

### **Category: Appointed Times**

## **The Omer**

"When you enter the land I am going to give you and you reap its harvest, bring to the priest an *omer* of the first grain you harvest. He is to wave the sheaf before Adonai so it will be accepted on your behalf; the priest is to wave it on the day after the Sabbath" –  
Leviticus 23:10-11.

The command to bring the first sheaf of the harvest to the Temple is of great significance to the disciples of Yeshua. It is an obscure appointment on the Biblical calendar, sometimes called the First Fruits of the Barley Harvest, but better known simply by its Biblical name, "The Omer." The *Omer* is a minor festival with major Messianic implications.

### **The Omer and the Messiah**

On the same day that that Caiaphas and his associates tried the Master, apostles of the Sanhedrin went out to a barley field not far from Jerusalem. On the same day that the Romans bound and crucified the Master, the apostles of the Sanhedrin bound up the standing barley into bundles while it was still attached to the ground so that it would be easier to reap.[1]

A day later, after the sun had set and the High Sabbath of Unleavened Bread was over, just 24-hours before the Master rose from His tomb, they returned to the barley field, reaped it and collected it in three baskets, even though it was yet the weekly Sabbath. That night they carried the baskets of grain to Jerusalem. They delivered the baskets to the priesthood in the Temple. The baskets contained more than enough grain to constitute a full sheaf's worth: enough to fulfill the mandate of Leviticus 23:10. The Hebrew word for sheaf is *omer*.

The harvest ritual of gathering this barley *omer* was for a special first fruits offering to the Lord. The Torah prohibited using or eating any grain or

produce from the new year's crops until the first *omer* of grain to ripen was harvested and brought to the Temple. The barley crop ripens first in Israel, so the *omer* was always a barley sheaf. The commandment of the barley *omer* served to remind Israel that the land and its produce belong first to God. The people of Israel could not enjoy the produce of the land until God had received His due. Until they harvested and offered the barley *omer* in the Temple, the rest of the crops were not deemed kosher.

So it was that very night, the Master's second night in the tomb, that the priests in the Temple threshed, roasted and ground the barley *omer* into flour. All night they prepared it. Then while the Master passed those silent Sabbath hours, the priests refined the freshly milled flour by sifting it through 13 sieves.

Lining up the *omer* ritual with the resurrection depends on how we reckon the passion week. For those who accept the traditional Christian Good Friday, whereby the High Sabbath of Unleavened Bread coincides with the weekly Shabbat, the waving of the *omer* would have taken place on Sunday after the resurrection. Those who adhere to the Good Thursday model advanced by some Hebrew Roots teachers and based on the Gospel of John, the Temple rituals of waving the sheaf and presenting the first fruits would have taken place just hours before the resurrection. Either way, the synonymy of events is remarkable. For our purposes, we will assume the latter model where the Master was crucified on a Thursday, Friday was the Sabbath of Unleavened Bread, and Saturday—the weekly Sabbath—was the day of presenting the first fruits of the barley.

That Sabbath day, while the Master slept, the priesthood was busy mixing the barley flour with oil and frankincense to make it into a bread offering. Just hours before the Sabbath was over, while Miriam from Magdala and the other women among the disciples still "rested according to the commandment" (Luke 23:56), the High Priest touched the barley flour to the altar and offered a portion of it on the altar as a memorial portion. They baked the remainder of the dough into loaves of unleavened barley bread to be shared among the priesthood. Along with this barley bread offering of the

*omer*, they sacrificed a single lamb as a burnt offering.

By divine design, the rituals of offering the barley *omer* in the Temple coincided with the death and resurrection of the Yeshua.

### **Counting the Omer—A Subject of Dispute**

The Harvest of the Barley *Omer* occurs on the second day of the seven days of Unleavened Bread. It is a miniature festival within a festival. It is listed in Leviticus 23 along with all the appointed times of God.

Beginning on the day that the first *omer* of barley was harvested and brought to the Temple, a countdown to the next Biblical Festival began. The Torah commands the Israelites to count off 49 days and then celebrate the festival of *Shavuot* (Pentecost) on the 50th day. The day the *Omer* was brought was 'Day One' of what is called 'Counting the *Omer*.' The next day was 'Day Two' of the *Omer* count, the next was 'Day Three' and so on.

During the 49 days of the *Omer* count, the wheat crop in Israel ripens. By the end of the *Omer* count, the crop is ready for harvest and the First Fruits of the wheat crop can be brought to the Temple for Pentecost. However, in the apostolic era, the Pharisees and the Sadducees disagreed about the timing of this ritual. As a result, they disagreed about the date of Pentecost.

The point of contention lies in the ambiguity of the Hebrew text. Leviticus 23:11 says the *Omer* is to be brought "on the day after the Sabbath." It is not clear whether the verse is referring to the weekly Sabbath or the special High Sabbath which begins the week of Unleavened Bread. If the verse refers to the weekly Sabbath, then the *Omer* would always fall on a Sunday but would have no fixed calendar date. If, however, the verse refers to the special Sabbath of Unleavened Bread, then the First Fruits of the Barley would always fall on the sixteenth day of the first month (Nisan) but would not fall on a fixed week day.

In ancient times, the meaning of the verse was hotly debated between the Pharisees and a sect of the Saducees. The Saducees understood the "day after

the Sabbath" as being Sunday. The Pharisees argued against that seemingly literal reading. In first-century Temple practice, the Pharisees ultimately prevailed, and as a result modern Judaism still reckons the Sabbath in question as the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread. Thus in modern Jewish observance, the First Fruits of the Barley *Omer* always falls on the sixteenth day of the first month (the second day of Unleavened Bread).

For years, I personally preferred and taught the Sadducean method of reckoning. I even wrote an article on the subject for First Fruits of Zion, urging believers to adopt the Sadducean reckoning. My colleague Tim Hegg, however, argued for accepting the traditional, Pharisaic reckoning. On one occasion, Tim challenged me, asking me, "When the believers gathered in the Temple to celebrate the 50th day of the *Omer*, did they do it according to the reckoning of the Sadducees or the Pharisees?" I looked into the matter.

If we can ascertain how the *omer* was reckoned in the days of the believers, we will know how we should reckon it. Two important, first-century eye-witnesses and contemporaries of the Apostles bring important testimony. Flavius Josephus, who was himself a member of the Temple priesthood, reports in Antiquities 3.10.5-6, "On the second day of Unleavened Bread, which is the sixteenth day of the month [Nisan], they first partake of the fruits of the earth, for before that day they do not touch them . . . They also at this participation of the first-fruits of the earth, sacrifice a lamb as a burnt offering to God."

Similarly, Philo, another First Century, Jewish eyewitness reports, "There is also a festival on the day of the Passover Feast, which succeeds the first day, and this is named the sheaf [*omer*], from what takes place on it; for the sheaf is brought to the altar as a first fruit..." (Philo, Special Laws 2:29 150) Both Philo and Josephus agree that the ritual was practiced in accordance with the reckoning of the Pharisees. In addition, the Greek Septuagint version of the Torah (a version employed fairly extensively by the first-century believers) makes the matter explicit by translating Leviticus 23:11 as, "And he shall lift up the sheaf before the Lord, to be accepted for you. On the morrow of the first day the priest shall lift it up." The term "morrow of the first day" can only be understood in accordance with the traditional Pharisaic reckoning. Tim was

right. I was wrong. If the believers had counted the *omer* according to the Sadducees, they would not have been gathered in the Temple with all Israel—pilgrims from all over the world—on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2. God put His divine seal of approval on the traditional method of counting by pouring out his Holy Spirit on the day of the Pharisaic *Shavuot*. After studying the matter out, I had to change the way I reckoned the *Omer*, and I had to re-write this article.

## **No Small Consequence**

The counting of the days of the *Omer* is a biblical commandment incumbent upon every believer. Traditionally, the period of the *Omer* count is to be a time of spiritual introspection as the counters prepare themselves for *Shavuot*. Because it begins during Passover and concludes at *Shavuot*, the counting of the *Omer* remembers the journey from Egypt to Mount Sinai.

The Messianic implications of the *Omer* and the subsequent count down are great. According to Matthew 28:1, Yeshua rose "after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week," a Hebraic expression for the *havdalah* hour that ends the Sabbath on Saturday night. We cannot help but notice that the appointed day for harvesting the barley *omer* coincides with the resurrection of Messiah. In a remarkable display of God's sovereign planning, the Torah set aside the resurrection as a day of first fruits 1,400 years before its occurrence.

The symbolism is strong. Just as the first *omer* of barley was brought as a first fruits of the whole harvest, so too Messiah's resurrection was a first fruits of the resurrection of the dead. This is the imagery Paul invokes with the words, "Messiah has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep." [2] Just as the first fruits of the barley made all the rest of the harvest kosher for harvest, so too the resurrection of Messiah makes the resurrection of the dead possible.

## **Counting the Days of Messiah**

Because of the resurrection and the connection to Pentecost, the counting of the *Omer* is an important *mitzvah* for believers.

According to Jewish tradition, the counting is done in the following prescribed manner. After the evening prayers each day, the counter recites a blessing: "Blessed are You, LORD Our God, King of the Universe, Who has sanctified us with his commandments and commanded us to count the *Omer*." Then the counter simply states, "Today is X days of the *Omer*." The person counting follows his formal declaration of the *omer* day with a recitation of Psalm 67 and a few short petitions for spiritual cleansing and renewal.

Tradition prescribes the recitation of Psalm 67 because it is composed of exactly 49 Hebrew words which correspond to the 49 days of the *omer* count. The Psalm is seasonally appropriate because of its harvest motif. It is spiritually appropriate because it speaks clearly of God's salvation (*Yeshua*) being made known over all the earth.

The Counting of the *Omer* creates a count down to *Shavuot*, the time of giving of the Torah and the time of the giving of the Holy Spirit. As such, it guides us on a spiritual journey of preparation. It is a journey that is begun with Passover, the symbol of our Salvation in Yeshua, and completed at Pentecost, the symbol of our completion through the Spirit. The distance of days between the two events should be a time of spiritual reflection, growth, purification and preparation.

The Master's resurrection makes the counting of the *Omer* a season of special significance and joy. For His disciples, it is a time to remember the resurrected Yeshua. All of His post-resurrection appearances fell within the days of the *Omer* count.

At the end of the first day of the *Omer*, at the beginning of the second day, He rose. On the second day of the *Omer*, He appeared to Miriam and to two of our number while they traveled to Emmaus, and also to Peter. On the third day of the *Omer* He appeared in our midst, among the Twelve. On the tenth day of the *Omer* He appeared to us again, and Thomas was with us. During the

counting He appeared to 500 of our number and then to James. During the counting He appeared to seven of our number while they fished on the sea. On the 41st day of the *Omer* He led us out to a hill near Bethany, and we saw Him ascend to heaven. Before He ascended, He commanded us not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father.

We waited and counted the days. Forty-one, forty-two, forty-three, forty-four, forty-five, forty-six, forty-seven, forty-eight, forty-nine days of the *Omer*...and when the day of Pentecost was fully come we were all together in one place.[3]

Let's work together this year as we keep the *mitzvah* of Counting the *Omer*. Let's express the resurrected life within us by doing more *mitzvot* and spreading more joy.

#### **Endnotes**

1. *Menachot* 10:3. See *Mishnah, Menachot* 10 for detailed information on the *omer* ritual.
2. 1 Corinthians 15:20
3. Acts 2

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