

Firstfruits & Resurrection

by Michael Rudolph

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Now that the sun is low in the west and we have concluded *Shabbat* with *Havdalah*, we find ourselves assembled on *Yom HaBikkurim* or “the day of Firstfruits.” *Bikkurim* is closely associated in the Bible with Passover, the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread, and another firstfruit day, the spring harvest celebration of *Shavuot*. *Bikkurim* is described and commanded in Leviticus 23:5-14 this way:

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; seven days you must eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall have a holy convocation; you shall do no customary work on it. But you shall offer an offering made by fire to the LORD for seven days. The seventh day shall be a holy convocation; you shall do no customary work on it." And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: `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. Its grain offering shall be two-tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with oil, an offering made by fire to the LORD, for a sweet aroma; and its drink offering shall be of wine, one-fourth of a hin. You shall eat neither bread nor parched grain nor fresh grain until the same day that you have brought an offering to your God; it shall be a statute forever throughout your generations in all your dwellings.

We no longer have the Temple in which we can bring our “firstfruit” offering, but the day of *Bikkurim* has far from lost its significance. First, we at Ohev believe it is the very day that Yeshua was resurrected from the dead following His crucifixion; I will show you why later. Second, it is the day from which we begin “counting the *omer*” to *Shavuot*, when the Holy Spirit first made Himself available to all on earth who would receive Him.

In a way, I didn't pick the subject of this message; the subject picked me because we are holding this service in the evening hours instead of on *Shabbat* morning in order to capture both *Shabbat* and *Bikkurim* in a single holy convocation. Given my “druthers” I may not have chosen to speak about *Bikkurim* because it is a subject with some technical complexities that might be better dealt with in a classroom rather than as a preaching from the *bima*. Even the day on which it occurs is controversial and not uniformly agreed upon by Jewish scholars. So kindly bear with me as I begin by discussing some of the technicalities surrounding *Bikkurim* because, for Jews and especially for Messianic Jews, they are important. I promise I will return to discuss aspects of firstfruits and later fruits that are less technical and more clearly connected to our hope in Yeshua and to our daily lives.

The Leviticus Scripture we just read says that *Chag HaBikkurim* occurs on the “day after the Sabbath,” but it does not say which Sabbath. Is the Sabbath *Nissan 15* or *21*, the first or last days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread? According to Scripture, they are both Sabbaths. Or perhaps it is the weekly Sabbath that precedes, falls during, or follows the Feast of Unleavened Bread? Of these possibilities, the two within the Jewish world that are in contention as being the Sabbath that is meant are *Nisan 15* and the seventh-day Sabbath that falls within the Feast of Unleavened Bread. We at Ohev believe it is the seventh-day Sabbath and not on the 15th of *Nisan*. In this regard, we agree with the Sadducees of old rather than with the Pharisees or with Rabbinical Judaism or, for that matter, with the UMJC that uses the 15th of *Nisan* to begin their count of the *omer* for their *Shavuot* fund-raiser. Leviticus 23:15-21 describes the counting of the *omer* this way:

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. 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. Then you shall sacrifice one kid of the goats as a sin offering, and two male lambs of the first year as a sacrifice of a peace offering. The priest shall wave them with the bread of the firstfruits as a wave offering before the LORD, with the two lambs. They shall be holy to the LORD for the priest. And you shall proclaim on the same day that it is a holy convocation to you. You shall do no customary work on it. It shall be a statute forever in all your dwellings throughout your generations.

Each way of reckoning the day of *Chag HaBikkurim*, Firstfruits, has its own logic and virtue. From the Pharisaic or Rabbinical point of view, counting from *Nisan 16* is good because, then, *Shavuot* always falls on the sixth of *Sivan* – an easy calendar calculation. I am guessing that it is also thought of as good by the Rabbis because if *Bikkurim* falls on *Nisan 16*, it cannot be shown to coincide with Yeshua’s resurrection – something the Rabbinical community would prefer not to do.

Although Ohev Yisrael culturally acknowledges the Pharisaic and Rabbinic date, we believe that the Sadducees were correct in placing *Bikkurim* on the day after the seventh-day Sabbath that falls within The Feast of Unleavened Bread. This way of looking at it always places *Yom HaBikkurim* on the first day of the week – Sunday, but of course the Sunday falls on a different calendar day of the month each year which is somewhat awkward.

This way of counting has two virtues however. First, it is consistent with the Scripture’s reliance on the solar rather than the lunar calendar. Does this surprise you? Well consider that, according to Scripture, the count to *Shavuot* is not only fifty days – it is also seven Sabbaths, and the weekly Sabbath is determined by the sun – not by the moon. Just to remind you, Leviticus 23:15-16 says:

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.

Now the “seventh Sabbath” spoken of in verse 16 is clearly a weekly Sabbath, so by what logic would the Sabbath in verse 11, just five verses earlier, mean the festival Sabbath of *Nisan 15*? There is no logic to such a switch of meaning. That is why Ohev has adopted the Sadducean way of dating *Bikkurim* and not the other.

Now if you are convinced that *Bikkurim* or Firstfruits always falls on the first day of the week – a Sunday close in time to when Yeshua was crucified, and you remember that His tomb was found empty on the first day of the week, the obvious thought that springs to mind is that perhaps the day of Firstfruits is also the day of Yeshua’s resurrection. Let’s get a feel for that day long ago by reading the Bible’s account of it in Matthew 28:1-10:

Now after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week began to dawn, Miryam Magdalene and the other Miryam came to see the tomb. And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat on it. His countenance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. And the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead men. But the angel answered and said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Yeshua who was crucified. He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. And go quickly and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead, and indeed He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him. Behold, I have told you." So they went out quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to bring His disciples word. And as they went to tell His disciples¹, behold, Yeshua met them, saying, "Rejoice!" So they came and held Him by the feet and worshiped Him. Then Yeshua said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me."

So this is the account of Yeshua’s resurrection, but what has it to do with Firstfruits? 1 Corinthians 15:20-23 shows that it is the firstfruits of our own future resurrection – the resurrection of the saints:

But now Messiah is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Messiah all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Messiah the firstfruits, afterward those who are Messiah’s at His coming.

This connection of “firstfruits” to Yeshua’s resurrection becomes even more significant when you consider that Ohev’s way of counting fifty-days to when the Holy Spirit fell on *Shavuot* is not from a mere date on the lunar calendar, but very likely from the very day that Yeshua was resurrected from the dead. I doubt that the Sadducees thought in these terms but, at least this time, they were probably right.

Let’s now turn our attention to the meaning of firstfruits themselves. The firstfruits of a tree are not necessarily better fruits but they are “first,” and a question we should ask ourselves if it is our tree, is what we should do with the fruits. If your understanding is that the fruits are owned by us because we grew them, then I suppose we can do what we want to, and we would no doubt either eat them or sell them. The Bible has something else to say about it, however, because God

regularly requires that our firstfruits (even the first born of our children) be given to Him or to those who minister in His behalf. Consider the words of Exodus 23:19:

The first of the firstfruits of your land you shall bring into the house of the LORD your God.

And Proverbs 3:9-10:

Honor the LORD with your possessions, And with the firstfruits of all your increase; so your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will overflow with new wine.

And Numbers 3:12-13:

Now behold, I Myself have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel instead of every firstborn who opens the womb among the children of Israel. Therefore the Levites shall be Mine, because all the firstborn are Mine. On the day that I struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I sanctified to Myself all the firstborn in Israel, both man and beast. They shall be Mine: I am the LORD.

The lesson Scripture teaches is that the product of our labors and all we possess (even our children) are from God, and ultimately belong to God, and not to ourselves. Giving God the first of our increase is a clear reminder of that.

Another biblical truth about firstfruits is that they tend to predict what the later fruits will be like. Speaking of the Messiah and also Israel, we read in Romans 11:16:

For if the firstfruit is holy, the lump is also holy; and if the root is holy, so are the branches.

Also, in Romans 8:22-23, we read:

For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.

So we who are Yeshua's disciples are said to have the firstfruits of the Spirit and, not only that, we are firstfruits ourselves, for in James 1:17-18, we read:

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.

I want to stay with this idea for a moment and challenge each of us to consider in what way we are a "kind of firstfruits of His creatures," and whether our fruits are the kind He wants to reproduce in others. We are helped in evaluating our fruits by comparing them with Galatians 5:22-25:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. And those who are Messiah's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.

Notice the connection of our belonging to Messiah, bearing His fruit, and crucifying our flesh. We are not to be crucified as He was, but we are, nevertheless, destined to share both His crucifixion and His resurrection.

The quintessential “firstfruit” is, of course, the Messiah Himself who, we maintain, rose from the dead on this very day of *Bikkurim* to be the hope and promise of our own resurrection at whatever time is appointed to each of us. Yeshua’s resurrection is foundational to our faith and to His being the son of God and deity Himself. Had Yeshua died as a mortal and not risen as an immortal, He could not be who Scripture says He is, and we cannot look forward to being resurrected either. Yeshua’s resurrection provides assurance that the Scriptures are true and that faith in Him, coupled with repentance, results in forgiveness of our sins and eternal life with God. 1 Corinthians 15:13-19 says it this way:

But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Messiah is not risen. And if Messiah is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Messiah, whom He did not raise up-- if in fact the dead do not rise. For if the dead do not rise, then Messiah is not risen. And if Messiah is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Messiah have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Messiah, we are of all men the most pitiable.

So today is “resurrection day,” *Yom HaBikkurim*, and “day one” of our fifty-day “count of the omer” to *Shavuot*. This year let us not only reflect on Yeshua’s firstfruits, but also on our own for, as “a kind of firstfruits of His creatures,” we too have things of value to impart to the world, and they are our visible lives modeled after His. And just as we commemorate Yeshua’s resurrection, let us also have faith for our own when God will one day receive us in and say to us: “Well done, good and faithful servant.”