

# HOLY CONVOICATIONS



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“ADONAI said to Moshe, “Tell the people of Isra’el: ‘The designated times of ADONAI which you are to proclaim as holy convocations are my designated times.” (Leviticus 23:1, 2)

## עֹמֶר רֵאשִׁית Omer Reisheet - First Sheaf

\*This festival is alternately known by the titles “Bikkurim=Firstfruits” and/or “Counting the Omer”

"ADONAI said to Moshe, "Tell the people of Isra'el, 'After you enter the land I am giving you and harvest its ripe crops, you are to bring a sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest to the cohen. He is to wave the sheaf before ADONAI, so that you will be accepted; the cohen is to wave it on the day after the Shabbat. On the day that you wave the sheaf, you are to offer a male lamb without defect, in its first year, as a burnt offering for ADONAI." (Leviticus 23:9-12)

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*\*2016 Update: This commentary is going to discuss the timing issues surrounding the Passion chronology of the week of Yeshua's death and resurrection. For years I asserted that Yeshua most likely died on the very same day as when the lambs were being sacrificed at the Temple, viz, on Nisan the 14<sup>th</sup>, which I was figuring was a Friday. This put his Seder meal on the prior evening—the sunset of the 13<sup>th</sup> as it became the 14<sup>th</sup>, eaten of course without meat from the sacrificial lambs. In this way, technically I had Yeshua keeping his Seder (I assumed it was a Chagigah) on the 14<sup>th</sup> while being able to die 21 or so hours later on the day part of the 14<sup>th</sup> as well. However, after careful research, and as an update to my own understanding of the chronology of the week of Passover in which Yeshua was crucified, I have now come to understand that Yeshua was most likely crucified on Nisan the 15<sup>th</sup>, which as far as I can reckon, would still have been on a Friday as I maintained earlier. This means he ate the Pesach meal with meat from lambs slaughtered the day before on Nisan the 14<sup>th</sup>—a Thursday. Essentially, I now hold to Yeshua being crucified on Chag HaMatzah—the Day of Unleavened Bread. So in conclusion, I still hold to a conjunction-like occurrence of Nisan 14, 15, and 16 all being back to back (i.e., Thursday, Friday, Saturday), with no days skipped in between. The only major changes to my timetable are that I now hold to Yeshua eating his Seder on Thursday the 14<sup>th</sup> (previously I thought the 14<sup>th</sup> was a Friday), and being crucified on Friday the 15<sup>th</sup> (previously I had the Seder and the crucifixion both on Friday, the “Chagigah” Seder being on the evening part of the 14<sup>th</sup> and his death during the afternoon some 21 or so hours later, viz, the day part of the 14<sup>th</sup>). I hope this updated clarification does not cause too much confusion when following this commentary.*

The Feasts of the LORD are very important times on the calendar. Accordingly, this third event of the **Pesach Season** would carry with it truths pertinent to the spiritual well being of the young Nation of Isra'el. But this was not just any calendar—this was the calendar of the Creator of all men! They are rightly called “**Holy Convocations**,” for intrinsically there is nothing special about one day against any other day. Yet when the LORD of Holiness sanctifies a day—sets it apart as holy—the day becomes holy without question. By divine decree it is holy. Since God recognizes it as such, it is only a matter of obedience that we do likewise.

Baruch A. Levine in his commentary to Leviticus by the Jewish Publication Society (JPS) outlines the logistics of this part of chapter twenty-three for us:

In this section, two offerings taken from the new crop are prescribed: *'omer* and *bikkurim*. The first, *'omer*, is the offering of a “sheaf” of new barley. As originally intended, the priest was to offer it on the morrow of the first Sabbath subsequent to the seven-day festival. New grain could not be eaten until this offering was made. It constituted desacralization, a rite that gives God the first of the new crop, thus releasing the rest of it for ordinary human use.

Beginning on the day of this offering, a period of counting is initiated. Seven full “sabbaths,” or weeks, are counted off. On the fiftieth day, the second offering of meal of new wheat, baked into leavened loaves, is offered in the sanctuary as *bikkurim*, “first fruits.” It consists of grain furnished by the Israelite settlements. That day is a sacred

assembly on which work is forbidden. Here, it is not designated [*chag*], "pilgrimage," as it is in Deuteronomy 16:10, a significant difference.<sup>1</sup>

As explained by Levine the Hebrew word for "sheaf" is "omer" עֹמֶר. The omer counting leads to the well-known event called "**Shavu'ot**," or **Pentecost**, as it is more widely recognized by many Christians. To wit, we must understand from this passage that the days from Pesach to HaMatzah to Omer Reisheet to Shavuot are inextricably linked. A biblical principal worth remembering, which carries significant truth down to this very day is that **the "first" always belongs to HaShem**. This theme will play a prominent feature later on in this commentary.

## Issues Surrounding the "Timing" of Omer Reisheet

Some readers will readily note that history has been generally "unkind" to this particular festival. What do I mean by "unkind"? I mean to draw your attention to the fact that no less than three prominent Jewish sects have come to interpret the timing associated with the start of this count in at least three respective, but differing ways. Author Tim Hegg has brilliantly noted such differences in his short paper 'Counting the Omer,' viewable from his web site <http://www.torahresource.com/>

At least three different sects understood the chronology of the omer counting differently: a) the majority of the Jewish community, and perhaps particularly those in Judea, near Jerusalem, considered the phrase "the morrow after the Sabbath" to be the day following the opening sabbath of Chag HaMatzot, that is, the 16th of Nisan; b) a sub-group of the Sadducees, the Boethusians, took the Leviticus text to mean "the morrow after the (weekly) Sabbath," and thus commenced their counting on the day following the first weekly Sabbath within the festival week. c) the Qumran sect apparently understood the Sabbath in question to be the final day of Chag HaMatzot, and thus began their counting on the first day of the week following the completed festival.

So, which view is correct and how does it impact you the reader? Depending on which view you go with, the impact will determine the date you celebrate Shavu'ot fifty days later! The difficulty lies in the interpretation of a key Hebrew phrase found in our text quoted at the onset of our commentary:

**"ADONAI said to Moshe, "Tell the people of Isra'el, 'After you enter the land I am giving you and harvest its ripe crops, you are to bring a sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest to the cohen. He is to wave the sheaf before ADONAI, so that you will be accepted; the cohen is to wave it on the day after the Shabbat. On the day that you wave the sheaf, you are to offer a male lamb without defect, in its first year, as a burnt offering for ADONAI." (Leviticus 23:9-12)**

Levine provides what appears to be a "Boethusian" view:

**on the day after the sabbath** The Hebrew words *mi-mochorat ha-shabbat*, repeated in

<sup>1</sup> Baruch A. Levine, *The JPS Torah Commentary to Leviticus* (Jewish Publication Society, 1989), p. 157.

verse 15a, are problematic because it is not specified which Sabbath is intended. The accepted rabbinic interpretation is that here *shabbat* does not refer to the Sabbath day but means something similar to *shabbaton* in verse 39, that is, a time of resting. This characterization applies both to the Sabbath and to festivals. This interpretation is explained in the Sifra ' Emor 23:11, 15: *mi-mochorat ha-shabbat-mi-mochorat yom tov*, "on the morrow of the Sabbath-on the morrow of the festival." Targum Onkelos explains *mi-mochorat ha-shabbat* in the same way, as does the Septuagint to 23:11: *te epaurion tes protes*, "on the morrow of the first day (i.e., the first day of the festival)." Although this interpretation resolves a difficulty in the text, it does not convey its simple sense. It has been suggested that the words *mi-mochorat ha-shabbat* in verse 11 and in verse 15a represent an abbreviation of the phrase *mimochorat ha-shabbat ha-shevi'it*, literally "until the morrow of the seventh 'sabbath' of days" in verse 16 below. Verses 15-16 use the term *shabbat* in the sense of "week"; verse 11 uses the abbreviation *shabbat* in its normal sense of a particular day, the Sabbath. This would require that seven "sabbaths" of days (*shabbatot*) would pass during the period of fifty days. It is therefore suggested that the words *mimochorat ha-shabbat* here and in verse 15a were glosses inserted to ensure that the period of counting the seven weeks would begin on the day after the Sabbath. If this analysis is accurate, the text of verse 11 should probably read as follows: *vehenif 'et ha-omer lifne; YHVH li-retsonkhem yenifennu ha-kohen*, "He shall present the sheaf before the LORD; for acceptance on your behalf the priest shall present it."<sup>2</sup>

And again, with relation to the date of Shavu'ot they make a distinctively "Boethusian" comment:

***And from the day on which you bring the sheaf. . . the day after the sabbath***  
Referring to the Comment to verse 11 above, it should be repeated here that the words *mi-mochorat ha-shabbat* may be a gloss. The original text may have read: *u-sefarthem lakhem mi-yom havi' akhem*, "And you shall count off, from the day on which you bring." This is how the text of the Temple Scroll from Qumran reads. The offering is known as *'omer ha-tenufah*, "the sheaf for the presentation." In biblical usage, when the term *shabbat* refers to a week and not an occasion it probably always connotes a sabbatical week. This is certain in chapter 23 and in the Holiness Code generally. In 25:8 *sheva' shabbatot shanim* means "seven septenaries," namely, seven cycles of seven years, each of which ends with a sabbatical year, when no planting or harvesting may be done. On this basis, *sheva' shabbatot* in verse 15 must mean "seven weeks of days." This indicates, in effect, that the period of counting begins on the day after the first Sabbath, the first Sunday subsequent to the beginning of the festival.<sup>3</sup>

How are we to interpret the above-offered explanation? How did the ancient Israelites understand the mitzvah to begin counting 'on the morrow after the Shabbat.' Perhaps the Torah gives us a valuable clue in the book of Joshua. In an effort to help resolve the matter, I personally prefer to think of the following example as "authoritative enough for me, adding to this the fact that as Hegg noted above, the majority opinion (Pharisees) also must have been heavily influenced by the Y'hoshua passage.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 158-159.

It reads:

**The people of Isra'el camped at Gilgal, and they observed Pesach on the fourteenth day of the month, there on the plains of Yericho. The day after Pesach they ate what the land produced, matzah and roasted ears of grain that day. The following day, after they had eaten food produced in the land, the manna ended. From then on the people of Isra'el no longer had manna; instead, that year, they ate the produce of the land of Kena'an (Y'hoshua 5:10-12).**

Notice carefully that verse 11 states that they ate the otherwise “forbidden” product on the day after Pesach (forbidden until waived [by the priests] before HaShem of course), and that in verse 12—the following day—that the heavenly food ended. The word Pesach in the above verse must include the Day of Unleavened Bread (HaMatzah), a Shabbat, for the verse to make sense. Fascinating, huh? It appears to be that the ancient Israelites understood ‘the morrow after the Shabbat’ to mean the day immediately following the feast of HaMatzah. What is more, it even appears to indicate that HaShem “approved of their interpretation” by ceasing to provide manna in favor of what the Land would produce from then on out!

With such a strong example provided for us by the events in Y'hoshua, is it no wonder that the Pharisees went with what I like to call a “conjunction-like” interpretation of the Passover week: Pesach—Unleavened Bread—Firstfruits! In this model, all of the feasts occur back-to-back with no days interrupting the chronology. Even more interesting is that if one were to go with a Friday Pesach model, the Pharisaic interpretation would have fixed the waving of the omer as Sunday (the day on which Mashiach was reported to have already been risen by the Synoptic Gospels), corresponding with the Sadducees as well! This means that for those who teach that the crucifixion took place on Nisan 14<sup>th</sup> instead of Nisan 15<sup>th</sup> (I used to believe the Nisan 14<sup>th</sup> crucifixion view) both Pharisees and Sadducees would have ended up recognizing “Resurrection Sunday” as the day of Omer Reisheet:

Pharisees:     14   Nisan=Pesach=Friday  
                   15   Nisan=Unleavened Bread=Shabbat/Saturday  
                   16   Nisan=Omer Reisheet (“the morrow after the [festival]  
                           Shabbat”=Sunday

Sadducees:    14   Nisan=Pesach=Friday  
                   15   Nisan=Unleavened Bread=Shabbat/Saturday  
                   16   Nisan=Omer Reisheet (“the morrow after the [weekly]  
                           Shabbat”=Sunday

God works in mysterious ways!

### **Three Literal Days and Three Literal Nights?**

Even though I now hold to a Thursday, Nisan 14<sup>th</sup> Pesach meal (with meat from lambs, as opposed to a mere chagigah that may not have had lamb meat), I still hold to a

Friday crucifixion and a very early Sunday morning resurrection. Many have asked me, in light of the phrase "three days and three nights," found in Matthew 12:40, how can I hold to a Friday crucifixion and a Sunday resurrection? The math doesn't seem to add up! The (late) esteemed Seventh Day Adventist scholar Dr. Samuele Bacchiocchi provides us with an answer to this oft-asked question (quoted at length with permission):

The literal interpretation of the phrase "three days and three nights" as representing an exact period of 72 hours ignores the abundant Biblical and Rabbinical evidence on the idiomatic use of the phrase "a day and a night," to refer not to an exact number of hours or of minutes, but simply to a calendrical day, whether complete or incomplete. Matthew, for example, writes that Yeshua "fasted forty days and forty nights" in the wilderness (Matt 4:2). The same period is given in Mark 1:13 and Luke 4:2 as "forty days," which does not necessarily require forty complete 24 hour days.

It is important to note that in Biblical times a fraction of a day or of a night was reckoned inclusively as representing the whole day or night. This method of reckoning is known as "inclusive reckoning." A few examples from the Bible and from Rabbinic literature will suffice to demonstrate its usage.

### **An Abandoned Egyptian**

1 Samuel 30:12 speaks of an abandoned Egyptian servant who "had not eaten bread or drunk water for three days and three nights." The idiomatic usage of this expression is shown by the following verse, where the servant states that his master had left him behind "three days ago" (v. 13). If the "three days and three nights" were meant to be taken literally, then the servant should have said that he had been left behind four days before.

### **Esther's Visit to the King**

Another explicit example of inclusive day reckoning is found in the story of Esther's visit to the king. When Queen Esther was informed by Mordecai about the plan to exterminate the Jews, she sent this message to him: "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the King" (Esther 4:16).

If Esther intended the three days and three nights to be taken literally as a 72-hour period of fasting, then she should have presented herself before the King on the fourth day. However, we are told a few verses later that Esther went before the king "on the third day" (Esther 5:1). Examples such as these clearly show that the expression "three days and three nights" is used in the Scriptures idiomatically to indicate not three complete 24-hour days, but three calendric days of which the first and the third could have consisted of only a fraction of a day.

### **Rabbinical Literature**

Explicit examples for inclusive day reckoning are also found in Rabbinic literature. Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah, who lived about A.D. 100, stated: "A day and a night are an Onah

[‘a portion of time’] and the portion of an Onah is as the whole of it." There are other instances in Rabbinic literature where the "three days and three nights" of Jonah 1:17 are combined with Old Testament passages which mention events that took place "on the third day." "It is in this light," writes Gerhard Dilling in the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, "that we are to understand Matthew 12:40."

### **Jewish Practice**

The practice of inclusive day reckoning, according to The Jewish Encyclopedia, a standard Jewish reference work, is still in vogue among the Jews today. "In Jewish communal life part of a day is at times reckoned as one day; e.g., the day of the funeral, even when the latter takes place late in the afternoon, is counted as the first of the seven days of mourning; a short time in the morning of the seventh day is counted as the seventh day; circumcision takes place on the eighth day, even though on the first day only a few minutes remained after the birth of the child, these being counted as one day."

The examples cited above clearly indicate that in Biblical times the expression "a day and a night" simply meant a day, whether complete or incomplete. Thus, in the light of the prevailing usage, the expression "three days and three nights" of Matthew 12:40 does not require that Yeshua be entombed for 72 hours, but for a full day and two partial days.<sup>4</sup>

### **Chronology of "Passion" Weekend**

The chronology of the Passion weekend provides further evidence of the idiomatic usage of the phrase "three days and three nights." The days of the Crucifixion, entombment, and Resurrection are given in clear sequence and with considerable clarity in the Gospels as Preparation day, Sabbath, first day.

Mark, who writes for a Gentile readership less familiar with Jewish terminology, explains with utmost clarity that Messiah was crucified on "the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath" (Mark 15:42). In the following chapter it will be shown that both the term "preparation" (paraskeue) and "Sabbath-eve" (pro-sabbaton) are two technical terms used unmistakably to designate what we call "Friday."

Mark, then, is most precise in explaining that the Crucifixion took place on what today we call "Friday." The next day is designated by Mark as "sabbath" (Mark 16:1) which in turn is followed by the "first day of the week" (Mark 16:2). Mark's chronological sequence leaves absolutely no room for a two-day interval between the Crucifixion and Resurrection.

Similarly Luke makes it clear that the day of Yeshua's Crucifixion was followed, not by a Thursday or a Friday, but by a weekly Sabbath. He writes: "It was the day of Preparation, and the sabbath was beginning" (Luke 23:54). By linking the beginning of the Sabbath to the end of the day of Preparation, and the beginning of the "first day of the week" (Luke 24:1) to the termination of the Sabbath (Luke 23:56), Luke leaves

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<sup>4</sup> Samuele Bacchiocchi, *The Time of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection* (Biblical Perspectives, 2001), p. 15, 16.

absolutely no room for two full days to intervene between the Crucifixion and Resurrection.<sup>5</sup>

### **No Two Sabbaths**

Some wish to make room for intervening days by arguing that between the Wednesday Crucifixion and Saturday afternoon resurrection there were two Sabbaths: the first, a Passover Sabbath which fell on a Thursday; the second, a weekly Sabbath which fell on the regular Saturday. Such an argument is based on pure speculation because nowhere do the Gospels suggest that two Sabbaths intervened between the day of the Crucifixion and that of the Resurrection.

Support for the two-Sabbath view is sought in the plural form the Sabbath in Matthew 28:1 takes, which literally reads "at the end of the Sabbaths." This text is viewed as a vital text, "which" proves that there were TWO Sabbaths that week with a day in between." The first Sabbath, Thursday, allegedly was "the annual high-day Sabbath, the feast day of the days of Unleavened Bread," while the second was "the weekly Sabbath, Saturday."

This conclusion is untenable, because, as Harold W. Hoehner points out, "The term Sabbath is frequently (one-third of all its New Testament occurrences) in the plural form in the New Testament when only one day is in view. For example, in Matthew 12:1-12 both the singular and plural forms are used (cf. esp. v. 5)." There is then no Biblical basis for a Passover Sabbath which occurred two days before the regular weekly Sabbath.

The clear and uninterrupted chronological sequence of days given in the Gospels is: Preparation day, Sabbath day, and first day. This sequence leaves absolutely no room for a literal interpretation of the phrase "three days and three nights" as representing an exact period of 72 hours.

### **Conclusion**

The foregoing considerations have shown, first, that the sign of Jonah given by Yeshua to prove His Messiahship consisted not in an exact 72-hour entombment, but in His Resurrection on the third day after His death. Second, the phrase "three days and three nights" (Matt 12:40) is an idiomatic expression which in Bible times meant not necessarily three complete 24-hour days (72 hours), but rather three calendric days, of which the first and the third could have consisted of only a few hours.

The latter conclusion is supported by the prevailing inclusive method of day-reckoning, by the parallel usage of the phrases "after three days" and "on the third day," and by the uninterrupted chronological sequence of days which does not allow for three complete 24-hour days. A recognition of these facts adequately explains how Yeshua fulfilled His prediction of a "three days and three nights" entombment by being buried on Friday afternoon and rising early on Sunday morning.

## **Summary**

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

Messiah rose while it was still dark (sometime after the sun went down on Shabbat, Nisan 16th, Omer Reisheet), reference: John 20:1. Messiah came up out of the grave and was spotted by his mother whom after recognizing him proceeded to cling to him (John 20:17). He objected to her touching/clinging to him because, in his own words, he had not yet ascended to his Father. What is the implication of his statement about ascension? I believe he had to present himself to the Father exactly the same way the Omer Reisheet had to be presented before HaShem in the Torah:

**"He is to wave the sheaf before ADONAI, so that you will be accepted; the cohen is to wave it on the day after the Shabbat." Lev. 23:11**

The midrash on this verse is that we, the believers, are the crop that is being represented on behalf of the first omer, who is Yeshua himself. Yeshua "waved" himself before the Father on our behalf (the rest of the crop) so that we, the resurrected ones to follow his resurrection, would be accepted. Thus redemption was complete only after he presented himself to the father, fulfilling the fullest purposes behind Passover, Unleavened Bread, and Omer Reisheet.

What is more, the Mishnah agrees that the omer was waived after the sun had set on the day of Unleavened Bread, which that year corresponded to sundown on Friday. Observe this lengthy quote from the Mishnah:

*How did they do it? Agents of the court go forth on the eve of the afternoon before the festival of Passover. And they make it into sheaves while it is still attached to the ground, so that it will be easy to reap. And all the villagers nearby gather together there on the night after the first day of Passover, so that it will be reaped with great pomp. Once it gets dark on the night of the sixteenth of Nisan, he says to them, "has the sun set?" They say, "Yes." "Has the sun set?" They say, "Yes." "With this sickle?" They say, "Yes." "With this sickle?" They say, "Yes." "With this basket?" They say, "Yes." "With this basket?" They say, "Yes." On the Sabbath, he says to them, "Shall I reap on this Sabbath?" They say, "Yes." "Shall I reap on this Sabbath?" They say, "Yes." "Shall I reap?" They say, "Reap." "Shall I reap?" They say, "Reap"- three times for each and every matter. And they say to him, "Yes, yes, yes." All of this pomp for what purpose? Because of the Boethusians, for they maintain, "the reaping of the barley for the offering of the first sheaf of barley is not done at the conclusion of the festival."<sup>6</sup>*

So for now, as of this writing, I choose to take the Pharisaic view. Then again, with the plethora of data available on the differing views, we may never know for sure what the correct view is until Messiah comes to expound on the difficult parts of Torah for us.

On to the rest of the commentary...

## Sunday Meeting?

<sup>6</sup> The Babylonian Talmud, Translation and Commentary by Jacob Neusner (Soncino CD-ROM Edition), XXXIX. Mishnah-Tractate Menahot 6:3, Hendrickson Publishers, 2006.

Suppose the Sadducean/Boethusian view is correct? Suppose that Omer Reisheet really starts on the morrow following the weekly Shabbat? This would put the festival on a Sunday every year. What is the impact on us now? Allow me to midrash in a different direction this time.

There are seven festivals mentioned on the biblical calendar of Leviticus 23. Each festival carries a similar aspect that ties it into the complete cycle of yearly gatherings. In every single feast except one, we can observe that the instructions to “have a holy convocation” are given (technically, Pesach does not bear this description but I safely assume that the historical example of the inaugural Pesach in Egypt covers the technicality). The one that is singled out as not being identified as a convocation (gathering) is Omer Reisheet. What could the Holy One possibly be conveying to us here? The following explanation will serve as a personal drash (homiletic application) on the calendar and this day that follows the Shabbat. It is not to be understood as the objective interpretation of the text rather, it is identifiably subjective. I base my understanding, however, on the objective findings of the text itself.

Isra'el was destined to be great among the surrounding nations. Theirs was a call to holiness, vividly demonstrated by their unique, God-given calendar. Surely, the many cultures and peoples that they interacted with had calendars of their own, identifying their various holy days and such. Yet Isra'el was to showcase the heavenly reality, through earthly means, that there was only One, True God under heaven worthy to be identified and worshipped as Creator. Isra'el was to teach the surrounding nations—by their own lifestyle—that “God is One” (Deut. 6:4).

During this period of the **TaNaKH** God usually worked his truth out by means of object lessons. His children would “do” things, which the surrounding nations were not “doing”; similarly, his children would also “abstain” from the things which the surrounding nations were “performing.” In this way, the surrounding nations would catch a glimpse of the difference between what God identified as “clean and unclean,” “holy and profane,” “life and death.” This was Isra'el’s “special call,” and as such, identified her unique “chosen-ness” (read Deut 4:1-20, specifically for this commentary, vv. 19-20).

Sun worship has been rife in the earth since the days of the Tower of Babel. The ancient myths tell of a supernatural being—a messiah, born of a woman, and born of the very rays of the sun itself! This supernal being was killed by his enemies during the Winter Solstice, only to be resurrected on the first day of the Spring Equinox. This interpretation arose out of the belief that the sun was in fact a god, which slept in death during the cold winter months, and arose to new life at the start of spring. Because its worshippers needed the sun’s vital, life-giving energy, they revered it as such in various pagan rituals and ceremonies. Sun worship was therefore, in many pagan cultures, mandated for survival itself.

One of the chief ceremonies involved “greeting” the sun as it made its way victoriously back from the underworld of the dead. Its followers would meet their deity as he made his reappearance from the wintry death that held him captive for a season. The day

chosen to represent this glorious awakening would become known as the first day of the Spring Equinox. And to ensure that the themes and symbols would forever be established among their adherents, an unforgettable name was granted to this very special day. Thus, "Sun-day" was born.

Now at this point in my commentary, it should be rather obvious by now that the event that I am describing bears a remarkable resemblance to our modern-day Easter celebration. This should be no surprise, as the origins of Easter can indeed be traced back to this very legend! Christianity in its infancy swelled to overflowing with former pagans, in an effort to establish itself as a viable religion in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries. It was (mis)understood that Judaism had failed, in that its lack of recognition of the Messiah placed it in a place less-favored—nay rejected—by the Holy One himself! Christianity would take its rightful place among believers as the True expression of Christ-worship.

Now, looking back in 20/20 hindsight, we can understand that this paradigmatic shift was not entirely complete, nor would it be permanent. It was, in fact, a shifting of responsibility of sharing the Good News with the surrounding nations, which placed Isra'el in this "less-favored" position. The students should familiarize themselves with Romans chapter eleven. But like Isra'el of old, the young Christian Church would make many significant mistakes, and mixing paganism with truth would become one of her errors that would permeate the very fabric of the Formalized Church like "tzara'at" (leprosy) down to this very day!

The damage was done.

The pagans brought their worship of the Sun into Christianity, and its traces can be observed even today. Easter is rightly recognized as the "holiest" gathering within Christianity. Billions of followers flock to sunrise services all over the world to pay homage to the True Son who was resurrected on this day—and rightfully so! Were it not for the awesome resurrection of our LORD Yeshua from the power of death, we believers—Jew and Gentile, would have no hope in this world!

Moreover, he did defeat death on that day, and we do have reason to celebrate! But do we have a biblical injunction to gather on this particular day? It is my premise that we do not. Our theology seems to be correct, yet our methodology lacks authenticity. Consider this example from the book of Ezekiel, chapter 8.

**"In the sixth year, in the sixth month on the fifth day, while I was sitting in my house and the elders of Judah were sitting before me, the hand of the Sovereign LORD came upon me there. I looked, and I saw a figure like that of a man. From what appeared to be his waist down he was like fire, and from there up his appearance was as bright as glowing metal. He stretched out what looked like a hand and took me by the hair of my head. The Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven and in visions of God he took me to Jerusalem, to the entrance to the north gate of the inner court, where the idol that provokes to jealousy stood. And there before me was the glory of the God of Israel, as in the vision I had seen in**

the plain. Then he said to me, "Son of man, look toward the north." So I looked, and in the entrance north of the gate of the altar I saw this idol of jealousy. And he said to me, "Son of man, do you see what they are doing—the utterly detestable things the house of Israel is doing here, things that will drive me far from my sanctuary? But you will see things that are even more detestable." Then he brought me to the entrance to the court. I looked, and I saw a hole in the wall. He said to me, "Son of man, now dig into the wall." So I dug into the wall and saw a doorway there. And he said to me, "Go in and see the wicked and detestable things they are doing here." So I went in and looked, and I saw portrayed all over the walls all kinds of crawling things and detestable animals and all the idols of the house of Israel. In front of them stood seventy elders of the house of Israel, and Jaazaniah son of Shaphan was standing among them. Each had a censer in his hand, and a fragrant cloud of incense was rising. He said to me, "Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the darkness, each at the shrine of his own idol? They say, 'The LORD does not see us; the LORD has forsaken the land.'" Again, he said, "You will see them doing things that are even more detestable." Then he brought me to the entrance to the north gate of the house of the LORD, and I saw women sitting there, mourning for Tammuz. He said to me, "Do you see this, son of man? You will see things that are even more detestable than this." He then brought me into the inner court of the house of the LORD, and there at the entrance to the temple, between the portico and the altar, were about twenty-five men. With their backs toward the temple of the LORD and their faces toward the east, they were bowing down to the sun in the east. He said to me, "Have you seen this, son of man? Is it a trivial matter for the house of Judah to do the detestable things they are doing here? Must they also fill the land with violence and continually provoke me to anger? Look at them putting the branch to their nose! Therefore I will deal with them in anger; I will not look on them with pity or spare them. Although they shout in my ears, I will not listen to them."

What was the problem here? Apparently Sun worship was even being practiced by 'Am Isra'el! Oy vey! Exactly how low had God's chosen people fallen? The traceable pattern to disobedience and error looks like this: first man misunderstands God's purposes, then man misunderstands God's methods. A lack of understanding of sanctification and true worship resulted in blatant disobedience of the Torah and eventually gross idolatrous practices (read vv. 17-18 again). This Torah Teacher believes that the Organized Body of Messiah of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is not far behind the 'Am Isra'el of this passage....!

Yet the damage was done.

Today, tradition still blinds us to the unchanging Truth of God's Word—a Truth that should not be compromised! The world is watching us believers. They are observing whether or not we will make a difference between the clean and unclean, the holy and the profane, life and death! HaShem did not tell 'Am Isra'el to "gather" on Omer Reisheet—the day after the Shabbat—which, according to the Sadducees, is Sunday itself!—in order to separate his truth from the error of paganism (remember sun worship has existed since the days of Bavel). I believe that the people of the TaNaKH set the

biblical example NOT to gather on that special Sunday during the Passover Week for a true heavenly reason. Why have we failed to grasp this truth?

Surely Yeshua was raised from death to life on that morning following the Sabbath! Surely he is the “firstfruits from the dead!” He is the first person to be raised unto a resurrection of incorruptible flesh! Although our flesh still houses sin, his flesh was sinless before his death on the execution stake; his resurrection demonstrates for us genuine believers what a resurrected body will be made like—raised to life everlasting! Why then do we continue to confuse this wonderful truth with our man-made traditions? Isn't it time we start demonstrating his holiness by the very days that we gather together on?

**The “first” always belongs to HaShem.** Why are we sharing it with paganism?

Consider these words.

***“Chag Omer Reisheet Sah-meach!”***

(Happy Festival of the First Sheaf!)

For further study, read: Ex. 23:16, 19; 34:26; Lev. 2:12, 14; 23:20; Num. 18:12-15, 26; Deut. 18:1-5; 26:2-4, 10; 2 Chron. 31:5; Neh. 10:35-39; Prov. 3:9; Jer. 2:3; Ezek. 44:30; 48:14; Mal. 3:8-14; Matt. 13:37-39; Mark 4:26-29; Heb. 6:20; 7:1-8; 12:1; Jude 14; Rev. 1:7

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