

"In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice" (Romans 11:5)

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A HOLIDAY OF THE WORD AND THE SPIRIT

by Galen Peterson

In Biblical times, beginning on the Sabbath after Passover, people were to count every day for seven weeks (Lev. 23:15). On the fiftieth day the people were obligated to return to Jerusalem as one of the three pilgrimage feasts.

Shavuot, the name of this holiday in Jewish tradition is derived from the Hebrew word for “weeks.” Its name in Christian tradition is *Pentecost*, from the Greek word for “fiftieth.”

This was not a very complex holiday in observance. All adult Jewish males went to the Temple, where they gave two loaves of bread made from the wheat harvest to a priest who waved them at the Temple as an offering to the Lord.

Unlike the unleavened bread that eaten at Passover, these loaves were baked with leavening. Throughout the Bible leaven is symbolic of sin (Lev. 6:17; 1 Cor. 5:6-8). Thus the leavened loaves represent sinful humanity. On the other hand, according to the

understanding of the ancient Jewish sages, unleavened bread represented Messiah who was sinless (the *afikomen matzah* of Passover was considered a symbol of the lamb, and according to Isaiah 53:7, the Messiah was like an innocent lamb led to slaughter).

The order here is important. The loaves representing human beings could only be presented to the Lord after the penalty of sin had been paid, as depicted in the Passover where redemption came through the sacrifice of the lamb. In the same way, for people of every generation, we have to receive the atonement of the perfect Lamb of God, Yeshua (Jesus), if we want to be in the presence of the Lord eternally.

The spiritual harvest—God’s redemption of the nations

As part of the biblical passage in Leviticus. 23 regarding *Shavuot*, people were instructed to leave the corners of their fields unharvested

so that the needy and the alien might find food. So according to Jewish custom on *Shavuot* the book of Ruth is read because it deals with the issue of gleaning.

In this story, Ruth, a Gentile woman, and therefore estranged from the God of Israel, was widowed and traveled to Bethlehem in the land of Israel in order to start her life over. She ended up in the fields of a Jewish man named Boaz who allowed her to glean the leftovers of the harvest. He later married her, which enabled her to share in the complete harvest, and she became a citizen of Israel, as well as an ancestor of Yeshua.

This story is a reflection of the way that we become believers. We are at first separated from God and unaware about Him and His ways. But when we are spiritually hungry we begin a journey that leads us to truth about the Lord as revealed in Scripture. At first we are only able to glean just a portion of those truths on our own.

It is not until a great intercessor intervenes on our behalf that we can claim the more significant truths. Like Boaz, the *Ruach HaKodesh*—Holy Spirit, speaks to our hearts and grants us deeper understanding. Ultimately we become reconciled to God and a citizen of His everlasting kingdom.

Because of this connection to the book of Ruth, *Shavuot* has an important theme of a spiritual harvest or God’s redemption for all nations. This theme is reinforced by the imagery of the temple ritual described above. Just as two loaves were waved before the Lord, the Bible makes it clear that the two groups of people—Jews and Gentiles—are welcomed side by side into God’s presence when their sins are covered.

This then, was the fundamental purpose of *Shavuot*—to depict God’s plan for inclusion of Jews and Gentiles alike in His kingdom. But after the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D., the holiday lost its biblical foundation. So alternative ways of observing the feast were sought in rabbinical Judaism. A different theme emerged. . .

The giving of the Torah

When asked what was the first day of Pentecost, many people will say it occurred in Acts 2. But that would be incorrect. It is a question that is easily answered if you think in terms of the timing of the first Passover. Following the formula given by God in Lev. 23, the first *Shavuot/Pentecost* would have taken place fifty days after the original Feast of Unleavened Bread in Egypt. That would put it in the initial part of the wilderness wanderings.

The ancient rabbis made that

exact determination by looking closely at the timeline in the book of Exodus. After leaving Egypt, the Israelites traveled through the region adjacent to the eastern shore of the Dead Sea. Then according to Exodus 19:1, “In the third month after the sons of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day they arrived at the wilderness of Sinai.” The phrase “*bayom hazeh*—on that very day” is a Hebrew idiom for the first day of the month, which would be Sivan 1. After a three day journey (cf Ex. 8:23; 10:9) they camped at the base of Mt. Sinai on Sivan 3. Then the people were to cleanse themselves and to be ready for the third day when Moses would ascend the mountain and receive the Torah (Ex 19:10-11). This would be Sivan 6. Thus the total number of days is:

1st month (Nisan)	14 days
2nd month (Iyar)	30 days
3rd month (Sivan)	<u>6 days</u>
Total	50 days

That means it was exactly fifty days after Israel left Egypt that Moses received the Law from God on Mt. Sinai. That would have been the very first *Shavuot/Pentecost*.

Naturally with the Torah being highly esteemed in Judaism, it became a primary theme of the holiday. So today the emphasis is on reading the Torah during *Shavuot*, and some Orthodox Jews will read the Torah throughout the night of the holiday.

Reading God’s Word is certainly a good thing. And keeping God’s Word is even better. But the problem with us sinful human beings is that accurately understanding God’s Word and faithfully obeying it are not so easy. For that, we need some help.

The giving of the Spirit

During Old Testament times the Holy Spirit did not remain with humanity but moved in and out of the circumstances of life, much like the wind that personifies the Spirit (John 3:8). But Yeshua promised that when His act of redemption for sin was completed, the Spirit would come in an enduring manner:

“And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper (Gr. *parakletos*) that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth” (John 14:16).

The timing of the arrival of the Spirit is no coincidence:

And when the day of Pentecost/*Shavuot* had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent, rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. (Acts 2:1-2)

Many people in our world miss the connection between the two great events that transpired on the day of *Shavuot*. The Jewish community recognizes the fact that the Torah was given on the very first *Shavuot* in Exodus 19. The Christian community recognizes the fact that the Holy Spirit was given on a *Shavuot* many centuries later in Acts 2.

For many Jews, the Torah is exalted on this day. For many Christians, the Spirit is exalted on this day (though it has lost its Jewish context and is only known as Pentecost). But the key is to see that these events are linked in purpose. It is the Spirit that enables us to comprehend the deep truths of the Torah and all

Scripture. And it is the Spirit that enables us to live out the serious terms of righteousness found in Scripture.

So when we are having a difficult time understanding what the Bible has to say, we need to pray for God the Holy Spirit to give us understanding. And when we are having a difficult time living out the principles set forth in Scripture, we need to pray for God the Holy Spirit to convict our hearts, guide us, comfort us and fill us completely so that we might live obediently and faithfully.

In James 4:2 we are exhorted, “You do not have because you do not ask.” God has given us the resource of the Holy Spirit. We just need to ask for His help.

When Moses gave his final blessing to Israel, he called the Torah: *eshdat dat*, which literally means a “fiery law” (Deut. 33:2). That is a pretty accurate description. God’s Words can be very fiery. They can motivate us to move. They can burn away the flimsy coverings that surround our souls, revealing our true nature. And they can lead to grave consequences to those who ignore them. “Is not My word like fire?” declares the LORD, “and like a hammer which shatters a rock?” (Jer. 23:29).

These are figurative words that describe the same concept in Galatians 3 where the Apostle Paul states that the Torah is God’s means for revealing what sin is. And the process of revealing sin can be very inflammable. Perhaps you have experienced that yourself when you have been confronted about a sin or when you confronted someone else. It’s not uncommon to become angry and defensive, and attempt to torch the one doing the confronting.

So if we are dealing with fire here, doesn’t it make sense that we

need a fireman to help us tame the flames? That’s where the Holy Spirit comes in. He helps us to recognize the dangerous hazards that we may encounter. He convicts our hearts when sin burns within us. He comforts us when we are touched by the flash points of life. He equips us to go forth and to join others on the frontlines of sparing others from peril. And He does it with the Living Water of Messiah by bringing glory to His name. That is what the Holy Spirit does for us. He is our true “fire chief.” Acts 2 goes on to say:

And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance. Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men, from every nation under heaven. And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were bewildered, because they were each one hearing them speak in his own language (Acts 2:3-6).

When it comes to signs of the presence of the Spirit upon the believers, the attention often is on speaking in tongues. But it’s easy to overlook the appearance of flames of fire on their heads. So we can see the purpose behind it when we consider it in the context of the Feast of Weeks and the giving of the Law.

The giving of the Torah on the first Pentecost was the ignition of a spiritual fire because the Law revealed what sin was (Rom. 3:20). But the giving of the Holy Spirit to indwell believers on a later Pentecost was God’s way of enabling us to comprehend this truth and giving us the resources to

deal with it.

The calling out of believers

Thus we have these three themes woven into the Feast of *Shavuot*: harvest/redemption of the nations, the giving of the Torah, and the giving of the Spirit. In Scripture we can see how they are linked together. The truth of the Word of God, illuminated by the Spirit of God leads to a spiritual redemption of people, who then become part of God’s growing kingdom. We see this illustrated in Acts 2.

“How is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born? Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—we hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God.”

Acts 2:8-11

Who were these people from all over the region? Contextually, they were all Jews, either by birth, or by belief in the God of Israel, because it was one of three times during the year that Jewish males had to be in Jerusalem (Ex 23:14-17). Even the “Arabs” mentioned here are not the ancestors of modern day ethnic Arabs but are Jews who lived in Arabia at that time. The passage clarifies it by saying that this crowd consisted of “Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men, from every nation under heaven” (v. 5).

Pentecost is often called the

“Birth of the Church.” At first glance, this seems clear, but we need to take a deeper look at what transpired in Acts 2.

The word “church” gets its spelling from one Greek word—*kuriakos* and its meaning from another one—*ekklesia*. It is like a DNA transplant in which you take the code from one cell and inject it into a different one.

Kuriakos literally means “belonging to the Lord.” Can we say that the birth of those “belonging to the Lord” took place on this day? The answer is yes if they did not exist prior to that special day of *Shavuot*. But the answer is no if they already were present.

Certainly Abraham belonged to the Lord. The same can be said for David and many more righteous people who lived before that day in Acts 2. Thus it is inaccurate to say that the day of Pentecost described in that chapter is the birth of the “people belonging to the Lord.” What is unique about that day then?

As mentioned above, even though the spelling of the word “church” comes from *kuriakos*, its meaning is derived from a different

Greek word *ekklesia*. To put it another way, whenever you see the word translated as church, the corresponding word in the original language is *ekklesia*. This word literally means “called out ones.” It has the sense of a body of people being called out for a specific purpose.

The logical result of the “calling out” means that people not previously part of the ones “belonging to the Lord” would become partners and share in God’s blessings. Even though there were some Gentiles already “belonging to the Lord,” they were few in number. This would all change with the coming of the Holy Spirit and the believing Jews would return to their homes all around the region, starting congregations and witnessing to their Gentile neighbors.

Rather than casually coining a phrase, “the birth of the church,” that is not found in Scripture and does not reflect what actually occurred, we need to have an accurate understanding of what transpired on that day of Pentecost in Acts 2. So while Pentecost is not the actual birth of “those belonging to the Lord,” it is the beginning of

the “the called out ones.” With that understanding we are able to preserve the recognition both of the legacy of the faithful men and women of Israel and our calling to reach out to others.

We, too, now bear that commissioning. We who believe in Messiah Yeshua should not be content in merely belonging to the Lord, we need to see ourselves as being called to reach out to others with the Good News of salvation. That is the ultimate message of the Feast of Weeks. It points the way to be witnesses, to be workers in the harvest.

It is no coincidence, then, that immediately following the Feast of Weeks comes an extended period of time when there were no feasts to observe in the annual cycle. In Biblical times the people returned home from Jerusalem to work in the fields, getting ready for the harvest in the fall. Likewise may we never forget that we should be laboring in the fields of testimony, working toward a great spiritual harvest of Jews and Gentiles alike being included in God’s everlasting kingdom.

This year, Shavuot/Pentecost takes place on May 31.

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