

How to Reckon the Day of Pentecost

by Lester L. Grabbe

“WHEN the day of Pentecost had arrived, they were all gathered together. And suddenly from heaven a noise like a violent wind filled the house where they were seated. . . . and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.”

This was the beginning of the New Testament Church. Jesus had fulfilled His promise to send the Holy Spirit to the disciples and believers. That particular Pentecost day was indeed a momentous event in history. This was the conception of an embryo which was to grow until it had filled the entire earth.

But when was that day of Pentecost? How is one to determine when to keep the memorial of the day when the Church began? Pentecost — “Feast of Weeks” in the Old Testament — was kept on at least four different dates by various Jewish groups. It has also been kept on more than one date by Christians who have attempted to emulate the practice of the Apostolic Church. Which is the correct day?

The Original Directions

The first instructions about keeping Pentecost, or the Feast of Weeks, are found in Leviticus 23. All the other annual festivals enumerated in this chapter are placed on a particular day of the month. So long as one uses the proper calendar, there is no difficulty with knowing when they occur. There has never been any serious dispute about the date of the other annual festivals, so far as we can tell from the historical records which have come down to us.

When it came to the Feast of Weeks, however, no simple day of the month was given. Instead, instructions were given for *counting* or reckoning the day from a particular ceremony performed at another festival. The cere-

mony was the cutting and waving of the first sheaf of grain of the first harvest — the so-called Wave Sheaf Offering.

Leviticus 23:15-16 states as follows (all translations are the author's from the original texts): “You shall number for yourself beginning with the day after the Sabbath, the day on which you brought the Wave Sheaf (seven Sabbaths shall be complete) to the day after the seventh Sabbath, counting fifty days. Then you shall offer an offering of new grain to the Eternal.”

If one knows the original Hebrew of the passage, the counting is quite clear. First, one must begin his count with the day of the Wave Sheaf Offering which is a Sunday (“day after the Sabbath”). Seven full Sabbaths are counted and the day after the seventh Sabbath — a Sunday — is arrived at. The text also notes this period of time includes fifty days.

“Shabbat” in Hebrew

Those who have counted wrongly have done so primarily for two reasons. One reason is reading the word “Sabbath” (Hebrew *Shabbat*) as “week.” This is one of the errors made by some early Jewish groups to be discussed later. During the intertestamental period, the term *Shabbat* had taken on the connotation “week.” The word was even borrowed into Greek as *sabbaton* or *sabbata* with the meaning either of “Sabbath” or of “week.” Both usages are attested in the New Testament.

But at the time of the instructions in Leviticus 23, centuries before the New Testament, the word *Shabbat* meant only the weekly or the annual Sabbaths. “Week” was expressed by the term *shavuah* which means “a period of seven (days).” The plural of this word

is the common Hebrew term for Pentecost: *Shavuot*.

The contrast between the terms *Shabbat* and *shavuah* is clearly seen when you read the instructions about Pentecost in Deuteronomy 16. These read: “You shall number seven weeks for yourself; you shall count the seven weeks from the time when you begin to put the sickle to the grain.” Here the term “weeks” is used rather than “Sabbath.” From all the linguistic data at our disposal at the present, there is no reason to believe the terms interchangeable at that time. *Shabbat* should be translated “Sabbath” and not “week.”

Confusion from Translations

A second error which has been made has resulted from a misunderstanding of the common English translations of Leviticus 23:15. For example, the Revised Standard Version translates, “And you shall count *from* the morrow after the sabbath . . .” The King James Version and many modern translations render somewhat similarly.

The English preposition “from” has many different uses. Its precise meaning in any given context depends on the particular syntax and idiom involved. But when used in reference to time, the English word “from” is usually used *exclusively*. That is, if I say, “Meet me a week from today,” I expect the person addressed to meet me on the same day of the week as the one on which I addressed him. Yet in order to do that, it means excluding the current day from the count. If I spoke to the person on a Sunday, Monday would be one day from Sunday, Tuesday would be two days from Sunday, and the following Sunday would be seven days from Sunday.

In a number of other languages, however, it is customary to count inclusively. A person speaking French or German will not use the term "week from today" to mean the same day of the week but "eight days from today." The same was true in Hebrew. The preposition "from" (Hebrew *min*) usually included the beginning segment of time as well as the concluding segment. Thus, Hebrew commonly counted *inclusively*.

This fact is illustrated from several standard reference works on the Hebrew language:

"Of time — viz. . . . as marking the *terminus a quo*, the anterior limit of a continuous period" (Brown-Driver-Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*).

"The sense *from* may refer to *source*, point of starting from, e.g. frequently in the local (and temporal) sense" (Davidson, *Hebrew Syntax*, p. 141).

"Frequently through *min* the starting point is contrasted with the end point, especially in order thus to include both" (Gesenius-Buhl, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Handwörterbuch*, translation from the original German).

"Used in reference to time it signifies . . . often the beginning point" (Brockelmann, *Hebräische Syntax*, p. 109, German original).

Naturally, the Hebrew preposition *min* is used in a great variety of ways, depending on the particular syntax and idiom. Yet when the construction in question is referring to counting "from" a certain point "to" (Hebrew *ad*) a certain point, both the beginning and ending points are frequently included. Thus, the fifty days of Leviticus 23:16 have to include both the beginning day and the ending day.

However, there is still no difficulty since the text clearly states not only where to begin counting (on a Sunday) but also where to *end* the count (on another Sunday). The fifty days is only a parenthetical remark about the total number of days. The day of Pentecost is clearly and unequivocally labeled "the day after the seventh Sabbath" (a Sunday) in Leviticus 23:16.

The day of Pentecost is plainly a Sunday seven weeks after the waving of the Wave Sheaf.

Pentecost Among Jewish Sectarians

We have already noted that Pentecost was not always kept on the same day unitedly by the Jews. We have records of at least four different dates on which the day was observed. Their disagreements seem all to concern the correct meaning of the word *Shabbat* in its three occurrences in Leviticus 23:15-16. But as we shall see, they *all* agreed on one important point.

Three Jewish groups observed the day of Pentecost according to the reckoning described above. These were the Sadducees, the Samaritans, and the Karaites. The Sadducees are the group well-known from the New Testament. The Samaritans were a group who worshipped on Mount Gerizim near Shechem and rejected most of the Old Testament except the Pentateuch. Although they were viewed as heretical by the Jews as a whole, they held many practices in common. Modern research has also shown that many of their practices came from an older priestly tradition which they held in common with the Sadducees but from which later Judaism departed.

The Karaites were a group which originated about the eighth century A.D. In an attempt to get back to the plain meaning of the Scriptures, they rejected the rabbinic Judaism with its traditions. One of their characteristics was that they, like the Sadducees before them and the Samaritans even to the present day, kept Pentecost on a Sunday.

The Pharisaic practice is still followed by Jewish people in the rabbinic tradition today. According to it, the Wave Sheaf was to be offered the day after the first annual holy day during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Thus, Pentecost did not fall on a fixed day of the week but was always on the same day of the week as that following the first annual holy day. At present with a calculated calendar that date is always the sixth of Sivan, but in the days when each new moon was visually observed, Pentecost could have fallen on the fifth, the sixth, or the seventh of Sivan.

Another group, the Falasha's of

Ethiopia, had their origin long before the time of Christ and had many traditions differing from the Judaism of Palestine. They too kept Pentecost on Sunday. But instead of counting from a Sunday within the Feast as the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Karaites, they counted from the first Sunday afterward. Thus, they kept Pentecost a week later than the Sadducees.

The Qumran sect, the authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls, is thought to be Esene by many. Their calendar differed rather drastically from that normally used among the Jews; they calculated Pentecost differently as well. Instead of counting from the day after the first holy day as did the Pharisees, they counted from the day after the last holy day. According to their calendar, Pentecost was always the fifteenth day of the third month (Sivan). Yet because the annual festivals always fell on the same day of the week in their peculiar calendar, Pentecost was also always observed on a Sunday.

Despite all the differences noted here, there is one consistent factor. *No matter how each particular group counted, they always counted the fifty days inclusively.* There is no deviation. However they interpreted the phrase "day after the *Shabbat*," they always began counting with that day.

Who Was in Charge of the Temple?

We have already shown the plain meaning of Leviticus 23:15-16. It is clear that the various methods of keeping Pentecost among different Jewish groups are only of historical interest except as they show that the fifty days were counted inclusively. We do not need to go to the Falashas or Qumranites to find out how to keep Pentecost. When it comes to the Pharisees and Sadducees, however, another point needs to be covered. Was the method of keeping Pentecost at the Temple done according to the Pharisaic or Sadducean manner?

It has been the general impression of many people that the Pharisees were the dominant religious group in Palestine in the time of Jesus. It has also been claimed that the priests conducted the Temple service according to Pharisaic regulations. Two sources show this

is incorrect. One is the New Testament; the other, recent research into rabbinic literature by modern Jewish scholars.

The book of Acts pictures a steady evolution of power for the Pharisees, but it shows the *Sadducees were in charge of the religious authority at least until shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem.*

Acts 4:1-3 tells us that "the priests, the officer of the temple, and the Sadducees" were those who arrested the apostles for teaching the resurrection. Acts 5:17 goes on to show the "high priest and those with him, that is, the sect of the Sadducees," became jealous of the preaching of the apostles. This demonstrates that *Sadducean views dominated the priesthood* which was responsible for the Temple service. This was in the 30's just after Jesus' ministry.

More than two decades later the situation had changed somewhat. Acts 23:6-10 shows the Sanhedrin about equally split between Pharisees and Sadducees. Yet even then the Sadducees still apparently had the upper hand since Paul was kept in prison even though the Pharisees wanted to free him. This was in the 50's, only about a decade before the war with Rome.

Some of the later rabbinic literature gives the impression the Temple services were regulated according to Pharisaic custom. Research has now shown this is purely apologetic propaganda made long after the destruction of the Temple. One of the leading scholars in this area is Jacob Neusner. His highly influential, three-volume scholarly work,

Rabbinic Traditions about the Pharisees before 70, is summarized in more popular form in *From Politics to Piety*.

Both these works discuss the question of who was in charge of the Temple. It becomes clear that *the Pharisees had nothing to do with Temple worship and practice*. Their concern was with their own table fellowship for which they developed detailed regulations. These regulations were first codified in the Mishnah about 200 A.D. The Mishnah and later rabbinic writings sometimes discuss the situation before 70 A.D., but often anachronistically and inaccurately. Neusner writes:

"The historical Pharisees of the period before 70 A.D. have eluded us. Our inquiry time and again brings us to problems of the history of ancient Judaism *after* the destruction of Jerusalem The rabbinical traditions about the Pharisees . . . have all been reworked in the forms used at Yavneh" (*From Politics to Piety*, p. 143). Yavneh was the council which edited and reworked earlier traditions. This reworking has generally obscured or distorted any genuine pre-70 material.

Thus, it is evident that those in charge of the Temple service were the priests who went according to Sadducean custom. Jesus and the disciples would have kept Pentecost according to the time it was officially observed at the Temple. This was on a Sunday according to Sadducean teachings.

The Church Today

The Worldwide Church of God today attempts to follow the customs and practices of the Apostolic Church,

taking into account today's modern world. The Church follows Jesus' own example in partaking of the symbols of the bread and wine as He did at His last supper. It also keeps Pentecost on the day when Jesus and His disciples kept it and on the same date as the New Testament Church began.

Since the directions for keeping Pentecost are given in the Old Testament, it is necessary to understand them according to the original Hebrew text. Modern Hebrew scholarship has ascertained the original implications of those instructions in a way not even possible centuries ago. It is clear that Pentecost was to be kept on a Sunday seven weeks after the Wave Sheaf Sunday during the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

The Old Testament instructions are further buttressed by a study of the New Testament and Jewish history. During the time of Jesus, Pentecost was kept by the official priesthood on a Sunday. There is no evidence that Jesus disagreed with the normal times for keeping the festivals, even though His keeping of them is mentioned several times. Jesus' example is very significant.

The Worldwide Church of God follows those examples today and observes Pentecost on a Sunday seven weeks from the first Sunday within the Feast of Unleavened Bread. □

Additional Reading

The Worldwide Church of God publishes a free booklet expounding each of the seven biblical festivals listed in Leviticus 23. Request: *Pagan Holidays — or God's Holy Days — Which?*