

The Mystery of the Date of Pentecost

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Introduction

For believers in Jesus the Messiah, the dating of Pentecost is one of the most exquisite examples of type and fulfillment in the Scriptures. Pentecost means fifty, and is actually fifty days from another feast, First Fruits. These calculations are explained in [Leviticus 23:10–11, 15–17](#). The feast of First Fruits was to occur on the day after the Sabbath (verse 11), which was always the Sunday of Passover week. Pentecost, then, was the day after the seventh following Sabbath (verses 15–16), which would be the fiftieth day after First Fruits and also on a Sunday.

The fulfillment of these feasts is striking. Jesus died the Friday of Passover week and had to be buried hastily before sunset, which was when the Sabbath began. His body remained in the borrowed sepulcher throughout the Sabbath day, but on that Sunday morning, when the priest was to offer the First Fruits offering in the Temple, Christ arose from the dead, the first fruits of them that slept ([1 Cor. 15:20](#)).

For forty ensuing days, the Lord appeared to His disciples in His resurrection body, and then ascended into Heaven. Ten days later, the Sunday of the Feast of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended upon the believers in Jerusalem and created the ekklesia, the called out body of Christ, the church. These fulfillments were obviously no coincidence, but were part of the overall plan and purpose of God in verifying the powerful meaning of the death and resurrection of Christ, and the establishment of the new body of believers.

From then on, the Jewish believers in Christ must have repeatedly informed the people of Israel about the nature of the fulfillment of Passover, First Fruits and Pentecost. It must have made a great impact on the Jewish people who lived between the resurrection of Christ and the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, a span of about forty years.

The Rabbis' Problem with Vagueness

This brings us to the explanation of First Fruits and Pentecost offered in an article by Moshe Kohn in the *Jerusalem Post*. Students of the New Testament might well be mystified over the tortured reasoning concerning what he perceives as the singular vagueness in the Torah about these two feasts:

It is strange that of all the festivals the Torah ordains, Shavuot [*Weeks, Pentecost*] alone the anniversary of the event that marks the birth of the Jewish people is given no

specific date. The Torah only tells us that at a vaguely specified time during Pessah, **from the day after the *shabbat* ... there shall be seven full weeks. Till the day after the seventh *shabbat* you shall count 50 days** ([Leviticus 23:15–16](#)).

Why is the day after the Sabbath considered vague? It seems pretty definite to us! It means the day after Saturday, that is, Sunday. This is the way the Sadducees and the later Jewish sect of the Karaites understood the Scriptures, as Kohn explains:

This vague formulation was in dispute between Jewish sectarians and the Sages. The Sadducees maintained that *shabbat* in this passage is a proper noun referring to the weekly Shabbat.

According to this understanding, accepted by the Karaites and Samaritans, the omer count begins the first Sunday after the first Shabbat of *Pessah*, so that *Shavuot* always falls on Sunday seven weeks later.

The normal Saturday meaning of the Sabbath in this passage was the view of the Sadducees. They were the priestly party and had control of the Temple, where the feasts were focused until the Temple was destroyed. The view of the Sadducees appears to be supported by the *Septuagint*, which was the translation from Hebrew to Greek by Jewish scholars in Egypt around 180 BC. In rendering the two Hebrew words *mimmacharat hashabbat* (on the morrow after the Sabbath) in [Lev. 23:11](#), they used the Greek word *protos* (first). This would indicate the first day of the week, or Sunday. Thus, the *Septuagint* suggests that the Sunday First Fruits and Pentecost was observed throughout the centuries before the First Coming of the Messiah.

However, Kohn explains that the Sages, the rabbis who compiled the Talmud after the destruction of the Temple, had a very different interpretation of the term Sabbath in this passage:

The Sages' view ... was that this *shabbat* is the generic for day of rest, referring to the first day of Pessah. Accordingly, the count begins the second day of Pessah rather the night before and *Shavuot* always falls on Sivan 6.

No less strange is that the Torah doesn't name this 50th day as the day of the Mount Sinai event. Again it is the talmudic Sages who ruled that the date is Sivan 6. (Shabbat 6b, Pessahim 68b)

Now, this is strange! The rabbis decided that in this case the term Sabbath did not mean Saturday, but something else: the first day of Passover, or, more precisely, the first day of Unleavened Bread (the second day of Passover). What justification do they have for changing the meaning of Sabbath that way? Kohn does not say, but there must have been a very strong motive to cause the Sages to interpret Sabbath as something other than the regular sacred Saturday Sabbath.

We have no proof, but suggest that the change came some time after the resurrection of Christ and before the destruction of the Temple. Think of the impact the Jewish believers must have had as they described the Lord's resurrection on the Sunday of

Passover week at First Fruits and the coming of the Spirit seven Sundays later on Pentecost. The leaders must have been hard pressed to explain away the relevance of the feasts and their fulfillment in the Messiah.

The solution they came up with was to obfuscate the calendar in such a way as to make the connection less clear between the feasts and their fulfillment in Christ and the Holy Spirit. The strategy apparently worked because most Jewish people today see no connection whatever between the Feasts and the Messiah. By the time Josephus wrote his history about the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD, the Jewish authorities had established the concept that First Fruits was always on Nisan 16, and Pentecost on Sivan 6. Josephus went through a rather lengthy explanation that the Sabbath of [Lev. 23:11](#) meant the first day of Unleavened Bread, not Saturday. Thus, apparently some time before the destruction of the Temple, the practice of observing First Fruits and Pentecost on Nisan 16 and Sivan 6 was in place.

Instead of causing Jewish leaders to marvel over the relationship between the Feasts and the Messiah, the current festival schedule leaves scholars like Moshe Kohn scratching their heads. They are perplexed over the vagueness of the dates of First Fruits and Pentecost, and why there is no clear statement in the Torah that Pentecost is the day Moses received the Law, which is the teaching of the Sages. Such appears to be part of the veil over the eyes of the majority of Jewish people that so tragically obscures the truth about the Messiah in the Law.

Nevertheless, many Jews today and a lot of Gentiles who have no background in these matters are being graciously enlightened and are receiving the Lord.

The Case for Sunday for First Fruits and Pentecost

There are strong arguments for the Sunday interpretation for First Fruits and Pentecost in the Leviticus passage:

1. The basic meaning of the term *Shabbat* in the Torah is Saturday. There are some rare exceptions to this rule, but the context usually clarifies the meaning when there is an exception. It would appear that the burden of proof would be with anyone who claims that Shabbat means anything other than Saturday. Thus, the morrow after the Sabbath must mean Sunday unless there are compelling reasons for understanding otherwise.
2. Even if the Sages could make a case for the first day of Unleavened Bread (the second day of Passover) to be considered a Sabbath, how could the seven succeeding Sabbaths be considered anything other than Saturdays? In order for Pentecost to fall always on Sivan 6, the seventh Sabbath after First Fruits has to be understood as something other than a Saturday. If it was difficult to consider the first day of Unleavened Bread as a Sabbath, it would appear almost impossible to consider Sivan 5 (seven weeks later) to be a Sabbath, no matter what day of the week on which it fell. Yet this is what the Sages are asking us to believe in order to accept what they have ruled.

3. All the other Mosaic feasts are given specific dates, such as Nisan 14, Tishri 1, Tishri 10, and so forth. If the Lord intended for First Fruits and Pentecost always to fall on Nisan 16 and Sivan 6, why did He not so specify as He did with the other feasts? Why go through the elaborate process of counting the seven Sabbaths, unless it was clear that these two feasts were moveable, and would fall on different days of the month each year? It seems that the emphasis in these two feasts is that they would always fall on the same day of the week (Sunday) every year, rather than on the same numerical day of the month.
4. As indicated above, the *Septuagint* appears to confirm the Saturday meaning of Sabbath in [Lev. 23:11](#) because it used *protos* to translate the phrase on the morrow after the Sabbath. The testimony of the *Septuagint* is important because it represents the thinking of Jewish authorities long before the first coming of Christ and the development of the Talmudic positions on controversial matters.

Thus, the great weight of evidence is that First Fruits and Pentecost were always intended to fall on Sundays, without regard to the day of the month they occurred. As for the New Testament record, it is clear that Jesus arose from the dead on Sunday, the First Day of the Week, the day after the Sabbath, as the fulfillment of the feast of First Fruits. What day of the month was this that year? We believe that Thursday was Nisan 14, the day the Passover lambs were sacrificed. Jesus ate the traditional Passover and died on Friday, Nisan 15, and arose from the dead on Sunday, Nisan 17. This would mean Pentecost fell that year on Sivan 7.