

FESTIVALS, COMMUNICATION AND DEVELOPMENT

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1. Introduction

Communities around the world have their own religious, political and cultural festivals and celebrate them in their own style on a particular period of time in a year. Religious communities in India whether they belong to Hinduism or Islam or Christianity or other faiths love to celebrate festivals with elaborate and expensive arrangements to make their celebrations grandeur. Some of the festivals such as Deepavali, Ramzan, Christmas are celebrated nation-wide by the respective communities with the greetings and blessings of their religious leaders, politicians of different parties and the President of India. Some other festivals such as Onam of Kerala and Pongal of Tamil Nadu are celebrated at the state level. A number of regional festivals are celebrated by the villagers or a sect or caste group or a tribe. Chithirai festival, marking the beginning of Tamil New Year is a grand festival celebrated locally for a week in the Meenakshi Temple at Madurai. National festivals such as Independence Day, Republic Day and May Day are remembered by all the communities of India, irrespective of their caste and religion. Festivals are given so much of importance in Indian society because they function as a medium of communication enabling the communities to maintain their self-identity in the midst of pluralistic culture. Festivals remind them of their religious, historical and social traditions. They strengthen the social and religious bond of the communities. Festivals make their worship more meaningful and contribute to their spirituality. Festivals of historical importance remind the participants of their historical past and motivate to shape their future. However, festivals are used sometimes to oppress a certain section of the community either a sub-caste or women or children.

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Festivals can be used for liberating the spirit of communities from hopelessness and exploited situation or for suppressing communities. Festivals can contribute for the development of communities if they are planned, taught to the participants and celebrated meaningfully. With the rise of fundamentalism, festivals are used today to propagate religious and political fanaticism, superstitions, oppressive customs and inhuman practices, creating tensions within a community or between communities. Celebration of festivals ends up sometimes in conflicts, violence and bloodshed.

A detailed study of festivals from different perspectives could be helpful. But my interest is to study some of the festivals of ancient Israel narrated in the Old Testament from the perspective of communication. Many studies have already been made on the festivals of Israel from historical, form-critical, development of traditions and theological perspectives using various approaches. Roland de Vaux gives a detailed narration of several festivals of the Old Testament discussing their origin and development in his book *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*.¹ H. H. Rowley discusses the development of worship from the patriarchal period to the post-exilic period and the place of festivals in Israelite worship.² Georg Fohrer points out the link between the festivals of Canaanites and Israelites and the way the Israelites theologised the borrowed festivals in the light of their faith in Yahwehism.³ Mowinckel brings out the meaning and role of cult and festivals, particularly the Enthronement Festival paying attention to the *sitz-im-Leben* of the festivals and the way the Psalms contribute to the preservation and development of the festivals in Israel.⁴ Arvid Kapelrud traces the relationship between worship and the development of religious traditions in Israel and the role of the cult in preserving the traditions and

¹Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, London: DLT, 1986, 475-518.

²H. H. Rowley, *Worship in Ancient Israel: Its Forms and Meaning*, London: SPCK, 1967, 1-143.

³Georg Fohrer, *History of Israelite Religion*, London: SPCK, 1981, 195-213.

⁴S. Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982, 1-22, 140-185.

transmitting to the generations.⁵ Norman Gottwald discusses the relationship between cult and historical traditions.⁶ K. J. Kraus' study brings out background and celebrations of various festivals.⁷ The Historical-Critical methods, no doubt, have contributed enormously to the study of festivals in the Old Testament, especially to know more about the origin and development of festivals, relationship between the cult and traditions, theology of the festivals in Pentateuchal sources of JEDP and the process of historicization and theologization of festivals. However, not much effort is taken to study the festivals in ancient Israel from the perspective of communication and its relevance for the development of community.

2. Community, Cult and Communication

Scholars of different disciplines of study have proposed various definitions for the term 'community' and make distinctions between the three related concepts such as 'communities', 'community' and "sense of community." 'Communities', in general, means "groups of people who relate to each other in an interactive way, who share common goals and values and survive as groups over some period of time."⁸ The ancient Israel settled in the land of Canaan is one of the communities which had goals and values, shared their resources and interacted within themselves as well as with other communities outside and faced natural calamities, attacks of enemies and persecutions in different periods of history and experienced exile and dispersion to other territories. Yet, they survived as a community and maintained a common identity as people of Israel. Scholarly studies on the nature of the composition of the people of Israel show the inclusion of different races such as Edomites, Moabites, Ammonites, Canaanites, Babylonians and Persians into the community at different stages of their

⁵Arvid S. Kapelrud, "Tradition and Worship: The Role of Cult in Tradition Formation and Transmission" in *Tradition and Theology in the OT*, ed. D. A. Knight, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977, 101-124.

⁶N. K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel 1250-1050 BCE*, New York: Orbis Books, 1981, 63-114.

⁷K. J. Kraus, *Worship in Israel*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1966.

⁸N. Jayaweera, "Communication for Community," in *Communication and Community and Prophecy*, ed. J. Massey, Delhi: ISPCK/WACC, 1989, 4-6.

history.⁹ There were marriages between the Israelites and other communities living in the midst of them or in their neighbouring nations. Biblical references to the marriage of Moses to the daughter of a Priest, a Midianite (Ex 2:15-22), Boaz to Ruth, a Moabite woman (Ruth 4:13), David with Bathsheba, a Hittite woman (2Sam 11:27), Solomon with the daughters of neighbouring kings (1Kings 11:1-3), Ahab with Jezebel, the woman of Tyre (1Kings 19:1) and the reform of Ezra (Ezra 9:12-14) and Nehemiah (Neh 13:23-27) to put away the wives taken from Babylonian exile prove the inclusive nature of the Israelite community. Some of them became part and parcel of their families and others lived among the Israelites and worked as their servants. Both the nucleus and extended families of ancient Israel had people of other races, languages and cultures. The self-understanding of the community of Israel as the chosen and covenanted people of Yahweh was nurtured and sustained by the process of communication. This included various means, which may be classified as follows:

- i) Telling of the stories about divine revelation and promises of land, prosperity and becoming a great nation given to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; their bondage, deliverance from Egypt; election and covenant to preserve the myth of their origin and occupation of the land of Canaan;
- ii) Sagas and legends of leaders and their victories and making the community a great nation;
- iii) Instructions of laws and ordinances as received directly from God to exist as an ethical community;
- iv) Presentations about God's attributes and actions through songs, prophetic oracles, historical reports, proverbs; and
- v) Theologising and offering sacrifices and celebrating festivals in the context of cult.

Through the above process of communication between God and people, leaders and congregations, members of family, the generations of the past, present and future in ancient Israel they could develop a self-

⁹J. Bright, *History of Israel*, London: SCM Press, 1972, 131; M. Noth, *The History of Israel*, London: SCM Press, 1983, 1-7.

identity and a culture as the community of Yahweh and maintain their identity and culture as distinctive and unique. They developed their community, in terms of their identity, structure of their society, leadership and administration, economy, military security, worship, sacrifices and festivals. The socio-political, economic and religious natures of the community were shaped by the effect of the communication taking place in the context of families, worship and court.

Cult played a major role in communicating the ideals to the members of the community. According to Mowinckel, cult is "the socially established and regulated holy acts and words in which the encounter and communion of the Deity with the congregation is established, developed and brought to its ultimate goal. In other words: a relation in which a religion becomes a vitalizing function as a communion of God and congregation, and of the members of the congregation amongst themselves."¹⁰ The communication of God to the community through words and acts is an initiative of God. Mowinckel calls the acts and words of God as "sacramental acts and words" because they reveal the holiness and power of God to create or grant rain, fertility or victory in times of war or liberate the community from the oppression of others. On the other hand, the initiative of human beings to communicate to God through their expression of words and acts, particularly by bringing offerings, sacrifices, and prayers, and obeying the laws is called "sacrificial acts and words."¹¹ Through the inter-action of 'sacramental' and 'sacrificial' acts and words, the relationship between God and community is established and continued in the cult. The acts and words in the inter-active communication explain what originally had happened. Whether God has granted the prayers of the community or accepted their offerings and sacrifices or acted in the history and liberated them or granted rain, fertility of the soil, harvest, protection from natural disaster and diseases, or deliverance from enemies can be known only when we analyse the communication happened between them. Whatever may be the result of the communication, Mowinckel summarizes these blessings of God to the community as 'life.'¹² Life, according to him, means "salvation." The salvation achieved through the

¹⁰Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 15.

¹¹Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 17.

¹²Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 17.

communication between God and community is actualised in the cult by celebrating the festivals. Celebrating the Passover festival actualised the liberation and exodus from Egypt. In celebrating the agricultural festivals, people acknowledged not only the goodness of God in granting rain, fertility of the soil and sustaining the lives of humans, plants and animals but also actualised the power of God over nature to create and continue the life on the earth. By celebrating the festivals, the community 'remembered' what God has done for them and 'reminded' their generation of all the deeds of God. The community 'actualises' the past and 'motivates' themselves to continue in communion with God.

In celebrating the festivals in the context of cult, they realized the presence of God in the midst of them. God's presence in their cultic celebration, represented either by the presence of the Ark of the Covenant or in the form of a cloud or a voice or carried out through symbolic rituals, makes the remembrance of the message of the festival or festal myth into a living reality. Cult in ancient Israel was not mere ritual but creative because of the interactive communication between God and the community. It energized the community through repeated celebration of the festivals to remember the act of God in their socio-economic and political history. It enhanced constantly the vision of God and strengthened their self-identity as the people of Yahweh. It became the context for the formation of and remembering the tradition. The inter-action of community, cult and communication is highlighted further as we discuss the origin, development, message of the festivals and fasts and the way they were celebrated as ritual events and interactive process in developing the society.

3. Festivals: History and Theology

Ancient Israel, like any other community, celebrated a number of feasts and fasts. Some of them are secular and not linked to their cult. A list of religious festivals and fasts celebrated is given in Ex 23:14-19, Num 28-29, Lev 23 and Dt 16:1-17. Each of these references in the Pentateuch mentions certain feasts and fasts and leaves out other feasts.

a. Pastoral Feast of Passover

The feast of Passover and Unleavened Bread, the two originally separate

festivals, were combined and presented as one festival in Ex 12:1-13:16; 23:15; 34:18-20, 25; Lev 23:4-14; Num 28:16-25 and Dt 16:1-8. Scholars have studied the relation of the pastoral feast of Passover to the agricultural feast of Unleavened Bread and pointed out the way these two different festivals were linked together at a later stage.¹³ The first reference to the event of Passover in the narration of the OT appears in Ex 12-13 in the context of oppression in Egypt and liberation from slavery. However, major part of the information in Ex 12-13 comes from the Priestly source dating around BC 450-400.¹⁴ The Israelites had to gather as a congregation and kill their lambs in the evening (Ex12:6), roast and eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs (12:8). This feast was not merely a family dinner but a "sacrifice to Yahweh" because they gathered as a congregation at a particular location in Egypt, sacrificed the selected lambs, sprinkled the blood on the altar and burnt the fat as an offering to Yahweh. Once this ritual of sacrifice was over, they were asked to apply the blood on the doorpost of their houses and stay inside the house. The entire lamb roasted should be eaten within that night and the remaining portion should be burnt on the following morning (12:10). The slaves and sojourners, who would be living in the midst of them after their settlement in Canaan, were allowed to take part in the feast if they were circumcised and incorporated into the congregation of Yahweh. This feast was held for one day but followed by the feast of the Unleavened Bread for a week. Ex 12:28 proves the actual happening of the Passover feast in the land of Egypt. But the Passover feast was not new to the Israelites. Scholars are of the opinion that nomadic community including the patriarchs of Israelites observed it during the spring season by sacrificing a young animal in order to secure the continuance of fertility of sheep and cattle and the prosperity of their flock.¹⁵ It was celebrated as they pitched their tent in a new place and make arrangement to take their flock for pasturing during spring season. It was an offering for the welfare of the flock. It is doubtful whether the nomads offered the sacrifice to redeem the first-born son in the family. Such a view of offering the sacrifice to redeem the first born in

¹³H. G. Mays, "The Relation of the Passover to the Festival of Unleavened Cakes," JBL, 55 (1936), 65-82.

¹⁴G. Fohrer, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, London: SPCK, 1976, 180. This author assigns Ex 12:1-20, 28, 40-51; 13:1-2 to P source.

¹⁵Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 489.

the family could have been inserted into the presentation of Ex 12:1-13:16 to link the feast of Passover to redeem the first born male and animal in Israel (13:1, 11-16) after seeing the death of the first born of Egypt and sparing their first born.¹⁶ But the nomads sprinkled the blood of the sacrificed animal on the doorposts of their tents to drive out the evil spirits attacking their flock. Scholars notice the traits of this nomadic festival such as collective participation, offering of sacrifice from the flock and not from herd, roasting the sacrificed lamb, sprinkling the blood on the doorposts of the tents, eating at night in hurry in the text of Ex 12-13. They affirm the nomadic origin of the feast of Passover.¹⁷ This practice of the Passover feast observed by the patriarchs and their descendants could have been the reason for the bonded Israelites asking Pharaoh to allow them to go out and celebrate the feast (Ex 5:1-3). Since they were denied permission to celebrate their traditional pastoral festival, they were commanded by Yahweh to celebrate it within Egypt (Ex 12) at the cost of the first born of the Egyptian families. This pastoral festival took the name of 'Passover' from the Hebrew term '*paseh*' referring to "Yahweh's passing over" the houses of the Israelites and sparing their lives. The aspect of redeeming the first born of the Israelite families after the exodus by offering the sacrifice to Yahweh became an integrated element at the event of the feast of Passover (13:1) after exodus.

The Israelites were commanded at the event of the Passover feast in Egypt to observe the feast forever. It became an ordinance to them is known to us from Ex 12:14. The feast of Passover continued in Israel is evident from the celebration recorded in historical text (Josh 5:10-12; 2Kings 23:21-23; 2Chro 30; 35:1-18; Ezra 6:19-22). Whether the Passover was celebrated each year was doubtful. 2Kings 23:22 speaks of lapses in celebrating this festival in pre-exilic period. We are furthermore not clear about the celebration of Passover during their exile in Babylon. But it was revived during the rule of Josiah and after returning from exile (Ezra 6:19-22). Although one can notice slight changes in the way they celebrated it from the period of bondage in Egypt to the period of Judges and Kings and

¹⁶M. Haran, "The Passover Sacrifice," VTS, 23 (1972), 89-90; Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 489.

¹⁷Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 494.

post-exilic, the following salient features of the Passover were not changed.

- i) The Passover feast continued as a community feast. The entire community of Israel celebrated it including those slaves and sojourners who were circumcised and joined the assembly. Women were not excluded.
- ii) It was held in the same month of Abib irrespective of changes in their political history. It was a nation-wide community celebration on the same day of Abib, which became the first month in their calendar due to the event of deliverance from bondage in Egypt (Ex 12:1-2).
- iii) The cultic dimension of the festival was upheld since the animal was killed not at their homes but at the site of the cultic centre when they gathered as the congregation. The sacrifices were regarded as holy to Yahweh.
- iv) The celebration of the Passover held at the local cultic centres in each town during the settlement period was transferred to the central sanctuary under the amphictyony (2Kings 23:22) and to Jerusalem after the construction of the temple (2Chro 35:18). Centralization of the cult in Jerusalem led the Israelites to go on a pilgrimage and celebrate the festival in Jerusalem.
- v) The festal myth of liberation from Egypt was reiterated because they were required to tell the reason for celebrating the festival of Passover (Ex 12) to their generation. The historicization of the feast of Passover as liberation from bonded slavery in Egypt was re-enacted at the festival by commanding the participants to dress like a traveller, have a stick and eat the feast in a hurry (Ex 12). The generations that never experienced slavery and liberation internalise this experience as their heritage by enacting the rituals of the feast.
- vi) This nomadic festival is theologised in Israel as redeeming the first-born son and animal by offering the sacrifice and gaining liberation and freedom from slavery. Nomads were not slaves to anyone. They wandered with their flocks and herds as free people. They found no geographical limitation to pasture their sheep and cattle. The farming community of ancient Israel which cherished the ideal of freedom

could no longer accept slavery and to be servants of Pharaoh. The experience of liberation from Egypt formulated the belief of Yahweh as the God of liberation and strengthened the ideal of freedom and rights of human beings. The Israelite community inherited the theology that their God is liberator at the event of Passover. They communicated the theology and history of liberation and redemption as the message of the festival to their generations by celebrating the Passover and actualising the experience of liberation.

b. Feast of Unleavened Bread

Although the feast of Unleavened Bread is mentioned in connection with the event of Passover in Ex 12-13, this festival was not celebrated at the time of exodus from Egypt. The Hebrew term '*massoth*' which means "unleavened or unfermented bread" indicates the connection of the feast of Unleavened Bread with agriculture. Since the Israelites who entered the land of Canaan and pitched their camp in Gilgal celebrated the Passover and ate the produce of the land as the manna ceased, it is possible that the feast of Unleavened Bread was celebrated for the first time in continuation with the Passover (Josh 5:10-12). The feast of Passover and Unleavened Bread at Gilgal marked a new beginning in the history of Israel. Their struggle for liberation reached its fulfilment as they celebrated these festivals on their arrival at Gilgal. We are not told clearly by the accounts of Joshua whether they ate the produce of their own cultivation. They might have purchased the grains from the Canaanites or gathered it from the fields. But after learning the agriculture from the Canaanites, they celebrated the feast of Unleavened Bread with the produce of their cultivation. Since the Canaanites celebrated a similar festival as they harvested barley, it is believed that the Israelites had borrowed this festival from the Canaanites. The feast was celebrated for seven days beginning and concluding it with a gathering of the community on the Sabbath. The important ritual of this feast is to eat the unleavened bread made out of the new grains for seven days. Bread should not be made with flour of the previous harvest and with leaven. The Israelites were required not to appear before Yahweh empty hand but to bring the offerings all the seven days of their celebration. Sacrifices were offered as burnt offering and sin offering (Num 28:16-25). Initially, it was a community celebration at the local cultic centres in villages and towns before it was transferred to the

temple in Jerusalem and made a pilgrimage festival. The feast of Unleavened Bread marked the beginning of the harvest season and represented the beginning of the new year. Their history of liberation and harvesting of the barley, the first fruit of the season, led them to mark the month of Abib as the beginning of the new year for the Israelites. The festivals of Passover and Unleavened Bread gave them the meaning of the new beginning in their lives because the liberation from slavery and eating the produce of the Promised Land happened in the month of Abib.

The following are the salient features of the feast of Unleavened Bread:

- i) Canaanites celebrated the same festival to mark the harvest of barley. But this feast is linked with the system of week in Israel and the celebration went on for seven days.
- ii) It also provided the basis for calculating another seven weeks to mark the harvest of wheat. Their calendar for harvesting wheat speaks of seven weeks from the harvest of barley.
- iii) It is linked with the Sabbath because the feast began with the solemn assembly on the Sabbath and concluded on the following Sabbath. The cultic dimension was maintained by bringing offerings and sacrifices to Yahweh on these seven days.
- iv) It is connected with the history of liberation from Egypt by celebrating it in continuation with the celebration of Passover. If the Passover marks the new beginning of their freedom from oppression, the Unleavened Bread marks the fulfilment of the exodus and beginning of their agrarian life in Canaan.
- v) The borrowed festival of the Unleavened Bread is indigenised in Israel by celebrating it to commemorate the beginning of their history in Canaan rather than observing the fertility cult of Canaan. By eating the unleavened bread at the beginning of each year, their generations could remember the past history and the fulfilment of Yahweh's promises to their ancestors. It is theologised as the feast of Yahweh since Yahweh has acted in the history of their salvation.
- vi) Anyone eats leavened food was punished by being excommunicated from the membership of the community (Ex 12:17-20). Following

strictly the rituals of the feast, and observation of the Sabbath before and after the celebration strengthened the solidarity of the whole Israelite community.

c. Feast of Weeks

The festival of Weeks is connected with the harvest of wheat. It is called as the "Feast of Weeks" because it was celebrated after seven weeks of the harvest of barley. If the feast of Unleavened Bread marked the beginning of harvesting the cereal, the feast of Weeks concluded the harvesting season of the year. Since the feast of Weeks was celebrated on the fiftieth day after the harvest of wheat, it is known later as the feast of the Pentecost. This feast began after the day of Sabbath by presenting the first sheaf of wheat to Yahweh. It was celebrated for seven days concluding on the following Sabbath (Lev 23:21). The important ritual of the feast is to offer two loaves of bread made out of the flour of wheat harvested recently and baked with leaven. In addition to this offering of bread, they had to offer sacrifices of lambs, bulls and rams as burnt offering. Drink offering was also demanded of them. The accounts of Lev 23:15-21 and Num 28:26-31 differ regarding the list of animal sacrifices and other offerings to be brought to Yahweh. The feast of Weeks required the use of leaven, which was prohibited in the feast of Unleavened Bread. The offering of the leavened bread to Yahweh signifies the nature of the feast as farmers' feast.¹⁸ The farming community such as the Canaanites leading a settled life used the leavened bread as their common food. The Israelites who borrowed this festival from the Canaanites celebrated the feast of Weeks on the third month of the year and linked the feast of Weeks with their history of liberation from slavery (Dt 16:12). Neither of the accounts in Ex 23, Lev 23, Num 28 and Dt 16 connects this feast with the making of the covenant at Sinai or renewal of the covenant through the celebration. Dt 16:12 indicates its link with the liberation and not with the event of making a covenant at Sinai. But scholars infer from the narration in 2Chron 15:10 that the festival celebrated during the third month (during the reform of Asa) was the feast of the Weeks.¹⁹ The important aspect of the feast was the renewal of the covenant. On the one hand, assuming the

¹⁸Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 494.

¹⁹Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 496, 501.

festival celebrated on the third month refers to the feast of Weeks is questionable. But, on the other hand, the third month marked the harvest of wheat and so Asa could have celebrated the feast of Weeks and brought in the aspect of renewal of the covenant to be incorporated into the feast. Another inference to consider the feast of Weeks to be associated with the covenant could be the demand of sin offering as an important aspect of the celebration (Num 28:22). Sin offering included in this feast means the necessity to seek the forgiveness for violating the laws of the Covenant. So in celebrating the feast of Weeks, it is possible, the Israelite community commemorated the covenant at Sinai rather than the fertility of the land. Mowinkel believes that Yahweh accepts the offerings and sacrifices of the festival and comes to renew the covenant made at Sinai and renews all the blessings to the community in celebration.²⁰

In addition to the salient features of this feast, marking the end of the harvest season and using the leavened bread in the offering to Yahweh, the following two features can be mentioned.

- i) The borrowed feast of weeks is indigenised by historicizing. It is linked to their history of salvation and making of the covenant during the third month of their arrival in Sinai. It is used as a tool to remember the Covenant, renew it each year and express the commitment of the Israelites to follow the law given at Sinai.
- ii) This feast is theologised to express the view that Yahweh who liberated them from Egypt is the God of the Covenant and is concerned about the relationship between them. Yahweh and Israel had mutual responsibility of keeping the covenant. Yahweh, on his part, had to provide the needed rain, fertility of the soil and posterity. Israel, on her part, had to fulfil the laws and ordinances of Yahweh.

d. Feast of Ingathering or Tent

The feast of Ingathering, another agricultural festival in Israel, was celebrated each year as they gathered the fruits in autumn season (Ex 23:16; 34:22). During their settlement period, it was held at Shiloh (Jud 21:19; 1Sam 1:3) but was transferred to the temple in Jerusalem at a later stage and transformed it into another pilgrimage festival. The celebration

²⁰Mowinkel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 154f.

of their festival went on for seven days beginning and concluding on the Sabbath day in the seventh month (Lev 23:33, 39). The Israelites were asked to take the fruits, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees and willows of the brook, and go in procession rejoicing before Yahweh (Lev 23:40) as an important ritual in addition to the offerings and sacrifices (Lev 23:36, Num 29:12-34). We come to know the treading of wine, drinking and dancing connected with the celebration of this festival from the accounts of Judges 9:27 and 21:19-21. This feast closely linked to the gathering of the produce of the land was borrowed from the Canaanites and celebrated as a farmers' feast (Ex 23:16). The main purpose of the festival was to thank Yahweh for the blessings of the land.²¹

It gained, however, another dimension as the Feast of Tents at a later stage (Lev 23:34; Dt 16:13-15). The Hebrew word '*sukkoth*' means 'hut' and not tent. The celebration of the feast of Ingathering required all the citizens of Israel to go out of their houses and live in booths made out of branches and leaves. The reason for this requirement is to teach the generations that their ancestors who came out of the slavery in Egypt, lived in tents in the wilderness (Lev 23:42-43). Thus, this feast was linked to the history of salvation.

In addition to the usual features of agricultural festivals such as a celebration of feasts as a community with a close link to Sabbath and cultic centres, we can point out two special features of this feast.

- i) Gathering the fruits of the land is to rejoice over the fruits of their hard labour in their land as well as to thank Yahweh for granting the produce and sustaining the supply of food to their community. The theology is that they were not worshipping the creation as happened in the cult of Baal but worshipping the creator and sustainer of nature. The Israelites indigenised the borrowed fertility cult of the Canaanites as a "feast of Yahweh," the creator and liberator.
- ii) Going out and living in huts was not to escape the attack of evil spirits as thought of by some other agricultural communities.²² The requirement of living in huts for seven days was to remember the

²¹Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 496, 501.

²²Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 500ff.

sojourning experience of their ancestors in the wilderness of Sinai and remind themselves as sojourners in the land given by Yahweh. It reminded them of their status of landless people and their responsibility to live and use the land as sojourners and aliens (See Lev 25:23). Yahweh's ownership of the land and the Israelites stewardship of the resources are implied in the celebration of the feast of Ingathering.

e. Day of Atonement

The Day of Atonement known as "*Yom Kippur*" is regarded as another appointed fast to be observed by the Israelites. Since all the references to this fast comes from the later source of P (Lev 16, 23:26-32; Num 29:7-11), it should have been introduced as an important observance at a later period in their history. However, offering sacrifices for the atonement of sin could have been practised for a long time before making it as an appointed fast. According to Lev 23:26-32, the day of atonement began on the evening of the ninth day and extended up to the evening of the tenth day in the seventh month. The ritual of the *Yom Kippur* includes the rest on the day it was celebrated. People have to express their self-denial by fasting the whole day. Sacrifices of bull, ram and lamb were offered for the atonement of sin (Lev 23:27; Num 29:8). The accounts of Lev 16 speak of two kinds of goats and sacrifices. The goat selected for sacrifice was offered to Yahweh. The other goat (*azazel*) was made to carry the sin of the community by a ritual of placing the hand on the head of the goat and sending it out of their region to the wilderness. The expiation also administered at stages. The first stage of the sacrifice was for the atonement of the sins of the priests and cleaning and sanctifying the altars. The second stage of the atonement was for the sins of the community. Roland De Vaux notices different layers of the texts edited at different stages and presented in Lev 16 as the reason for two kinds of goats and sacrifices and rejects any link with the episode in Lev 10:1-6.²³ Since the Day of Atonement became a fast for the entire community in later periods, it could have been associated with the second temple in the post-exilic period. Whether all citizens of Israel were asked to assemble in Jerusalem for the Day of Atonement is doubtful because it was considered as a pilgrimage (*hag*). While the ritual of sacrifice took place in Jerusalem, the Israelites could have observed the ritual of rest, fast and sacrificing the

²³ Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 507-510.

animal on that day in their own villages and towns. Members who disobey to observe the ritual of rest, fasting and taking part in the atonement sacrifice were to be ex-communicated from the community.

The salient features of the Day of Atonement are the following:

- i) It was celebrated as a fast annually in addition to the usual sin offering brought by the people to the priests. But by making it an annual event in the temple, this fast of the Day of Atonement called the people nationwide for analysing their lives, penitence and seeking forgiveness as a nation. It was a national fast for the corporate sin of the country.
- ii) It emphasized the holy living of the priests and people.
- iii) The symbolic action of sending out the goat (*azazel*) carrying the sins of the community could have been dramatic. We can notice similar ritual using pigeons, chickens and even goats in some festivals celebrated for the deities of villages in India.
- iv) The theology behind this fast is that Yahweh is a holy God and expects the people to be holy and the altars of the worshipping place to be kept sanctified.

f. Sabbath and the Festival of Trumpet

The Sabbath is included in the list of appointed festivals (Lev 23:3). In addition to this reference to Sabbath, the list mentions another Sabbath as a festival of trumpet (Lev 23:23-25) on the first day of the seventh month. The ritual of the festival of trumpet in the seventh month includes complete rest, a holy convocation commemorated with trumpet blasts (23:24) and a sacrifice of bull, ram and seven lambs as burnt offering along with grain offering (Num 29:1-6). The seventh month was marked for celebrations. The Day of Atonement and the feast of Ingathering or Tent went on the 10th and 15th day, respectively, on the seventh month. The seventh month that falls in the autumn season could be the old civil and religious new year. Whether the feast of Trumpet celebrated on the first day of the seventh month had any connection with the new year feast celebrated in the later post-exilic period is questionable. The exact reason for instituting the feast of Trumpet is also not clear. Perhaps, this festival could be to calculate and regularize the Sabbath days in the calendar after

their return from exile. Scholars have discussed the possibility of the origin of Sabbath in Babylon, Assyria and Canaan.²⁴ The celebration of Sabbath could have been borrowed by the Israelites because keeping days of rest at regular intervals was found in other cultures too. But the Israelites did not limit to the full moon day in a month. The Israelites have made the seventh day as the Sabbath and declared it as solemn rest to the family and animals. The sociological concern of rest from work was the earliest purpose for the observance of the Sabbath. But it was theologised to be regarded as a rest for Yahweh, too, because, first, God rested on the seventh day after creating for six days. Roland De Vaux says: "This idea of God's resting is not an anthropomorphism, but the expression of a theological idea: creation is the first action in the history of salvation; once it was over, God stopped work, and he was then able to make a covenant with his creature."²⁵ Second, the rest became a law by bringing it as a requirement in the Covenant made at Sinai (Ex 20:8-11). The Sabbath is linked with creation and covenant and made as a sign of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel (Ex 31:12-17). Third, the exodus event did not institute the Sabbath. On the other hand, the Sabbath as a sign of the covenant is linked to their history of liberation from slavery. So observance of Sabbath means remembering their slavery and rendering rest and deliverance to slaves.²⁶ The seed to make Sabbath as a festival could have been sown during the exilic period because Ezekiel emphasizes the observance of Sabbath (Ezek 20:13-20, 22:26, 23:38). Sabbath gained importance during exile because the Israelites could not have the temple to offer sacrifices and celebrate other festivals connected with sacrifices. The post-exilic situation led the Israelites to make it an annual special festival during the seventh month in addition to regular weekly observances. This could be inferred from the details about the festival of Trumpet coming from the later sources such as Isa 58:13 and Priestly document of Lev 23.

The following are the salient features of the festival of Trumpet:

²⁴Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 476-480.

²⁵Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 481.

²⁶Niels-Erik Andreassen, "Festival and Freedom: A Study of Old Testament Theme," *Interpretation*, 28,3 (1974), 281-297.

- i) The observance of Sabbath in Israel gave rest to human beings and animals once in seven days instead of once in a month on the full moon day.
- ii) It is detached from the order of lunar calendar, and, thus, from nature cycle and fertility cult and attached to the order of creation (Gen 1-2).
- iii) It is made as a law by linking it with the Decalogue, an integral part of the covenant at Sinai. Thus, Sabbath gained the theological dimension. Roland De Vaux writes: "Whatever its origin was, the Sabbath took on a particular meaning which made it an institution peculiar to Israel. Its characteristic feature lies not in the regularity with which it recurs, nor in the cessation of work, nor in the various prohibitions, which the cessation of work implies: all this is found, more or less, in other civilizations. Its distinctive trait lies in the fact that it is a day made holy because of its relation to the God of the Covenant; more, it is an element in that Covenant."²⁷
- iv) It is a sign of Israel's state of holiness by requiring the people to appear before Yahweh on the usual Sabbath day and with ritual sacrifices on the seventh month.
- v) This dimension of sanctification of people on the Sabbath day became an integral part of celebrating other festivals such as Passover, Unleavened Bread, feast of the Weeks and feast of the Ingathering. Observance of the Sabbath day before and after celebrating these festivals functioned as a preparation for the sanctity of Israel.
- vi) Since Sabbath was made a sacred sign of the covenant, observing it became a necessity. They remind themselves of their longing for rest during their slavery in Egypt and render rest and deliverance to others. It was another guarantee of salvation (Isa 58:13-14, 56:2; Jer 17:19-27).

g. Enthronement Festival

The list of the appointed feasts does not mention the festival of Enthronement. But it has to be included here for discussion because of references to the actual enthronement of kings in Israel (1Sam 10:1; 2Sam

²⁷Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 480.

5:1-5; 1Kings 1:38-40) and the statement of "Yahweh malek" appearing in some psalms (Ps 47, 93, 96). Enthronement of kings in Israel happened whenever a new king was selected. Such a celebration of coronation was occasional and not a regular annual event at the beginning of new year. But scholars argue that the Enthronement of Yahweh as a festival was celebrated in the form of a drama at the beginning of new year.²⁸ For, they believe that such an enthronement festival was celebrated at the beginning of new year in the Ancient Near Eastern countries, particularly in Canaan. The drama of Baal fighting and overcoming Mot and sitting on the throne victoriously was celebrated each year as their *El Elyon* festival in Jebusite territory.²⁹ Another argument is to read the phrase "Yahweh malek" as "Yahweh has become king" and suggest that the enthronement psalms were used as liturgy at the time of enthronement festival.³⁰ If so, then the question is about the exact festival in which enthronement of Yahweh could have been enacted. Mowinkel argues that Psalm 65 indicates the festival of Ingathering or Tent as the location for the enthronement of Yahweh.³¹ But other scholars question the above theories and reject the view that the Israelites celebrated the enthronement of Yahweh as a festival at the time of new year. They interpret "Yahweh malek" as "Yahweh reigns," referring to the sovereignty of Yahweh, and accept the notion of Yahweh's kingship. Moreover, the feast of Ingathering was celebrated on the seventh month. If the Enthronement festival was celebrated in the new year, then, it could not have been linked to the feast of Ingathering. According to their arguments, there could not have been annual festival of enthronement of Yahweh. However, Israelites who borrowed the concept of kingship from the Canaanites modified it and acclaimed Yahweh as their king. It is my opinion that they would have proclaimed Yahweh's sovereignty over nature and nations probably at the time of coronation of kings in Israel or whenever they celebrated victory over their enemies. The Israelite need not have enacted a drama of enthronement of Yahweh during these celebrations but proclaimed definitely Yahweh's kingship and authority over the community by

²⁸Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 504; the author lists the arguments of various scholars in this regard.

²⁹Mowinkel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 125.

³⁰Mowinkel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 117, 115.

³¹Mowinkel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 119.

reciting the enthronement psalms. The salient features of Yahweh's kingship remembered in Israel are the following:

- i) Yahweh's sovereignty is not only over Israel but also over other nations and nature. Yahweh never dies as Baal dies in Canaanite mythology. Yahweh is victorious forever. So enthronement of Yahweh is detached from fertility cult.
- ii) Yahweh is the king, and human kings are only representatives of Yahweh to rule the people with divine values.
- iii) Enthronement festival of kings in Israel with the acclamation of "Yahweh is King" paved the way for the concept of Kingdom of God and Messianic ideals.

h. Festival of Purim

The festival of Purim is another annual celebration instituted in the period of Esther. This festival is not listed in the appointed festivals given in Lev 23 because it was instituted after the compilation of the Priestly code. This festival received its name '*purim*' from the Akkadian root '*pur*' which means 'lot' or 'destiny' referring to the lot and destiny of the Jews at risk during the plot of Haman. Scholars notice festivals similar to the Jewish Purim in other cultures, too.³² The festival narrated in the story of Esther was not borrowed from any other culture but grew out of their historical situation in Persia. As such the festival of Purim is not mythological about the struggle between good and evil as described in other cultures. It was an achievement of deliverance from genocide due to the timely effort of Mordecai and Esther (Esther 8:16). It brought light and gladness to the Jewish community, and, therefore, the festival of Purim was also known as the festival of light. In order to commemorate the deliverance from the wicked plan of Haman, the Israelite in Persian Diaspora celebrated it on the 14th to 15th day of the month of Adar. The rituals of this festival include feasting and gladness, sending gifts of food to one another and resting on the 15th day of Adar (Esther 9:18-19). Later on, going to the synagogue and reading the Book of Esther and pronouncing the blessing of Mordecai on Jewish community were added as part of the festival.³³

³²Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 516.

³³Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 514.

Whether sacrifices and other offerings were made during the festival is not clear. The salient features of the festival are four:

- i) The festival of Purim is connected with the history of deliverance from genocide. So this festival has a political dimension and speaks of their salvation history.
- ii) By making it a festival and calling the 15th day of Adar for complete rest and feasting, it reminds them of God's intervention and protecting their existence in foreign land.
- iii) The symbolism of light during the festival indicates the victory over the darkness of evil and hope of life for the Jews in Diaspora.
- iv) The celebration of this festival in Diaspora was also a warning to the ruling majority not to oppress the minority aliens in their land.

The above study of the selected festivals and fasts brings out their ritual activities, content and other salient features. Whether festivals and fasts are mere rituals of religious obligation and celebration or inter-active communication needs a discussion here because of the relationship between community, festivals and communication:

4. Festivals, Inter-Active Communication and Community Development

Festivals can be regarded as an "annual programme" or a "system of orientation" rather than an instrument of communication such as radio or television. Festivals are part of "traditional media" and a process of inter-active communication.³⁴ Let me point out the characteristic of "inter-active communication" and a definition of "community development" and then show how the inter-active communication contributes for the development of the community. The inter-active communication requires an active role of the participants in communicating the message. The power of communication is not rested in the hands of one partner in the community but shared and experienced by all partners. It makes the participants to share the experience and their culture with one another. The inter-active communication, according to Neville Jayaweera, does not stop with

³⁴A. D. Manual, *Communication and the Church*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1998, 28-30.

passing on the message but transforms the people involved and builds the community.³⁵ The inter-active communication during the celebration of the festivals contributed to the development can be highlighted below from the above-mentioned salient features of each festival. The main thrust of most of the definition on community development is on the socio-economic development of the people. Many people confuse the concept of community development with the projects and activities such as providing drinking water, digging of irrigation canals, establishing schools and clinics and starting poultry farms for employment, etc. The focus, in this kind of understanding, is on activities rather than people. The idea of community development is reduced to fulfil the programmes and achieve the activities rather than developing the community. Robert Litteral quotes a definition of community development from the writing of Yost and Yost as "... the process whereby a community is strengthened so that it can creatively meet its needs (spiritual, mental, physical, social) through expansion of awareness, increased inter-action within and without the community, and the development and effective utilization of available resources."³⁶

- a. Festivals, as shown above, are celebrations of not individuals but the community of Israel. They were not the private affairs of families. The participants were priests, rulers, elders, parents, children, slaves and sojourners in the midst of them. Festivals celebrated nationwide integrated them as one community. The sociological and cultural integration took place at different levels. First, by requiring the members of the family to take part in the festivals, the celebration united the family. The celebration of festivals in the cultic centres in their own villages and towns, and, later, in Jerusalem fostered fellowship between families, clans and tribes and reminded them of their identity as people of Yahweh even though they were settled in different regions of the promised land.
- b. The inter-active process was enhanced further by requiring the members of the community to take part in the sacrifices and the meal afterwards. Feasting together with families, relatives and friends at the site of the

³⁵Jayaweera, "Communication for Community," 8.

³⁶R. L. Litteral, *Community Partnership in Communications for Ministry*, Wheaton: Billy Graham Centre Monograph, 1988, 40.

cultic centres or at homes and rejoicing strengthened their communion. Celebrations helped them to forget their differences and problems and rejoice over the goodness of Yahweh. Festivals contributed to the presence and maintenance of gladness in the community.

- c. God inter-acted with the community in the festivals by appearing or being represented through cloud, voice or fire and accepting their sacrifices and offerings and blessing the people. The inter-action between God and community in festivals strengthened their relationship and reminded them of their mutual commitment.
- d. They gathered not merely for celebration but for a definite purpose of understanding, remembering and realizing the message of each festival. They inter-act by communicating to themselves the message of the festivals. The leaders and parents were required to communicate the meaning of festival to the children and make them actively involved in celebrating the festivals meaningfully. Celebrations of festivals such as Passover, Ingathering and Purim brought an awareness about their history of bonded slavery in Egypt, living as landless sojourners in the wilderness of Sinai and entering into a covenant and deliverance from the genocide in Persia. Political history came alive to them at each festival. The participants experienced their past history in the celebration, and enhanced their spirit of patriotism to work for the progress of society and build their nation to be free from oppression of foreign nations.
- e. The power of communication was not rested with certain authorities such as priests or rulers or prophets or parents but was shared within the entire community including children, slaves and sojourners. Festivals were dialogical among the members of the community and by reciting the prayers and liturgies when they met in a solemn assembly. They were inter-active in realizing the meaning of Yahweh's action in their salvation history. In realizing the history and theology of the festivals, the participants shared among themselves the historical experience and expressed their history and theology through songs (Ps 95; 105, 137) and dance (Ex15:1-21). This realization contributed to the development of their folklore, art and dance.

- f. Festivals of Unleavened Bread, feasts of Weeks and Ingathering rooted the community in the vocation of agriculture and value hard work on the land and producing food for the community. They motivated them to be self-supporting and self-reliant by continuing the ploughing, sowing and harvesting rather than neglecting agriculture and valuing other crafts and professions. In agriculture, the inter-action between families in villages and with Yahweh could be realized more. For, they were partners. The partnership of Yahweh was shown in granting rain and harvest. Although Israelites attributed the blessing of the land to Yahweh, they realized their responsibility of giving hard labour and producing grains, vegetables and fruits. Some of the psalms used during pilgrimage to celebrate the festivals reveal their responsibility towards agriculture and dependency on Yahweh for the blessing (Ps 126:5-6; 128:1-5; 133:1-3). The idea of Yahweh as the owner of the land and the Israelites as the sojourners and stewards of the land is reflected through the festival of Ingathering. Agrarian economy is not merely the activity of the people alone but also the joint activity of God and the people. This kind of a vision and spirituality contributed to the development of their economy.
- g. Agricultural festivals manifested not only the faith of the Israelites in Yahweh but also their spirituality of non-compromise with the cult of Canaan. Their spirituality based on the action of Yahweh in their history shaped their theology of creation and enabled them to indigenise the Canaanite festivals to express their faith and values of Yahweh. The process of indigenisation removed the inhuman practices linked with the Canaanite festivals such as requiring the children to walk on fire, parents to sacrifice their sons and daughters and engage in cult prostitution and worship the plants and trees rather than the creator. Prophets condemned the Israelites for following such practices (Jer 3:1-6; 2:23; Hosea 2:13; Amos 2:7).
- h. The calendar of the Israelites was not based on the Canaanite agrarian calendar that followed the cycle of nature. Festivals brought a change in working out their calendar based on the action of Yahweh in their history. Their day-to-day life was not controlled by the moving of sun, moon and stars but by the actions of Yahweh. That is why, they made the month of Abib, in which the liberation from bonded slavery took

place, as the first month in their calendar. Festival of Passover marked the beginning of the year. Their calendar began with the experience of liberation rather than depending on the mercy of nature and movement of the planets. They used the seasons of autumn, spring and summer for agriculture but did not make these seasons, which are in the control of Yahweh to control their calendar. It is not the creation but the creator and their salvation history became the basis of guiding principles of the events of their community.

- i. Observing the Sabbath rest before and after the festivals developed not only their spiritual dimension of "resting for Yahweh" but also the social dimension of resting for physical need. Rest from work is needed for human beings and animals. People and animals cannot be treated as machines in production. The rest demanded during the celebration of festivals, in addition to regular weekly rest, regenerated their energy and strength. The rest is not a privilege for the landlords or rulers in Israel but an obligation for all, including the slaves, servants and animals. Rest and celebration provided freshness to mind and body.
- j. Protecting the rights of human beings is another important aspect in developing the society. The Passover festival was a constant reminder to the community not to oppress others. Slaves and servants have their right to go free from oppression. The masters need not wait for the sabbatical year or Jubilee year to release their slaves. They can very well do it in each year during the festival of Passover. A note attached to the agricultural festivals as a standing rule to leave the remaining harvest for the sake of the poor in Lev 23:22 expressed a sociological concern for the downtrodden in the society. Sharing of the resources with the needy helps to narrow down the gap between the rich and poor and alleviate poverty in the midst of them to a certain extent. The celebration of Purim provided hope for the minority community of Jews in diaspora by challenging the misuse of political power and authority. The festival of Purim stood as a warning to protect the rights of the minorities from racial discrimination and genocide and allow them to progress.

5. Conclusion

The festivals, no doubt, had contributed to the spiritual, theological,

political, sociological and economic development of ancient Israel. The principles of adopting festivals from the local context, indigenising their form and content, historicizing and theologizing festivals and integrating to the ethical life of the community are challenges to us.

How can our festivals such as Christmas, New Year, Easter and other local festivals of Protestant and Roman Catholic churches enhance the inter-active communication among Christians and contribute towards the development of society? Certainly, some of our festivals have become mere ritual events. Others have become commercial to promote the sale of greetings cards, decorations, sweets and gifts. Christians in India need to find the ways to make festivals more effective in integrating the people and promoting service to others. In addition to the celebration of harvest festivals in local churches, Christians could explore the possibility of celebrating festivals such as Pongal, Onam and Deepavali with the neighbours by indigenising their content and form.

National integration can be strengthened further if all the religious communities in India could make the Independence Day the festival of liberation from the rulers of foreign nations by celebrating it in their cultic centres. Such a festival has a history behind and can be theologized. It could become like a Passover festival for Indians, a festive occasion to bring together Indians as a single community, with a common nucleus to celebrate with.