



FIRST FRUITS AND SHAVUOT: THE HARVEST IS THE LORD'S

Shavuot is the Biblical holiday known as the Feast of Weeks. Shavuot means “weeks” or “sevens” in Hebrew. Pentecost is from the Greek and means “fiftieth.” The festival is also referred to as the Feast of Harvest and “Bikkurim,” the Day of Firstfruits. In Temple times it was one of the most popular and joyous festivals of Israel. It was celebrated as a harvest festival seven weeks, or fifty days after Passover. From the second night of Passover until the night before Shavuot observant Jews “count the omer” (a measure of grain) marking the days from Passover until Shavuot. Firstfruits was one of the three festivals for which the people of Israel were required to go up to Jerusalem to celebrate. The other two holidays are Passover and Sukkot.

The original setting of Shavuot was the wheat harvest, however, since the diaspora the focus has shifted away from the agricultural aspect. Some remnant of the agricultural origin remains in the custom of decorating the home and the synagogue with fragrant flowers and bright foliage and the eating of dairy products, such as cheese blintzes. Two loaves of Hallah (a braided bread) are prepared to symbolize both the two tablets of the Law and the loaves of the firstfruits of the wheat harvest presented at the Temple. In Judaism today, it is the giving of the Torah, the Law at Sinai, which is celebrated. Shavuot is considered the birthday of the nation of Israel. This idea may be a response to the Christian belief that the church was founded at Pentecost. There is no Biblical reference to the understanding that the nation of Israel was founded at Shavuot, though the giving of the Law did perhaps follow seven weeks after Passover.

In the synagogue, traditional readings include the Ten commandments (Exodus 20:1-17; Deut. 5:6-21). The congregation stands as a gesture of respect as this expression of the Moral Law of God for all mankind is recited. (Have them stand and read the Ten Commandments.) Other readings include the biblical passages establishing the feast and the corresponding sacrifices (Numbers 28:26-31; Deut. 16:9-17). Many religious Jews stay up all night reading the Psalms of David. The book of Ruth is also read because it has reference to both the harvest and the acceptance of the Law of God by Ruth, a Moabitess. Ruth is also connected with David. It is believed that David died at Shavuot. Hope for the coming of the Messiah, David's descendant, is in focus. In the Biblical account the context for Shavuot is the Passover redemption (See Deut. 16:12). It is because of the

Passover that the people of God could enjoy the harvest as free men in the land. The counting of the omer (Deut. 16:9 and Lev. 23:15-16) also connects this feast with Passover. On the day after Passover a sheaf of grain, the first harvested, was to be brought to the priest in the Temple and waved before the Lord as Symbolic of the whole harvest. A year old lamb without spot or blemish was sacrificed at this time. After seven weeks, fifty days after Passover, the people were to present two loaves of bread made from the firstfruits of the grain harvested as a wave offering to the LORD. seven male lambs, one young bull, and two rams were to be offered as a burnt offering. One goat served as a sin offering and two lambs as a fellowship offering. The lambs were waved together with the bread by the priest. The people were commanded to do no regular work and to hold a sacred assembly.

SIGNIFICANCE FOR NEW COVENANT BELIEVERS

Just as Jesus came to fulfill the Passover through his death as the Lamb of God, so also the pouring out of the Spirit was the expression of the completed redemption he provided. Jesus was raised from the dead as the “firstfruits of them that slept” (1 Cor. 15:20). As our Redeemer he won for us the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:32-33). On that great day, when Pentecost came in all its fullness, three thousand came to faith and were baptized. This was the firstfruits of the great harvest of the nations the Messiah came to bring. And if there was a firstfruits, there was certainly to be a full harvest. Isaiah had prophesied that the “Law would go out from Zion, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem” (Is. 2:3). He spoke of the day when the “earth would be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” and the root of Jesse, the Messiah, would “stand as a banner for the peoples and nations would rally to him” (Is. 11:9). He said of Christ “I will put my spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations...he will not be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth; In his Law the islands will put their hope” (Is. 42:1-4).

WITNESSING SUGGESTIONS

1. Ask yourself: “Do I realize the power of God available for us through the redemption Jesus has provided? Do I have this perspective on evangelism? Am I expectant that God will reap a great harvest?”
2. Pray for boldness to share Messiah with your Jewish friends. The disciples were told to wait in Jerusalem to count the omer, until they received power through the Holy Spirit to be witnesses of the Messianic Redemption to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Timothy was told, “for you have not received a spirit of fear, but of power, love and self-control. So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord” (2 Tim 1:7-9).
3. Do an internet search to find out the date each year, as it changes.

CHAIM, Box 133, Glenside, PA 19038, (215) 576-7325
Web: www.chaim.org E-mail: chaim@chaim.org

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