

An Introduction to Shavuot

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If your congregational leaders didn't make such a thing of it, Shavuot would probably be the commanded feast most likely to be overlooked. After all, what about it is so memorable? Passover has its *seder* and *matzah*. *Rosh HaShanah* has its trumpets. *Yom Kippur* has its fast and break-fast. And *Sukkot* has its *lulov*, *etrog*, and booths. Even the two secondary holidays of *Chanukah* and *Purim* win over Shavuot for memorable distinctives. *Chanukah* has its *Chanukiot* and potato *latkes*, and *Purim* has its *grages* and *hamantaschen*.

But poor old *Shavuot*. What does it have to endear us to it? The tradition of eating dairy? Big deal! I do that every morning. Celebration of the Spring Harvest? My backyard garden only grows flowers. Why even God can't remember where He put *Shavuot* on the calendar and has to have us count 50 days of the *Omer* to help Him remember it.

Okay, all of this chiding was for humor. But actually, *Shavuot* is probably the most theologically complex and unifying of all the feasts because it links together so much, and over two covenants. To understand it, let's begin with its appearance in the Mosaic Covenant, and so I don't have to continually give you chapters and verses, here are all the occasions of the Feast mentioned in *Torah*:

Exodus 23:14-17, 19

Leviticus 23:9-22

Numbers 28:26

Deuteronomy 16:9-12

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Each of the Scriptures has something important to say about Shavuot, but let's take Leviticus 23 as a jumping off point. It begins, not with *Shavuot*, but with Passover and Unleavened Bread, and that is very significant because it shows that *Shavuot* is not just a day, but the finality of an entire season that begins with the Israelites' release from Egyptian bondage, and culminates with a harvest that was to be celebrated when the Israelites came into their promised land. It is an understatement to say that it took more than 50 days for the Israelites to get from Egypt to their promised land, but God chose 50 days to represent that period of travel so that the Feast of *Shavuot* could be celebrated annually. It is also intriguing that within those 50 days, two of them are referred to as days of firstfruits. Now let's look more closely at Leviticus 23, beginning with verse 4:

"These are the feasts of the LORD, holy convocations which you shall proclaim at their appointed times. On the fourteenth day of the first month at twilight is the LORD's Passover. And on the fifteenth day of the same month is the Feast of Unleavened Bread to the LORD;"

So far, we have Passover and Unleavened Bread. Let's continue with verse 10:

“When you come into the land which I give to you, and reap its harvest, then you shall bring a sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest to the priest. He shall wave the sheaf before the LORD, to be accepted on your behalf; on the day after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it. And you shall offer on that day, when you wave the sheaf, a male lamb of the first year, without blemish, as a burnt offering to the LORD.”

So to the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread, we have now added a prophecy of coming into the “promised land” and a harvest in the land, during which the firstfruits of that harvest are said to belong to God. The Israelites were to commemorate that harvest by offering both the agricultural firstfruits and also a perfect male lamb. Remember that perfect lamb because it is important as we will soon see.

We are also told that this remembrance was not to be just on that one occasion but year after year, for in verse 14 we are commanded:

“It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations in all your dwellings.”

And now we start counting days toward the next Feast; beginning with verse 15:

“And you shall count for yourselves from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering: seven Sabbaths shall be completed. Count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath; then you shall offer a new grain offering to the LORD. You shall bring from your dwellings two wave loaves of two-tenths of an ephah. They shall be of fine flour; they shall be baked with leaven. They are the firstfruits to the LORD.”

Here we have another firstfruits offering 50 days, seven weeks after the initial firstfruits offering. This is the day we call *Shavuot* which means “weeks,” and is specifically called a day of “firstfruits” in Numbers 28:26:

“On the day of firstfruits, your Feast of Weeks, when you bring an offering of new grain to the Lord, you shall observe a sacred occasion: You shall not work at your occupations.”

So we have a second day commemorating firstfruits, and Scripture says that on this day, in addition to the agricultural offering and other offerings, the Israelites were once again to sacrifice an unblemished lamb – this time not one lamb but seven:

“And you shall offer with the bread seven lambs of the first year, without blemish, one young bull, and two rams. They shall be as a burnt offering to the LORD, with their grain offering and their drink offerings, an offering made by fire for a sweet aroma to the LORD.”

And as with the first day of firstfruits, this second day of firstfruits must also be celebrated every year, for in verse 21 we read:

“It shall be a statute forever in all your dwellings throughout your generations.”

Here is one other important piece of information that sometimes escapes us because it is not recorded in Scripture, but is rather in the orally transmitted information that has come down to us. It seems that shortly after the destruction of the second Temple, the Jewish leaders identified *Shavuot* as the anniversary of when the *Torah* was given to Israel at Mount Sinai. We can read about the giving of the *Torah* in Scripture in Exodus 19:1 to 20:17, and in Deuteronomy 5:19-30, 9:9-19, 10:1-5, and 10:10. The fact that there is nothing in the biblical text explicitly linking this occasion to Shavuot has resulted in my not having paid much attention to the rabbinic pronouncement for years. But I have recently been awakened to it, and now look at this in a different way. We know that not all events of history are recorded in Scripture. Is it not possible that the *Torah* was, in fact, given on the day of *Shavuot* and that God gave that knowledge to the Jewish leaders through revelation? At the very least, is it not valid for the Jewish community to even arbitrarily choose an anniversary day to represent so important an event as the giving of the Law? Let's suppose for now that God conveyed it to the Jewish leaders through revelation and let's see where that takes us.

So now let's review:

1. We have Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread
2. We have a prophecy of coming into the promised land.
3. We have a day of firstfruits where an unblemished lamb is offered to the Lord.
4. We then count 50 days and 7 weeks to a second day of firstfruits called *Shavuot* where not one, but seven unblemished lambs are offered to the Lord.
5. And we have the additional fact that the Jewish leadership (perhaps prophetically) has come to regard *Shavuot* – this second day of firstfruits – as the anniversary of God having given Israel the *Torah* on Mount Sinai.

Now we take a long jump into the future, to the year and time of Yeshua's death, and we see the genesis of the New Covenant and the parallels and fulfillment of the history we have just recounted. Yeshua celebrated his last Passover in a most unpleasant way for he was put to death before the Feast of Unleavened Bread even began. That year as always, Israelites sacrificed their perfect lambs but THIS year, Yeshua was one of those lambs. He was resurrected from the tomb on the first day of the week which was *Bikkurim*, the day of firstfruits, and so He was indeed the firstfruit of the resurrection. He then walked the earth in his resurrected body for forty of the 50 days of the *Omer* count, and then left the earth to join His Father in Heaven. But he instructed His disciples to wait in Jerusalem for whom He called the "comforter" and whom we now know was the *Ruach Ha Kodesh* – the Holy Spirit. His disciples did not understand what Yeshua meant, but they were going to Jerusalem anyway to perform their annual *Shavuot* or Spring harvest sacrifices that included the sacrifice of perfect lambs. Little did they know that that year, on that day, they would be visited by the *Ruach HaKodesh* who, as predicted, came in place of the perfect lamb of God who had just left them 10 days before. That particular day of *Shavuot* is what the Christian Church calls "Pentecost."

And where does the giving of the *Torah* fit in? That becomes clear in light of John 1:1-3 and verse 14 which shows that Yeshua was the Word of God made flesh for a season:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.” ... “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.”

Let me try to put this all together now. The New Covenant Scriptures make it clear that the *Shavuot* season that seemed to be merely agricultural under the Mosaic Covenant, was really a foreshadowing of God visiting the earth –first as the written *Torah* at Mount Sinai if the rabbis were prophetically correct, then as Messiah Yeshua, the *Torah* made flesh according to John 1, and finally as the *Ruach HaKodesh* – the *Torah* who can dwell within us, for Jeremiah 31:33 says of the New Covenant:

“But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My Torah in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.”

So *Shavuot* may not have a lot of “pizzazz” like the other feasts, and at first glance may look like just a day that commemorates God’s agricultural provision for Israel. But it is clearly that and more. It is the day that God chose to send the *Ruach HaKodesh* to earth to indwell those who would receive Him, it is a day that links the two covenants, and it is a day that links the Christian Church to Israel. What’s more, if the Jewish understanding that *Shavuot* is the anniversary of Israel receiving the *Torah* at Mt. Sinai is prophetically correct, it is also a day of major prophetic significance in being the focus of God visiting the earth as “The Word.”

And that, in my mind, makes *Shavuot* the Messianic Feast of Feasts!