuary (Cf. Jdg 21:19; 1Sm 1:3). It was to this feast of Tents that Zechariah foretold that all the nations would come annually to worship Yahweh in Jerusalem (Zech 14:16). According to the Jewish historian Josephus⁵ and the gentile Plutarch⁶, this was the holiest and the greatest of the Hebrew feasts.

5. Antq. viii iv. 1.

6. Quest. Conv. iv. 6.

The Nature of this Feast

This was a farmers' feast of ingathering (Cf. Ex 23:16; Dt 16:13). When all the produce of the fields had been gathered, and the olives and grapes had been pressed, the farmers used to celebrate a feast to thank God. Joy was the characteristic note of this feast. The episode of Hannah the mother of the prophet Samuel (1Sm 1:1-20) reveals that heavy drinking of new wine during this feast was quite common.

It was a time of popular rejoicing. It was at this occasion that the Benjaminites in their difficulty of getting proper wives, carried off young girls from Shiloh while they were dancing in the vineyards at the feast of Yahweh (Jdg 21:19-21).

This feast lasted seven days (Cf. Dt 16:13-15). And pilgrims came from all over Palestine to the central sanctuary in Jerusalem. According to Lev 23:33-43, there was an eighth day celebration, which was a day of rest from work, and the people had to assemble for sacrifice and worship. There were elaborate laws concerning the various sacrifices to be offered on these eight days of celebrations (Cf. Num 29:12-38).

During this feast for seven days people were to live in huts, in remembrance of the sojourn of Israel in the desert during their exodus from Egypt when they lived in tents (Lev 23:42-43). At the time of Esdras, when the people heard from the reading of Lev 23, they went out to cut branches and to erect huts for their families, on the roof-tops, or in the squares of Jerusalem or in the temple (Neh 8:13-18). Lev 23:39-40 stipulates: "On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the produce of the land, you shall keep the feast of the Lord seven days; on the first day shall be a solemn rest, and on the eighth day shall be a solemn rest. And you shall take on the first day the fruit of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days." From this it is clear that carrying of fruits and branches of trees in joyous procession was also customary to this feast.

3. The Festival of Atonement

The day of atonement (Yom Kippur) is an important solemn feast of the Jews even today. It is celebrated on the 10th of the Jewish month Tishri (Sept.-Oct.).

The Ritual of this Feast

According to Lev ch. 16, no work was allowed on this day of atonement. It is a day of fasting and penance. The people had to assemble in the Temple, where special sacrifices were offered to make expiation for the sins, for the sanctuary, for the priests, and for the people.

First of all, the high priest offered a bull as an expiatory sacrifice for his own sins and the sins of all in priesthood. Then he entered the Holy of Holies to offer incense to the Mercy Seat, and to sprinkle it with the blood of the bull. By this time the community put forward two goats. Lots are cast to choose one of them for Yahweh and the other for Azazel, the prince of the devils. Then the high priest offered this goat of Yahweh for the sin of the people. Then he enters the Holy of Holies with the blood of this goat and sprinkles it over the Mercy Seat as he did with the blood of the bull. Then he makes expiation ceremony for the sanctuary and especially the altar by sprinkling and rubbing it with blood. After that the high priest let the other goat, which is still alive, stand before Yahweh, and places his hands over the goat's head and transfer to it all the faults, deliberate and indeliberate of the people of Israel. Then he sends this goat with a man into the wilderness, where it is left free to be eaten by the wild beasts, it is worth to remember that the Israelites looked on desert places as the abodes of devils (Is 13:21; 34:11-14; cf. Tob 8:3; Mt 12:43). And this goat carrying all the sins of the people is given over now to Azazel the prince of the devils. The man who took this goat to the wilderness was considered impure, and could not join the community until he washed himself and his clothes.

In this Levitical ritual the transferring of sins and the expiation become effective only because this goat is presented before Yahweh. It is Yahweh who effects all this. Besides, this goat is not sacrificed to Azazel. It is no longer a sacrificial victim as it has been charged with the sins of the people and thereby became impure.

4. The Festival of the Hanukkah or Dedication

This is generally called the feast of the Dedication. The more literal translation of the Hebrew "hanukkah" is found in the Greek name "Ta egkaina", which means "inauguration" or "renewal."

According to 1 Macc 4 : 36-59, Antiochus Eppiphanus, the fanatic king of the Seleucid dynasty, desecrated the Temple of Jerusalem and its altar. He erected over the altar of holocausts, a pagan altar, and offered on it the first sacrifice to Zeus Olympios, on the 25th of the Jewish month Kisleu (December) 167 B.C. three years later, when Judas Maccabeus had his first victories, he purified the Temple and built a new altar and inaugurated it on the 25th of Kisleu, 164 B.C. It was then decided that every year this feast of the rededication of the Temple should be observed.

The Ritual of this Feast

This feast of Hanukkah was celebrated eight days from the 25th Kisleu. As we understand from 1Macc 4 : 56-59, it was a most joyous feast. During this feast sacrifices were offered in the Temple; green branches, palms and thyrsus were carried around, and hymns were sung (2Macc 10:6-8; cf. 1Macc 4:54). The Hallel Psalms (Pss 113-118) were sung. The very title of Ps 30 shows that it was to be sung during this feast. Another important characteristic of this feast is the use of lights. The Jewish historian Josephus called this feast "the feast of lights." According to the Mishnah and Rabbinical writings, during this feast lamps were lit in front of each home, and the number increased by one every day until the last day of the feast. This light symbolized God's presence and grace. So they sang: "The Lord is God, and he has given us light" (Ps 118:27). Josephus takes this light of Hanukkah for the dawn of freedom on the Jewish people.⁷ However he says that in later times, this light became the symbol of the Law, which is called light in Pr 6:23 and Ps 119:105.

5. The Feast of Purim

This feast was celebrated on the 14th and 15th of the Jewish month Adar. According to Josephus⁸ this feast was meant to commemorate the revenge of the Jews of Persia upon their enemies. In preparation to this feast, a day of fasting was held on the 13th of the Jewish month Adar. That day evening, lamps were lit in every house, and all people went to the synagogue. The 14th and 15th were great days of rejoicing, and everyone went again to the synagogues to listen to the reading from the

7. Antq. xii. vii. 7

8. Antq. xi. vi. 13

book of Esther. The congregation would interrupt the reading of the story of Esther with curses against Aman and the wicked in general. This meeting would be closed with a solemn blessing of Mardochai of Esther and of all the Israelites.

This feast was an occasion for the distribution of gifts and alms. The pious people did these with religious intention. But otherwise, this feast has more profane character than religious. People celebrated it with banquets and amusements. Drinking was allowed. This feast slowly became the Jewish carnival.

The name "Purim" and the institution of this feast owed to the story of Esther contained in the book of Esther. This book narrates the story of the miraculous deliverance of the Jews settled in Persia at the time of the Persian king Ahasuerus the Great. The story tells us that at that time the emperor conceded to the counsel of Haman, who was hostile to the Jews, to issue an edict to exterminate all the Jews. But the Jews were saved by the effort of Esther, a young Jewess, who has become the queen. She acted always according to the advice of Mardocai, her uncle. God has reversed the situation, and so the edict was not only withdrawn, but also the wicked Haman was punished with death and Mardocai was honoured, and the Jews were given privileges. This great intervention of God in the history of Israel is remembered by celebrating this feast of Purim. It is called "Purim", because Haman had cast lots (pur) on the 14th of Adar to exterminate the Jews, but to his surprise this wicked plot of his turned against himself (Cf Est 9:26). The word "pur" comes from the ancient Akkadian "puru", meaning "lot" or "destiny." The feast under the name Purim, was instituted by Mardocai and confirmed officially by the queen Esther (Est 10:32).

The characteristic note of this feast is joy. The Jews remembered the days Adar 14th and 15th as the days "on which the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness, and from mourning into a holiday" (Est 9: 21-22). During this feast the Jews are called upon to feasting and rejoicing, for sending choice portions to one another and gifts to the poor.

The origin of this feast is only a matter of conjecture. Perhaps it originated in the Jewish communities of Eastern Diaspora in the 4th century B.C. It commemorated the miraculous escape of the Jews from

a dangerous situation in their history. It contained certain characteristics of the Persian New Year feast, e.g., the amusements, the banquets, the New Year gifts, the notion of a change which brings about a renovation. From Persia the feast might have spread to Mesopotamea, and there it assumed several Babylonian characteristics, such as the very name Purim from the casting of lots (puru). This fits in well with the Babylonian belief that at the beginning of each year the destination of men were fixed.

II. INDIAN FESTIVALS

India is a land of many religions and many religious festivals. This article is not an indepth study of any of these festivals. In this part of the article we make a quick glance of some of the important hindu festivals that we may see that the basic dynamics at work in human heart with regard to Festivals, irrespective of their creed, are strikingly parallel.

The Lunar Calendar

Both India and Israel followed the lunar calendar. This is part of their great oriental heritage. In the Orient most countries of ancient culture followed the lunar calendar in fixing up the feasts.

The lunar calendar of Israel is as follows: Every New Moon was the beginning of a new month. If the sky was so cloudy as the appearance of the new moon could not be observed, then the new month would begin on the next day. In this way there could be months of 29 or 30 days. According to this lunar calendar, the year had 13 months: 1) Nisan (Middle of March upto middle of April); 2) Iyyar (Middle of April to middle of May); 3) Sivan (Middle of May to middle of June); 4) Tammuz (Middle of June to middle of July); 5) Ab (Middle of July to middle of August); 6) Elul (Middle of August to middle of September); 7) Tishri (Middle of Sept. to middle of Oct.), 8) Marchesvan (Middle of Oct. to middle of Nov.); 9) Chislev (Middle of Nov. to middle of Dec.); 10) Tebeth (Middle of Dec. to middle of Jan.); 11) Shebat (Middle of Jan. to middle of Febr.); 12) Adar (Middle of Febr. to middle of March); 13) Second Adar. The yearly cycle of the sun has 11 days over and above the 354 days required for 12 cycles of the moon. To make up for these extra days, every now and then an extra month was added to the year, which was called "second Adar." The addition of this second month

was done according to the condition of the harvest. If the harvest was not ripe enough, a central committee in Jerusalem decided to add this extra month. If this extra month was added, then accordingly the feast of Passover was postponed by four weeks.

Because change in the waning and waxing moon is easily perceptible, the moon became a medium of measurement of time which is intimately related to movements observable in space. As in Palestinian tradition, India also acknowledged twelve lunar months. They are: 1) Caitra (March–April), 2) Vasakha (April–May), 3) Jyesta (May–June), 4) Asadha (June–July), 5) Sravana (July–August), 6) Bhadrapada (August–Sept), 7) Asvina (Sept–Oct), 8) Karttika (Oct–Nov), 9) Marga-Sirsa (Nov–Dec), 10) Pansa (Dec–Jan), 11) Magha (Jan–Febr), 12) Phalgun (Febr–March).

In the Indian system each lunar month is divided into two halves based on the waxing and waning of the moon. Each half is further divided into 15 tithis (lunar dates). A tithi is slightly shorter than a solar day of 24 hours. The eleventh day of every month is dedicated to Vishṇu and consequently is observed with fast by many devout Vaishṇavites; similarly the Śaivites observe the 13th day of every month as dedicated to Siva, while 4th is dedicated to Ganeśa, and 8th to Durga. Ganesa's feast falls on the 4th bright half of the month Bhadrapada (Aug–Sept) and therefore is known as *Ganes-chathurthy* (Ganeś on the 4th). Krishna's birthday falls on the 8th dark half of Śrāvana (July–August) and hence is known as *Krishna-Janmāshṭami* (birth of Krishna on the 8th).⁹ Most of the important festivals are fixed according to the lunar calendar. Thus the feast of *Deepāvaly* (Feast of Lights) begins on the 13th of *Asvina* (Sept–Oct) and goes upto the 2nd of *Karthika* (Oct–Nov).

The numerous feasts which the Hindu people celebrate can be classified into some main categories:

- 1) Feasts celebrating the memory of the liberation of the people, or the triumph of the good over the evil.
- 2) Feasts which are basically harvest festivals.
- 3) Feasts of pilgrimages and atonement.

8. Cf. V.F. Vineeth, "Religio-Cultural Festivals of India", *Journal Dharma*, Vol. XII, No. 2 (1987); pp. 136–137.

- 4) Feasts of particular gods and goddesses and their saving tales.

1. Festival of Liberation

Reminding us very strongly of the Paschal Festival, a remembrance of the story of liberation, India celebrates several festivals, all of which are attempts to remember and re-enact mythical stories of their suffering in the past and liberation through the special intervention of the Lord. I am mentioning here a few of such stories.

a) *Deepāvali*: Deepavali or the feast of lights is a grand festival celebrated all over India. As it is a festival of life, it already points to the triumph of light over darkness.

On the 13th month Asvina (Sept–Oct) the entire India enters into a joyous mood of celebration. The temples, streets and houses are decorated with lights of different colours, and sounds of fireworks cram the atmosphere. People are beginning to celebrate the feast of lights. Several myths are remembered, most of them are pointing to the story of their own deliverance from the demonic reign of ancient rulers.¹⁰

These festal celebrations are supported by the remembrance of the myth of deliverance and people's faith in the need of divine help. Since India is a vast country, the myths remembered vary from place to place. This is because people adapt stories to their surroundings. Thus during Deepavali many people in the South celebrate the victory of Krishna over a demon king called Narakasura, while in the North it is the remembrance of the coronation of Rama, an avatar of Vishnu, who had to go through an ordeal of 14 years of hard life in the forest. As Rama was a peace-loving king and because during his reign peace and prosperity reigned in the kingdom, people in India even now use the word Ramarajya (the kingdom of Rama) as an epithet for an ideal kingdom.

The rituals of the feast include the commemoration of Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity on the 13th of Asvina, the ritual bath of purification on the 14th, and illumination of temples, houses and roads on the 14th night accompanied by fireworks, the feast of cattle on the 1st day

10. Ibid. p. 138.

of Karthika and the fraternal get-together of families on the 2nd of Karthika. Thus the festival marks the end of the night that reigned in their life upto that day and the beginning of a new life in harmony and rhythm under the loving protection of a god or a goddess who saves them.

b) *Dasara*: Dasara is another grand festival celebrated all over India. Once again it is a liberation story that is remembered and celebrated. As in the case of Deepavali, North and South India differ in relating the celebration to appropriate myth; but invariably they are always myths of liberation, prosperity and peace. Thus in the southern state Karnataka what is celebrated is the victory of goddess Durga over the wild king Mahishasura, whereas in the northern states of the Hindi belt Dasara is celebration of the victory of Rama over the demon king Ravana.

The ritual of the feast includes nine days of novena and fasting, each set of three days dedicated to Durga, the goddess of divine power, to Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity, and Saraswathi, the goddess of wisdom and fine arts respectively. With the help of the divine power the demon is defeated, the new life is inaugurated with signs of prosperity and virtue and wisdom begin to reign in the country in rhythm and peace.

There are several other festivals in India reminding us again and again the victory of the good over the evil. Sree Krishna Jayanthi is a commemoration of the murder of Kamsa, a legendary king of Madura, by Krishna, an avatar of Vishnu, whom the wicked king Kamsa wanted to slay, but paradoxically the contrary took place. The two great epics of India, the Ramayana and the Mahabharatha, are basically war stories telling us the same truths that truth will prevail over untruth, though for a moment untruth may shine forth as great and powerful.

2. Festivals of Harvest

Onam and Pongal in the South and Holi in the North are supposed to be the festivals of harvest origin. Myths were probably added later in imitation of the myths of the festivals of liberation.

a) *Onam*: Onam is a festival widely celebrated in the Southern state Kerala. The feast celebrated for 7 days with various festivities is in essence the remembrance of the good old days of a nice and benevolent

king, who reigned over the people of Kerala, and while he reigned, peace and prosperity prevailed in the country as justice and truth prevailed in the heart of the people. This good king of the South was however stealthily defeated by Vamana, Vishnu in the disguise of a dwarf, and pushed down to the underworld. The Lord Vishnu, however, allowed the benevolent king to visit his people every year. Onam is the time of this yearly homecoming of the king Mahabali. Kerala celebrates the feast in harvest season and the community rejoices in richness of varieties of the fruit of the land and various cultural competitive festivities. Since Vamana is an avatar of Vishnu and belongs to the Aryan pantheon and Mahabali is a king of Dravidian origin, the festival may also point to the Aryan victory over the Dravidians in the South. The people of Kerala, however, are happy as they remember their good king Mahabali.

b) *Pongal*: As Onam in Kerala, so Pongal in the adjacent state Tamilnadu is a harvest festival very widely celebrated. The myth remembered reminds us of the Mother earth, who appearing in the form of a cow, promises Prathu, an earnest and diligent farmer, to fecundate the earth with her own milk. Pongal is the celebration of the fruits of this fertility. The rituals celebrated includes the rite of purification on the eve of the sun Pongal day, and the boiling of rice with milk and sugar on the Pongal day. This day, the 1st day of the Tamil month Tai, is dedicated to sun. Pongal is of Dravidian origin and does not follow lunar calendar. The word Pongal means rising a leaping upward. As rice when boiled swells and rises and leaps upward so does the human heart, filled with glory, leaps upward and flows outward in love, labour and concord. The third day of the Pongal is dedicated to the cattle and the fourth day for visiting friends and relatives. What is especially to be noted is that friendliness and harmony is restored not only among human beings, but also with cattle and the whole nature. The festival is essentially the restoration of the entire rhythm of the universe.

3. Festivals of Atonement

All over the world mankind is aware of human sinfulness. Religions have, therefore, come forward with rituals of atonement. In Indian tradition long and arduous pilgrimages are attached to the ritual of atonement. Thus we have the feast of Sabarimala Ayyappan in the South, a popular festival of pilgrimage and atonement in the South, and Kumbhamela, a feast of atonement and ritual bathing in the North. People, who

make their vow to go to Sabarimala have to observe very strict rule of fasting, abstinence and prayer. They wear only black clothes from the day of the commencement of their fast which last for thirty days. The pilgrimage includes the arduous journey carrying the bundle of offerings on their heads, the climbing of the mount Sabari and the final homage of the self to the diety. The faith is that the Lord on the mount Sabari forgets and forgives all the sins of his faithful and grant them grace and power for a new life.

So also the Kumbhamela in the North attracts thousands of devotees from all over the country, and from abroad. The ritual bath at the meeting place of three rivers, Ganga, Yamuna, and Sarawathy is considered to be especially propitiatory and meritorious. But what is demanded of the faithful is a mentality of inner purification and freedom from all sort of mental bondages. Often, as in the case of several festivals, *mela* (celebration) remains a mere *mela* of sound, music and play, while the inner cleanliness is comfortably forgotten. But the original significance of the festivals are quite meaningful and is earnestly understood and followed at least by a few faithful devotees.

4. The Festival of Dedication

The rhythm of the divine has to flow uninterruptedly all through man's life. What hampers this divine flow of rhythm in human life is his self-centredness. Whenever man acts he gets into the grip of ego. Hence man has to act without ego, just as God demands him to act. Though this is the ideal, practically it is very difficult. He can, however, consciously cease to act for a few days and dedicate all his instruments of action to God. This can be ritually done, though what is really meant is the dedication of all his being and activities.

In the month of *Aśvina* (Sept–Oct) the hindu people of India celebrate the feast of dedication, known, as *ayudha-puja*: the sacrifice of all the utensils of work. The workers surrender their instruments before the altar of Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity and the students surrender their text books, note books and pencils at the altar of Saraswathi, the goddess of wisdom. Untouched they remain at the altar of the goddess for three days. Then they take them back to restart their ordinary rhythm of life, but by now these instruments are blessed by the goddess

and consequently their lives too which use these instruments. Everything become God-centred.

5. Other Occasional Festival

Hindus in India celebrate numerous other festivals to commemorate the day of a particular god or goddess of a special sect or family. Thus we have the feast of Ganesa, a widely celebrated feast in honour of the elephant-headed son of Siva. It is believed that Ganesa bestows grace and prosperity on his devotees. So also the feast of each particular deity enthroned in a shrine or a temple are duly celebrated. India is a land of numerous feasts, fasts and unending celebrations.

III. CONCLUSION

This brief look at the biblical and hindu festivals does not conclude that these festivals are identical in their institution or nature. However, they point to certain dynamics that are operative in all of us and find solutions for our own inner quests by celebrating festivals of various kinds. The celebration of a feast gets its real meaning only from the perspective of faith with which it is celebrated. It is faith that makes a ritual eloquent and meaningful. Faith also supplies a world-vision bringing the whole universe to the centre of the festal celebration. As faith varies, the inner understanding of the feast also varies. The Israelites looked upon each feast as specially ordered by Yahweh. This is typically manifested in the commandment to observe the Pasque. When we come to the Hindu world such commandments given by a personal God may not be seen. But Scriptures give numerous injunctions or orders as to the manner festivals are to be celebrated. People follow this by way of a tradition. God, the Lord, who is the creator of all human beings can speak through a prophet or also through the human nature which reflects his very image. Festivals, whether instituted by a revealing God or by untraceable human tradition, assure our specific quest of mankind: to experience the eternal in time, the divine in human hearts. As Mircea Eliade rightly points out it is a moment of man's entry into the divine time and the divine world. Many festivals, biblical as well as hindu, are harvest festivals. A religious sanction of it may be added later. It is quite natural that people forget the pain and hardships of labour for a moment when they reap the fruits of their hard labour. God in his loving providence sanctifies it; a commandment of God follows or a

myth is attached to it. This is needed for the total rejoicing of man. Both body and soul, earth and heaven rejoice at the celebration of festivals.

In the festivals of liberation God's salvific power is especially manifested. This engenders trust in the devotees and also a salutary fear against the reign of wickedness in one's life. As Yahweh is presented in the Old Testament as a God who takes vengeance over the enemies, so also many hindu gods and goddesses come out triumphantly after ruthlessly slaying the tyrant king who persecuted the good people. Both these stories, whether historical or mythological, mark a stage of human thinking and acting where love for enemies and self-sacrifice for the deliverance of all, as in the case of Jesus, are still unknown ideals to the world. Yet always we see fasts attached to feasts. Nobody has a right to celebrate a liberation unless he is free of bondages. Hence the regulation regarding fasts before the festivals. Selflessness is necessary for the building up of any healthy community. Only with a pure and unselfish heart one can dedicate everything to God. The feasts of atonement emphasize the need of purification, while that of dedication the need of divine reign in everything.

India and Israel have a lot in common. They look somewhat different in their understanding about God, they both share a common oriental heritage and culture. The personal monotheistic concept of God Yahweh is uncompromisingly distinct from the hindu concept of the Pantheon. However, the wrath with which this God acts, and the predilection which he has for one race and all such human characters attributed to this God, especially in the stories of liberation or salvation, reminds us of the triumphant descent (*avatar*) of the Hindu god or goddess to save his/her devotees. Both countries developed festivals centering around the stories of their own deliverance, the event of harvests, the need of atonement in their life and complete surrender to the divine will.