

Shavuot: A Jewish Perspective on Pentecost

This year, Shavuot, the Festival of Weeks, begins as the weekly Sabbath ends on Saturday evening at sunset.

Understanding this many-faceted holiday from a Jewish perspective provides a fitting background to the Christian celebration of Pentecost, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, which took place on the same day about 1,300 years later.

Shavuot falls exactly 50 days (seven Sabbaths) after the first day of Passover (Pesach); hence the name Pentecost, the Greek word for “50.”

“Count 50 days to the day after the seventh Sabbath; then you shall offer a new grain offering to the Lord.” (Lev. 23:16)

It’s the second of the three biblical pilgrimage festivals, following Pesach – the Feast of Unleavened Bread – and before the fall festival of Sukkot, the Feast of Tabernacles. Many themes are interwoven in this holiday. Here’s a few.

The Book of Ruth

In biblical times, Israelites countrywide traveled to Jerusalem to present an offering at the Temple on Mount Zion (Temple Mount). Also known as Hag Ha’hkatzir (Harvest Festival), Jews traditionally read the Book of Ruth, along with the Torah portion, which reminds them to share God’s bountiful provision.

“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field when you reap, nor shall you gather any gleaning from your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and for the stranger. I am the Lord your God.” (Lev. 23:22).

The Book of Ruth tells the story of the Moabite woman who chose to return to Israel with her mother-in-law, Naomi.

"Entreat me not to leave you or turn back from following after you; For wherever you go, I will go and wherever you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God, my God." (Ruth 1:16)

When the young widow goes out to glean, she finds herself in grain fields belonging to Naomi's close relative, Boaz, who becomes her husband. Ruth then gives birth to Jesse, the father of King David, placing her in the genealogy of Israel's Messiah.

First Fruits and Giving of the Torah

Israelites brought the first fruits of the harvest to the Temple, hence the name Hag ha'Bikkurim, the Festival of First Fruits. They likely brought some of the seven species with them – olives, grapes, wheat, barley, figs, dates, and pomegranates – those harvested in the spring after the winter rains.

Today, Israel produces these same fruits in abundance. On Shavuot, dairy products and fruit are traditional fare, celebrating the land flowing with milk and honey.

Shavuot is also called Hag Matan Torateinu (Festival of the Giving of the Torah), celebrating God's giving the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai. It's traditional to stay up all night studying the Torah, the first five books of the Bible.

Another Outpouring

On Shavuot, nearly 2,000 years ago, 120 followers of Yeshua (Jesus) were waiting in an upper room in Jerusalem to be imbued with power from on high. They were told to tarry until it happened.

They may have prayed about the promise foretold by the prophet Joel, which Peter described.

“There came a sound from heaven, as of a mighty, rushing they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.” (Acts 2:2-4)

The outpouring of God’s Spirit produced quite a harvest – about 3,000 people joined the 120 disciples to become “witnesses to Me in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.”

And so it happened, just as the prophet foretold.

“And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, that I will pour out My Spirit on all it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” (Acts 2:17a, 21)

Many would agree that such an outpouring is what today’s world needs the most.