

The Timing of Shavuot

Last year, I got a frantic call from someone who heads a small Messianic house group, and he said to me, “The Jewish calendar I have says Shavuot is on Wednesday, May 19, but we scheduled it for Sunday, May 23, because you said that's when it is.”

“That is when it is.”

“But the Jewish calendar says it's Wednesday.”

This year, similar conversation, except the Jewish calendar says it's... well, that it was Wednesday, June 8, instead of Sunday, June 12. And because I'm such a stickler for keeping Torah-commanded festivals on the day in which they're commanded, this has been confusing for some people, so I thought I would clarify why Shavuot – better known as Pentecost – is always on Sunday, and suggest some reasons why traditional Judaism keeps it incorrectly. Let's start by looking at the commandment for the timing of Shavuot as given in Leviticus. But we have to back it up to the previous commandment, which is the commandment for Yom HaBikkurim (Day of the First Fruits), following the commandments for Pesach (Passover) and Chag Matzah (Feast of Unleavened Bread) and I will intersperse some commentary in between:

Leviticus 23:9-16

Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, 'When you enter the land which I am going to give to you and reap its harvest, then you shall bring in the sheaf of the first fruits of your harvest to the priest. He shall wave the sheaf before the LORD for you to be accepted; on the day after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it.

Here is the first point of differentiation. Traditional Judaism – following the opinion of the Pharisaic school – interprets the “Sabbath” in this commandment as meaning the Festival Sabbath that is the first day of unleavened bread.

The interpretation given by the Sadducees, the Essenes, and several other schools is that it means the weekly Sabbath. And if this statement stood alone, I would say there is room for either interpretation. However, as we continue, we see that one of these interpretations cannot work. We pick up at verse fourteen:

'Until this same day, until you have brought in the offering of your God, you shall eat neither bread nor roasted grain nor new growth. It is to be a perpetual statute throughout your generations in all your dwelling places. You shall also count for yourselves from the day after the sabbath, from the day when you brought in the sheaf of the wave offering; there shall be seven complete Sabbaths.'

Here is where we see a second point of differentiation. Traditional Judaism – again, following the opinion of the Pharisaic school – interpretively translates the last phrase in this commandment as “seven full weeks.” The Sadducees, the Essenes, and several other schools stick to what they say is a more literal translations, “seven complete Sabbaths,” as the translation we're using, the New American Standard, does. Which is correct? Well, let's look at the Hebrew. The wording is “sheva tahmeem Shabbatot.” Sheva means seven, tahmeem means complete, whole, or sound, and Shabbatot means Sabbaths. To mean seven full weeks, it would be “sheva tahmeem Shavuot.”

To get to the other problem with this counting, we must continue with the Scripture passage. We pick up at verse sixteen:

'You shall count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath; then you shall present a new grain offering to the LORD.'

The traditional, Pharisaic count is simply fifty days from the day after the festival Sabbath, but in verse sixteen, we see there is a specification to that fiftieth day... it is THE DAY AFTER the Seventh Sabbath, not simply sometime after the Seventh Sabbath. For example, last year, their seventh Sabbath is the 29th of Iyyar, or the 23rd of May on the Gregorian calendar (beginning the night of the 22nd). The day after the seventh Sabbath would thus be the 30th of Iyyar, or the 24th of May on the Gregorian calendar (beginning the night of the 23rd). But the traditional, Pharisaic count says that Shavuot will always be on the 6th of Sivan... and last year, that's THE SIXTH DAY AFTER the Seventh Sabbath that they have counted! This cannot be accurate Biblically! Also, let us ask ourselves – why is this the only festival for which God does not command a specific date, if it is to fall on a specific date, the 6th of Sivan, as the traditional Pharisaic count says!

There are two supporting arguments for the traditional Pharisaic count that they claim are Scripturally-based. Let's address those. We read in:

Deuteronomy 16:9-11

“You shall count seven weeks for yourself; you shall begin to count seven weeks from the time you begin to put the sickle to the standing grain. Then you shall celebrate the Feast of Weeks to the LORD your God with a tribute of a freewill offering of your hand, which you shall give just as the LORD your God blesses you; and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God, you and your son and your daughter and your male and female servants and the Levite who is in your town, and the stranger and the orphan and the widow who are in your midst, in the place where the LORD your God chooses to establish His name.”

The claim is that, by using the less specific term “seven weeks,” Moses has thus made the count less specific, causing ambiguity. I would agree, except we have the specific statement in Leviticus 23:16, that Shavuot is THE day after the Seventh Sabbath. I have no idea how the Pharisees thus interpret “the day after” in Leviticus 23:16 so they can have Shavuot six days after that seventh Sabbath – and if anyone knows, please tell me – but I don't see any other way to interpret it than being the actual next day.

The second Scriptural basis for the Pharisaic count is the description of the first Yom HaBikkurim in the Promised Land in:

Joshua 5:10-11

While the sons of Israel camped at Gilgal they observed the Passover on the evening of the fourteenth day of the month on the desert plains of Jericho. On the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate some of the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain.

They claim that this establishes the Day of the First Fruits as always being the day after the Passover, because you could not eat the new grain until Yom HaBikkurim. My response to this is two-fold: one, it doesn't say the grain was new. In fact, given that it was made into unleavened cakes and parched grain, I think a case can be made that it was stored grain from the previous harvest, which is allowed to be eaten up until the Day of the First Fruits.

My second response is that just because Yom HaBikkurim fell on the day after the Passover seder that year – assuming it did, as I said, we don't know that that's what it means – does not mean it always does. Again, let us ask ourselves – why is this the only festival for which God does not command a specific date, if it is to fall on a specific date, the 6th of Sivan, as the traditional Pharisaic count says!

The question becomes, when did the count that is recorded as the Pharisaic count, that was institutionalized by the final Sanhedrin, led by Hillel II, start to be used? The claim is that this is always the way it was done, but I sincerely question that, as we've just seen that it doesn't pass Scriptural muster. The final Sanhedrin met after the destruction of the Temple, as the faith that would one day be called “Christianity” is picking up steam. They knew that the Sect of the Nazarene – also known as “The Way” – was using the Day of the First Fruits and the Omer Count of strictly weekly Sabbaths to reinforce their message of Yeshua's Messiahship, which this Sanhedrin is completely against... in fact, they formalized and institutionalized a benediction in the Amidah that labeled the Nazarenes as heretics!

I don't think, in the climate of the times, with the Jewish people going into exile, with the members of the Sanhedrin blaming the Nazarenes for not supporting the Bar Kochba revolt (because Rabbi Akiva declared Bar Kochba the Messiah), that we can discount the idea that they might, possibly, have decided to change the way things were figured to point away from Yeshua?

Am I saying that's what happened? No. Is it a possibility? Certainly.

And finally, I want to address one final objection to the so-called Sadducean count, which I believe is the Scriptural count, and this objection is brought only by fellow Believers in Yeshua. That objection is that we cannot accept the Sadducean halacha (interpretation), because they do not believe in the resurrection of the dead – for anyone, not just Yeshua. Well, just because they are wrong on that – a totally unrelated issue – doesn't mean they are wrong on this. The traditional rabbis, the Pharisaic rabbis, who uphold the traditional count, don't believe Yeshua is the Messiah! Which is a worse sin, rejection of the Messiah or rejection of the general concept of resurrection? Yeshua Himself castigated the Pharisees, when they were wrong. That shows that we shouldn't automatically uphold their interpretations as right.

Some suggest that since Yeshua never lashed out at the Pharisees for their false count. This assumes: one, that the Pharisaic count in fact predates the final Sanhedrin. Other than testimony that post-dates Yeshua, we have no proof that the traditional Pharisaic practice was the normative practice at the time of Yeshua. And it assumes two, that because we have no record in our canonical Gospels of such an objection that it never happened. Well, we are told in:

John 21:24-25

This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and wrote these things, and we know that his testimony is true. And there are also many other things which Yeshua did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written.

When I was taught logic in college, I was taught that an argument from silence is a logical fallacy.

Some suggest we in the Messianic community cannot say the Pharisees are wrong since we do not understand their position, because if we understood their position we'd see they're right. That's tautology – we cannot show they are wrong because we just don't understand they're right. I believe we don't have to understand their position. All we have to understand is what the Scripture says. And the Scripture says:

Count Seven Complete Sabbaths (Sheva Tahmeem Shabbatot, not Sheva Tahmeem Shavuot) – Leviticus 23:15

Shavuot comes on the day after the seventh Sabbath – Leviticus 23:16

I find no way to uphold the traditional count, given the very specific statement, the day after the seventh Sabbath.

In prayerful hope that this teaching has edified the Body of Messiah, I wish you...

Shalom u'Brachot b'Shem Mishikeinu Yeshua,
(Peace & Blessings in the Name of Our Messiah Jesus)

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