

# Sadducees, Pharisees, and the Controversy of Counting the Omer

by J.K. McKee posted 17 January, 2008 www.tnnonline.net

The season between Passover and Unleavened Bread, and the Feast of Weeks or *Shavuot*, is one of the most difficult times for the Messianic community. While this is supposed to be a very special and sacred time, a great number of debates certainly rage over Passover. Some of the most obvious debates among Messianics occur over the differences between Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jewish *halachah*. Do we eat lamb or chicken during the *sedar* meal? What grains are “kosher for Passover”? Can egg *matzos* be eaten? What are we to have on our *sedar* plate? What traditions do we implement, and what traditions do we leave aside? And, what do we do with the uncircumcised in our midst?

Over the past several years, I have increasingly found myself taking the minority position on a number of issues. Ironically, that minority position is usually the traditional view of mainline American, Ashkenazic Conservative and/or Reform Judaism—the same *halachah* that I was originally presented with when my family entered into Messianic Judaism in 1995. I have found myself usually thrust among those who follow a style *halachah* that often deviates from the mainstream.

Certainly, I believe that our Heavenly Father does allow for creativity when it comes to human traditions. Tradition is intended to bind a religious and ethnic community together, giving it cohesion and a clear connection to the past. It is only natural for someone like myself, of Northern European ancestry, to more closely identify with a Northern and Central European style of Judaism, than one from the Mediterranean. Yet, even though I may frequently favor Ashkenazic *halachah*, I recognize the value of Sephardic *halachah* for those who identify with that specific religious community, and I wish Messianics who choose to follow such traditions the best. But over the past five to six years, every year when we have come to what is supposed to be a very special and sacred season for Believers in Yeshua—Passover to *Shavuot*—I hear a common whine among many Messianic Believers: “Everyone is wrong about this time of year except *me*.”

None of us can claim total objectivity when we enter into this season. Starting with the Passover *sedar*, at the very least each one of us is going to critique the meal that is set before us. We are going to scrutinize the liturgy, how people pronounce the Hebrew prayers, and how fast or how slow the *sedar* service is conducted. Each of us may think that our homes and kitchens are more “kosher for Passover” than someone else’s. But how much of this is more preference and deference to tradition, than something that clearly relies on a detailed and thorough discussion of Biblical practices? Just consider that much of what is considered “kosher for Passover” is clearly a value judgment often made on very gray factors, and there are foods known today that were not known in the Biblical period.

There are issues in this season which we have significantly more information about both inside and outside of the Bible. During the week of Unleavened Bread, a fifty-day count to the festival of *Shavuot*, also commonly known as Pentecost, begins (Leviticus 23:15-16; Deuteronomy 16:9-10). In Judaism today, this time is commonly known as counting the *omer*, the *omer* (עֹמֶר) being a measurement of grain<sup>1</sup> that was to be offered before the Lord each day during this period. It was to be a time of focused dedication before God, where the priests would traditionally cite Scriptures such as Psalm 67:1-7, thanking Him for His goodness toward Israel.<sup>2</sup>

However, even though the period of counting the *omer* was supposed to become one where all could focus on the work of God in anticipation of the Feast of Weeks, by the Second

<sup>1</sup> In modern weights, an *omer* is the equivalent of about 2.3 quarts or 2.2 liters (Michael M. Homan, “Weights and Measures,” in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1374.

<sup>2</sup> Since the fall of the Second Temple, various traditions have arisen in Judaism to commemorate this fifty-day period, including reflecting on various passages of the Book of Psalms, as well as the tractate *Pirkei Avot* (Sayings of the Fathers) from the Mishnah (cf. Ronald L. Eisenberg, *The JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004], pp 293-294).

Consult the book *Counting the Omer: A Daily Devotional Toward Shavuot* by William Mark Huey for some Messianic reflections on the various passages traditionally contemplated from Psalms.

Temple era it became an issue of extreme division between the two major sects of Judaism as seen in the Apostolic Scriptures: the Sadducees and the Pharisees. Each had their own distinct ways of counting the *omer* from the Feast of Unleavened Bread to *Shavuot*, and there were frequent deviations between them on what day *Shavuot* was to be celebrated.

We should not be surprised that in today's emerging Messianic movement, the same disagreement that existed between the Sadducees and the Pharisees has arisen. The Saddusaical point of view largely died out in the First Century with the destruction of the Second Temple and end of the priesthood (although today's Karaite Jews do follow the Saddusaical method). The Pharisaical view continues to be followed in mainline Judaism today among Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Jews with *Shavuot* celebrated on 06 Sivan on the traditional Hebrew calendar.

Whether you are aware of it or not, how one determines the day to celebrate *Shavuot* is a complex issue. It is not only a complex issue because of the competing ideologies involved, but also because of the complicated hermeneutical questions that are asked of the interpreter. While one may easily be led to say "The Scriptures actually say this..." the same person is often unaware of the other *interconnected issues* that this debate actually involves concerning proper interpretation of the Bible in its full historical and cultural context.

### **What is the argument about Counting the Omer?**

Whether a congregational leader, Messianic Bible teacher, or Messianic layperson favors the Saddusaical or Pharisaical way to determine *Shavuot*—it is largely true that that emotionalism and abuses have guided far too much of the discussion from *both* sides of the debate. Advocates of both the Saddusaical and Pharisaical methods have made unfounded accusations of those they disagree with, and more secure factors such as reason, logic, and mutual respect often do not guide our conversations. Often there has been widescale dismissal of the other party, before consideration of evidence is actually made.

The debate over counting the *omer* has only really arisen in the past ten to fifteen years as many non-Jewish Believers have entered into the Messianic community and embraced the Hebraic Roots of the faith. Prior to this time, and indeed continuing in a large number of Messianic Jewish congregations today, the traditional rendering and date of *Shavuot* as 06 Sivan has been followed by Jewish Believers. Only with non-Jewish Believers entering into the fold has the debate over counting the *omer* really emerged. It has become an issue now because entire congregations can be divided during the season of Passover to the Feast of Weeks—at a time when God's people should be united.

The differences that have arisen largely concern how one is to interpret Leviticus 23:11 and how the counting of the *omer* begins:

"He shall wave the sheaf before the LORD for you to be accepted; on the day after the sabbath the priest shall wave it" (NASU).

There were three distinct ways that this passage was interpreted among the Judaisms of the First Century:

1. The Sadducees interpreted "the day after the Sabbath" to be the weekly Sabbath that occurs during the week of the Festival of Unleavened Bread. The counting of the *omer* was thus to begin on a Sunday, and end on a Sunday fifty days later.<sup>3</sup>
2. The Pharisees interpreted "the day after the Sabbath" to be the High Sabbath that occurred immediately after the first day of the Festival of Unleavened

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<sup>3</sup> The entry for "Firstfruits" in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch* (eds. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003]) simply states "the wave sheaf of immature barley [was] offered during the Feast of Unleavened Bread on the first Sunday after Passover" (p 314).

It is notable though, that there is no engagement with the differing opinions in Second Temple Judaism in this article regarding *how* the command of Leviticus 23:9-14 was interpreted, and assumptions are made without any dialogue with external resources.

Bread, 16 Nisan. The counting of the *omer* would (usually) begin on any day of the week, and the day of the week that *Shavuot* would be commemorated would likewise fluctuate. Later Jewish tradition would set 06 Sivan as the specific day for *Shavuot*.

3. The Essenes (of which the Qumran community was a part) interpreted “the day after the Sabbath” to be the weekly Sabbath that occurred after the week of the Festival of Unleavened Bread was over. Thus, the Essenic community would observe *Shavuot* a week after the Sadducees.<sup>4</sup>

Many in today’s independent Messianic community have started a noticeable trend, advocating that the Saddusaical way of counting the *omer* is correct, as the first fruits offering would be presented before the Lord on a Sunday. Sunday is the traditional day of Yeshua’s resurrection in the Christian Church—a type of first fruits offering (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:23)—and Pentecost Sunday in most Christian denominations is remembered seven weeks later. Wanting to make the Torah commanded festival of *Shavuot* more palatable to Christians, many assume that the Pharisees must have deliberately changed the *omer* count from Sunday to Sunday to downplay or disregard the Messiah and His work. Thus, the Saddusaical way of determining when to remember *Shavuot* is advocated to obviously the correct way.

In response to this, many Messianic advocates of the traditional Jewish way of when to celebrate *Shavuot*, the Pharisaic method of beginning the *omer* count after the High Sabbath of Unleavened Bread, have often cried slurs of “You’re doing it on SUNday, and God would never use the venerable day of the Sun to honor our Savior!” Advocates of the Saddusaical method respond with rhetoric along the lines of “You’re downplaying the resurrection of Yeshua!”

**It is at this point where reason, logic, and a sound exegesis of the Scriptures often get thrown out the window in favor of emotionalism.**

Regardless of which view a Messianic Believer holds to, we do need to be respectful of one another during this time of year. The season from Passover to the Feast of Weeks is a time of year when we all need to be especially united around the work of the Lord—regardless of the specific *day* one chooses to celebrate *Shavuot*. Paul says, “if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Messiah has been raised; and if Messiah has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain” (1 Corinthians 15:13-14). Notice what Paul’s emphasis is upon: the event of the resurrection of our Lord. If we are not united around the fact that Yeshua the Messiah *was raised from the dead*, conquering the grave, then we have no faith. One can surely disagree about the timing of the resurrection, the chronology of the Passion Week, *and* even how His resurrection has fulfilled the typology of first fruits. **But, no one can disagree that Yeshua was bodily resurrected!**<sup>5</sup>

With that said, is it sufficient for us to base our beliefs on how to count the *omer* toward *Shavuot* **solely and entirely** on what Leviticus 23:11, 15-16 says? Should we not weigh these verses against other Scriptures, and the different ways this was actually observed in Second Temple times? What other factors from history and tradition must be included in our conversation? Likewise, what do we have to consider from the theological ideology of the parties of the Sadducees and the Pharisees that widely gets overlooked—**particularly as it concerns their positions on the resurrection?**

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<sup>4</sup> For another summation of all three views, consult Baruch J. Schwartz, “Leviticus,” in Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp 263-264.

<sup>5</sup> I would ask you to remember that many liberal Christian theologians deny the reality of Yeshua’s bodily resurrection, instead believing that the Disciples probably hallucinated it. While some of us might disagree on *when* it actually occurred, none of us can disagree on the fact that it *did occur*, and that the Disciples actually did see their Lord in reanimated human flesh (cf. John 20:24-29).

## An Evaluation of the Saddusaical and Pharisaical Methods

A trademark of the Holy Scriptures is that facts are to be determined by evidence provided by multiple witnesses.<sup>6</sup> If one particular view of counting the *omer* is seen to have more Biblical and historical evidence than another, **no major doctrines of our faith are going to be challenged.** Yeshua the Messiah still resurrected from the dead. Salvation is still a free gift of God available to all, not achievable by human works. We all still need to have the love of God permeating our hearts and minds so that we can be useful in the work of His Kingdom on Earth.

However, as we evaluate the differences between the Saddusaical and Pharisaical methods of counting the *omer* what may be challenged instead are **current trends in Messianic hermeneutics.** I am one of those people who has come to believe that simply getting up and saying “The Scriptures say that the *omer* count begins ‘the first day after the Sabbath’ and that begins on Sunday,” is far too simplistic and convenient. While the counting of the *omer* is by no means something that should shake the faith of any person, understanding *all of the factors involved* is a definite exercise in whether or not today’s Messianic Bible teachers have joined, or are at least beginning to join, into an interpretational conversation that involves more than just a single English version of the Scriptures and a Strong’s Concordance.<sup>7</sup> Value judgments on how large that conversation should be have to be made regarding this issue.

I was once one of those people who thought that a simple, straightforward reading of Leviticus 23:11, 15-16 was all that was necessary to determine the counting of the *omer*. For a season, I was a passive advocate of the Saddusaical view. Yet as my hermeneutics and skills improved as a Bible teacher, I began to realize that I may have made some hastily drawn conclusions, and I failed to consider *other factors* that I would certainly include in examining significantly *more important* issues such as Yeshua’s Messiahship<sup>8</sup> or the role of various kinds of “works” in First Century Judaism.<sup>9</sup> As these factors became significant in my exegesis of other Scriptures, I realized that my view of counting the *omer* was going to have to change and **today I am an advocate of the traditional, Pharisaic method of when Messianics should celebrate Shavuot.** This change has nothing to do with anything regarding “Sunday,”<sup>10</sup> but instead an honest consideration of Biblical hermeneutics that control how we properly interpret and apply the text.

I offer you the following arguments from both the Saddusaical and Pharisaical sides of counting the *omer*, and would ask you to consider which one has joined a broad theological conversation, and which sect actually *upheld* the doctrine of resurrection. The points presented for the Saddusaical view have been listed first, with a counterpoint response by the Pharisaical view. I would encourage you to make an informed decision:

### Messianics who favor a Saddusaical determination of Shavuot

#### 1. Leviticus 23:11 tells us that the counting of the *omer* is to begin on a weekly Sabbath:

“He shall wave the sheaf before the LORD for you to be accepted; on the day after the sabbath the priest shall wave it.”

The day after the *Shabbat*, the weekly Sabbath during the Festival of Unleavened Bread (not the High Sabbath), is the day that the counting of the *omer* (עֹמֶר) or sheaf offering is to begin. After this, one is to count *sheva Shabbatot temiot* (שִׁבְעַת שַׁבָּתוֹת תְּמִימוֹת) or “seven complete sabbaths”

<sup>6</sup> Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15; Matthew 18:16; 2 Corinthians 13:1; 1 Timothy 5:19; Hebrews 10:28.

<sup>7</sup> Consult the editor’s article “Getting Beyond Strong’s Concordance.”

<sup>8</sup> Consult the editor’s article “Answering the ‘Frequently Avoided Questions’ About the Messiahship of Yeshua.”

<sup>9</sup> Consult the FAQ entry on the TNN website “Works of the Law.”

<sup>10</sup> I would, however, be completely remiss if I did not mention that some Christian teachers who believe in the prophetic significance of the Biblical festivals do believe that the waving of the sheaf and *Shavuot* occurring on a Sunday, concurring with the Saddusaical method of counting the *omer*, somehow foreshadowed the current practices of today’s Church. Kevin J. Conner is one who concludes,

“The very fact that these two Feast days were kept on the morrow after the sabbath actually prophesied an end of sabbath keeping as of the Mosaic Law...all these typical things were caused to cease by their fulfillment in Christ” (*The Feasts of Israel* [Portland, OR: Bible Temple Publishing, 1980], 36).

(Leviticus 23:15). This means that *Shavuot* will always occur on the first day of the week or a Sunday. Its date is not fixed by the calendar, and can vary from year to year.

**2. If the “Sabbath” referred to in Leviticus 23:11 were the High Sabbath of Unleavened Bread, then the Hebrew word *Shabaton* would have been used:**

In Leviticus 16:31 *Yom Kippur* is referred to as a *Shabbat Shabaton* (שַׁבַּת שְׁבֻעֹת) or “a sabbath of solemn rest,” in other words, a High Sabbath. *Yom Teruah* is referred to as a special “rest” or *Shabaton* in Leviticus 23:24, a High Sabbath. *Yom Kippur* is again referred to as a *Shabbat Shabaton* in Leviticus 23:32, “a sabbath of complete rest.” *Shabaton* is used twice in Leviticus 23:39 to refer to the first and last “rest” days of *Sukkot*.

*Shabaton* means “a sabbath that is markedly different from the usual שַׁבָּת inasmuch as it is to be observed strictly and to be celebrated in a special way” (*HALOT*),<sup>11</sup> hence “a High Sabbath.” If the counting of the *omer* were to begin on the High Sabbath of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, then this term should have been used in Leviticus 23:15, rather than the more normal *Shabbat*, which clearly designates the weekly Sabbath.

**3. Yeshua the Messiah is the First Fruits of the resurrection, thus we must always remember His Sunday resurrection in the counting of the *omer*:**

Yeshua the Messiah, according to the Apostle Paul, is the First Fruits of the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:20, 23). The *omer* counting begins on the weekly Sabbath during the Festival of Unleavened Bread and allows us to commemorate Yeshua’s Sunday morning resurrection. The command in Leviticus 23:10-11 is, “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.” As the Marys left to go to the tomb, “after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first *day* of the week” (Matthew 28:1), it is clear that this took place after the weekly Sabbath on the Day of First Fruits.

It is interesting that now in the Jewish community, the counting of the *omer* begins on the High Sabbath or the first day of Unleavened Bread. Why is this the case? Was this started to downplay Yeshua’s prophetic fulfillment of First Fruits and His resurrection? Did this happen so that His resurrection would be denied?

**4. The Messianic community should observe *Shavuot* in a way that appeals to Christians’ understanding of Pentecost.**

The Christian Church recognizes what Pentecost Sunday is—fifty days after Resurrection Sunday—and has actually gotten this correct in spite of centuries of Jewish misinterpretation of Leviticus 23. Following the Saddusaical determination of counting the *omer*—from the Hebrew of Leviticus 23 alone—we can educate our Christian brothers and sisters on the prophetic fulfillment of Yeshua’s First Fruits resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at *Shavuot* without any major complications.

### **Messianics who favor a Pharisaical determination of *Shavuot***

#### **1. *Shavuot* is the “Feast of Weeks,” and not the “Feast of Sabbaths”:**

It is quite significant that the name of the holiday in question is *Shavuot* (שֻׁבוֹת), the plural of the Hebrew *shavua* (שָׁבוּעַ), meaning “week.” Before examining any Scriptures, why would the designation of this festival be *Shavuot*, meaning “Weeks”—rather than *Shabbatot* (שַׁבָּתוֹת), meaning “Sabbaths”? Is this not an indication that the date of *Shavuot* is to be determined using the *week*, and not the Sabbath? What constitutes what one would consider to be an “incomplete Sabbath”? This can only be the case if the term *Shabbat* can be used representing “week.”

There is strong evidence in favor of the fact that the Hebrew term *Shabbat* (שַׁבָּת) need not always refer to the “Sabbath.” While the primary usage of *Shabbat* is undoubtedly “the day of

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<sup>11</sup> Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, eds., *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2001), 2:1412.

rest, the sabbath” (*HALOT*),<sup>12</sup> this does not disallow other possible usages—including “week” (*Jastrow*)<sup>13</sup> as seen in other Scriptures and certainly throughout Rabbinical literature. This is why most Bibles actually render Leviticus 23:15 with the counting of the *omer* being determined by “seven weeks” (RSV, NIV, NRSV, ATS, NJPS, ESV, HCSB, CJB, et. al.). The only major versions that leave it as “sabbaths” are the KJV, NKJV, and NASU.

Consider that in a similar vein, the Hebrew term *yom* (יוֹם) primarily means “day of twenty-four hours” (*HALOT*),<sup>14</sup> but there are most certainly instances when *yom* means “a period of time” such as a “year” (*HALOT*),<sup>15</sup> or simply “division of time” (*BDB*)<sup>16</sup> that may or may not be specified. Will we allow God some variance in the vocabulary that He uses in His Word?

**2. We cannot ignore the witness of Deuteronomy 16:9 and the Septuagint rendering of Leviticus 23:11:**

Deuteronomy 16:9 gives us further clarification of how *Shavuot* is to be determined, stating, “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.” The command here is not to count using “Sabbaths,” but rather to count *sheva shavuot* (שִׁבְעָה שָׁבֻעוֹת) or “seven weeks.” Are we to ignore this instruction to count via “weeks,” and *only follow* what Leviticus 23:15 may be telling us?

Liberal theologians would actually conclude that there is a noticeable difference between the command delivered in Leviticus 23:15, to count “seven complete sabbaths,” and the command in Deuteronomy 16:9 to count “seven weeks.” Attributing these differences to the JEDP documentary hypothesis,<sup>17</sup> they may claim that the command seen in Leviticus 23 is from P or the Priestly writer, and that the command seen in Deuteronomy 16 is from D or the Deuteronomist. Those of us who believe in unified authorship of the Mosaic Torah *have the responsibility to reconcile* these “differences,” lest any of us be accused of following “P” or “D.” When we reconcile these differences and synthesize the two passages, the Pharisaical view of starting the *omer* count on the High Sabbath of Unleavened Bread is validated.<sup>18</sup>

The Hebrew of Leviticus 23:11 is vague, indicating that the counting of the *omer* is to begin *m'mochorat ha'Shabbat* (מִמּוֹחֶרֶת הַשַּׁבָּת), literally “from the morrow the Sabbath,” understood to be “the day after the sabbath.” With the Sabbath not specified, the Sadducees interpreted this as the weekly Sabbath—whereas the Pharisees interpreted this as the High Sabbath during the first day of Unleavened Bread. This is where a great deal of division took place, with the Hebrew unclear on this point. The exegesis of Messianics who advocate that the Saddusaical method is correct often stops here.

We should not be consigned to make a decision solely on the basis of what the Hebrew Masoretic Text of Leviticus 23:15 might say about “the day after the sabbath.” Three centuries before the coming of Yeshua, the Hebrew Tanach was translated into Greek resulting in what we now call the Septuagint. The LXX is the most significant complete textual witness to the Hebrew

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:1411

<sup>13</sup> Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature* (New York: Judaica Treasury, 2004), 1520.

<sup>14</sup> *HALOT*, 1:399.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:400.

<sup>16</sup> Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 398.

<sup>17</sup> Consult the editor's entries for the Pentateuchal books (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) in *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic* (forthcoming 2008) for a conservative analysis and response to the JEDP documentary hypothesis.

<sup>18</sup> No Messianic advocating the Saddusaical view would argue that the command to congregate “in the place which [God] chooses, at...the Feast of Weeks” (Deuteronomy 16:16) is unimportant, especially per the many Jews assembled from all over the known world as seen in Acts 2 following Yeshua's resurrection. Yet, as Schwartz indicates, “in P this festival [*Shavuot*] is not marked by a pilgrimage” (*Jewish Study Bible*, 264), as though Moses did not have anything to do with it and the command to commemorate is a later addition of the so-called Deuteronomist from the time of the Josianic reforms.

Certainly, the need to understand *additional* Scriptures and their relationship to Leviticus 23 should be apparent.

MT, and was frequently used by the Apostles in their quotations of the Tanach. **The Apostles' usage alone requires us to consider how the LXX renders Leviticus 23:11.**

The Greek LXX rendered the Hebrew *m'mochorat ha'Shabbat*, "the day after the sabbath," with *tē epaurion tēs prōtēs* (τῆ ἐπαύριον τῆς πρώτης), or "On the morrow of the first day" (LXE). Is this "first day" the weekly Sabbath? No. It is the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread. If we follow the Saddusaical argument using the LXX, then the counting of the *omer* would actually begin on a Monday, the day after "the first day." But this is an improper conclusion based on what "first" actually translates. Tim Hegg notes in his article "Counting the Omer: An Inquiry into the Divergent Methods of the 1st Century Judaisms," "Here the Hebrew *חַבַּט*, *shabbat*, is translated by *πρῶτος*, *protos*, 'first,' meaning the 'first day of the Festival.' The Lxx, clearly an authoritative text in the 1st Century CE, gave direct substantiation for the Pharisaic reckoning."<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, in Leviticus 23:11 the LXX rendered the Hebrew *sheva shabatot teminot*, "seven complete Sabbaths," with *hepta hebdomadas holoklērous* (ἑπτὰ ἑβδομάδας ὁλοκλήρους), "seven full weeks" (LXE). This only confirms that *shabbat* can be understood in a greater context beyond that of "Sabbath," and can also include "week."

If we consider the Greek LXX to have any kind of validity, then it supports the counting of the *omer* beginning immediately after the first day of Unleavened Bread in conjunction with the Pharisaic method that is observed in mainline Judaism today. Furthermore, this is a textual indicator that the debate over determining *Shavuot* goes back several centuries before the time of Yeshua, and thus one cannot claim that there was a later "conspiracy" to downplay His resurrection by having the *omer* count begin on a day other than Sunday. This issue was present long before His Earthly ministry.

In today's Messianic movement, the Greek Septuagint is often casually dismissed among teachers as a valid resource to use for exegetical analysis. Its rendering of Leviticus 23:11 gives strong support for the Pharisaic reckoning of *Shavuot*. But in all honesty this is a rather minor issue on which to ignore the LXX. There are many more substantial issues pertaining to the Septuagint such as the quotation of Tanach Scriptures in the Apostolic Writings where the LXX differs from the Hebrew MT. If we get into the habit of ignoring the Septuagint on minor issues such as the determination of *Shavuot*, **then we may ignore it in more significant issues** such as the quotation of various Messianic prophecies used by the Apostles.<sup>20</sup> So should we remove the LXX from our conversation on when *Shavuot* is to be observed?

**3. *Shabaton* can refer to the weekly Sabbath equally as much as a High Sabbath in the Torah:**

Advocates of the Saddusaical view often claim that if the High Sabbath were being referred to in Leviticus 23:11, "on the day after the sabbath," then the Hebrew word *Shabaton* (שַׁבְּתוֹן) would be used instead of *Shabbat* (שַׁבָּת) or in conjunction with it. It is asserted that *Shabaton* is only used in the Torah to refer to High Sabbaths, and likewise that *Shabbat* is only used to refer to weekly Sabbaths, thus the beginning of the *omer* count starts on a weekly Sabbath.

What Saddusaical advocates have conveniently avoided is that *Shabaton* can be used in reference to the weekly Sabbath every bit as much as a High Sabbath:

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<sup>19</sup> Tim Hegg (2002). *Counting the Omer: An Inquiry into the Divergent Methods of the 1st Century Judaisms*. Torah Resource. Retrieved 12 March, 2007, from <<http://www.torahresource.com>>.

<sup>20</sup> A widescale dismissal of the relevance of the Greek Septuagint for Messianics took place in 2005, with an incoherent teaching released on the canonicity of the Epistle to the Hebrews, a text which not only (almost) exclusively quotes from the LXX, but also makes distinct arguments about Yeshua from its unique renderings. Rather than considering the importance of the Septuagint for Biblical Studies, the accusation was made that the author of Hebrews misquoted from the Tanach, and did not know what he was talking about, meaning that Hebrews should not be considered authoritative Scripture for Messianic Believers today. Such misguided assertions bring gross discredit to the theological credibility of the emerging Messianic movement, in addition to planting seeds of doubt that the Apostolic Scriptures cannot be trusted.

Consult the editor's commentary *Hebrews for the Practical Messianic*, and *Scripture Under Scrutiny: Was the New Testament Really Written in Hebrew* by Margaret McKee Huey, for a discussion on these and related issues.

“[T]hen he said to them, ‘This is what the LORD meant: Tomorrow is a sabbath observance [*Shabbaton*], a holy sabbath to the LORD. Bake what you will bake and boil what you will boil, and all that is left over put aside to be kept until morning’ (Exodus 16:23).

“Then Moses assembled all the congregation of the sons of Israel, and said to them, ‘These are the things that the LORD has commanded *you* to do: For six days work may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a holy *day*, a sabbath of complete rest [*Shabbat Shabaton*] to the LORD; whoever does any work on it shall be put to death’ (Exodus 35:1-2).

“For six days work may be done, but on the seventh day there is a sabbath of complete rest [*Shabbat Shabaton*], a holy convocation. You shall not do any work; it is a sabbath to the LORD in all your dwellings” (Leviticus 23:3).

When we see that *Shabaton* is used equally to refer to the weekly Sabbath as well as High Sabbaths in the Hebrew Torah, no one can insist that the *Shabbat* for beginning the *omer* count must be a weekly Sabbath. No one would insist that the weekly Sabbaths mentioned in Leviticus 23:3—which occur every week—all of a sudden become High Sabbaths. The “type” of Sabbath is simply not specified in the imprecise Hebrew of Leviticus 23:11, and we are forced to examine other Scriptures (i.e., Deuteronomy 16:9) to formulate a more well-rounded interpretation of what is being referred to.

#### **4. The Apostle Paul said that Yeshua the Messiah was the First Fruits of the resurrection—and he was a Pharisee:**

The Apostle Paul is the one who writes the Corinthians, “Messiah has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep” (1 Corinthians 15:20). Paul is the one who ascribes some level of fulfillment of the Festival of First Fruits to the resurrection of Yeshua. David H. Stern remarks in his *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, “Sha’ul probably wrote this letter between *Pesach* (5:6-8) and *Shavu’ot* (16:8), during the season for presenting the **firstfruits** of the harvest at the Temple (Leviticus 23:9-15).”<sup>21</sup>

We need to temper Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians with his own testimony before the Sanhedrin in Acts 23:6: “Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!” The Greek *egō Pharisaios eimi* (ἐγὼ Φαρισαῖός εἰμι), appearing in the present active indicative tense, makes it abundantly clear that *Paul actively considered himself a Pharisee* the day that he made these remarks. *Halachically*, the observance of *Shavuot* counting from the High Sabbath of the Festival of Unleavened Bread was a major division between the Pharisees and Sadducees of Yeshua’s time. If we can accept Paul’s testimony before the Sanhedrin as being accurate, then we can conclude that he observed *Shavuot* with the Pharisaic party (cf. Acts 20:16; 1 Corinthians 16:8). He had no problem writing that Yeshua fulfilled the prophetic pattern of First Fruits, while at the same time being a Pharisee.

Likewise, we have to remember Yeshua’s words in Matthew 23:2-3, “The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say *things* and do not do *them*.” While Yeshua does issue some imperatives against the hypocrisy of the Pharisaic leaders in Matthew 23, He nevertheless instructs His followers to take their *halachic* lead from the Pharisaic rulings. We have justified course, then, as Messianic Believers to observe *Shavuot* with the remainder of the worldwide Jewish community on 06 Sivan—and not a date of our own choosing—along with the rest of the appointed times.

#### **5. Following the Pharisaic method of determining *Shavuot* does not subtract from Yeshua’s prophetic fulfillment of First Fruits:**

It is commonly asserted among advocates of the Saddusaical reckoning for *Shavuot* that beginning the *omer* count immediately after Passover, after the High Sabbath of Unleavened Bread, subtracts from Yeshua’s prophetic fulfillment of First Fruits. Specifically, because the counting of the *omer* can occur on any day of the week via the Pharisaical reckoning for *Shavuot*, it is believed among some to take away from Yeshua’s “Sunday morning resurrection.”

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<sup>21</sup> David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1992), 488.

First of all, it should be noted that one can legitimately challenge the concept of a “Sunday morning resurrection” as Matthew 28:1 indicates that the Marys left to visit Yeshua’s tomb *opse de sabbatōn* (Ὁψὲ δὲ σαββάτων) or “late on the Sabbath day” (American Standard Version), meaning Saturday evening. Secondly, we all recognize that Yeshua’s resurrection was three days and three nights (Matthew 12:40) after His death. Counting back from Saturday evening, this places Yeshua’s death on Thursday afternoon. Following this would seemingly have been the first day of Unleavened Bread (Friday), and then the first day of the *omer* count (Saturday) to be immediately followed by Yeshua’s resurrection that evening. Yeshua would have been dead three days and three nights: Thursday day/night, Friday day/night, and Saturday day/night.

This chronology *could* place Yeshua’s resurrection immediately after the offering up of the *omer* (assuming that the Pharisees would allow for the sheaf waving to commence on an actual Sabbath, which was debated; cf. b.*Menachot* 63, 65, 72). Some Messianics who follow the Saddusaical method may have difficulty with seeing how Yeshua could possibly prophetically fulfill this typology by not being resurrected on the “day” of the First Fruits offering, should it have been offered immediately before His resurrection. *If* He was resurrected after the waving of the sheaf, our answer to this lies in understanding that Yeshua’s sacrifice in prophetic fulfillment of Passover also fulfills the sacrifice in fulfillment of *Yom Kippur*—a holiday that occurs over seven months after Passover. This is a major theme of the Epistle to the Hebrews, and it forces the able interpreter to conclude that prophetic fulfillment in Scripture is often more “fluidic” than his Western mind is accustomed to understanding. Hegg observes,

“The parallel between first fruits and resurrection exists regardless of which day one calculates the beginning of counting the omer. The idea that events must happen simultaneously in order to be seen as valid fulfillment simply cannot be sustained from a biblical standpoint. As an example, Yeshua surely fulfills the picture of Yom Kippur and the sacrifice made on that day, but the timing of His death is not remotely close to the observance of Yom Kippur. The first fruits themselves, when understood within the overall festival, point to the fulfillment in Yeshua’s resurrection, not necessarily that He rose on the same day that the sheaf was waved. For the lesson of first fruits is that more is to come: as the first of the harvest is brought to the Lord, the hope is that a great abundance is to follow. This is a parallel to Yeshua’s resurrection, and as the first fruits from the dead the point is that many more will follow. Like barely brought in from the new crop, so Yeshua is the first to rise from the dead of His own accord. As such, He guarantees the full harvest of all who are His. This is the connection to the first fruits, and it does not require simultaneous events.”<sup>22</sup>

Advocates of the Saddusaical view also do not answer the question of how the Apostles commemorated the resurrection in the years following, and whether they remembered it on the *day* of the week—or the *date*—on which it occurred. While many Messianics may be agreed on when things happened the year of Yeshua’s atoning sacrifice, how this was commemorated in the early Messianic community in later years—and consequently what we should do today—is a matter of considerable divergence.

It is notable that many in the Christian Church of the Second-Fourth Centuries (commonly called the Quartodecimans) followed a tradition of celebrating Easter three days after the Jewish Passover, and they saw no problem with commemorating the resurrection on *any day of the week*.<sup>23</sup> Once the Jewish community set the date for Passover (claiming to follow a tradition from the Apostle John via Polycarp), these Christians would then count three days and that would be their date to celebrate Easter. However, the Council of Nicea decreed that a different date, the first Sunday after the vernal equinox, should be used to commemorate Easter. Susan E. Richardson’s comments from *Holidays & Holy Days* confirm this:

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<sup>22</sup> Hegg, “Counting the Omer,” 14.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. David W. Bercot, ed., “Quartodecimans,” in *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 547.

“...In A.D. 325, the Council of Nicea set aside a special day just to celebrate the Resurrection. The problem with an official day was deciding whether or not the Resurrection should be celebrated on a weekday or...on a Sunday.

“Many felt that the date should continue to be based on the timing of the Resurrection during Passover. Once Jewish leaders determined the date of Passover each year, Christian leaders could set the date for Easter by figuring three days after Passover...”

“...As Christianity drew away from Judaism, some were reluctant to base the Christian celebration on the Jewish calendar.”<sup>24</sup>

Ironically, Messianics holding to a staunch view of a Saddusaical *Shavuot*—one that always occurs on a Sunday—have fallen into following a Church ruling that was designed to keep Christians away from the “Jewish Passover.” Furthermore, it may actually detract from Yeshua’s prophetic fulfillment of Passover. (My own reasoning against always commemorating a Sunday *Shavuot* has *nothing* to do with some vendetta against Christians who attend Church on Sunday, as this is another issue altogether, and the Lord surely moves where two or three are gathered together as stated in Matthew 18:20.) Instead of counting three days from the 14th of Nisan, the day of Passover, commemorating Yeshua’s resurrection on the day after the High Sabbath of Unleavened Bread—some may have to count as many as five or six days between a Monday or Tuesday Passover and then a Sunday First Fruits. Would it not be better to follow a more accurate chronology of three days consistent with what Yeshua told us about His resurrection?

**6. Following the Saddusaical method does not necessarily mean an emphasis on the resurrection:**

Even though advocates of the Saddusaical determination for *Shavuot* may insist that they do not lose focus of Yeshua’s resurrection—as they count the *omer* from Sunday (the supposed day of the week of Yeshua’s resurrection when it originally took place)—it should be noted that the theology of the Sadducees is often not considered. The testimony of the Gospels and Acts is unanimous on the fact that the Sadducees *did not believe* in any kind of resurrection:

“For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all” (Acts 23:8; cf. Matthew 22:23; Mark 12:18; Luke 20:27; Acts 23:6).

Also consider that in Acts 4, immediately following the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at *Shavuot*/Pentecost, it was the chief priests or Sadducees that harassed and detained the Apostles.

Theologically speaking, if we were to emphasize the resurrection as a definite teaching of Scripture—then why would we follow the *halachic* ruling of a First Century Jewish sect *that denied the resurrection?* The doctrine of resurrection was Pharisaical. Unfortunately, many Messianics who insist that the Saddusaical determination for *Shavuot* is proper often fall prey to the long-standing Christian belief that the Pharisees are the “bad guys,” not realizing that Yeshua *never criticized* them for their theology, but instead their hypocritical attitudes. Furthermore, the Pharisaism of the Apostle Paul is often glossed over.<sup>25</sup>

Between the two major Jewish sects in the First Century, following the Pharisaical (and consequently the traditional, modern Jewish way) of observing *Shavuot* actually affirms the reality of Yeshua’s resurrection.

**7. The Believers in Jerusalem are seen keeping *Shavuot* with the majority of the population, all of whom followed the Pharisaic method according to history:**

The testimony of Acts is clear that the Apostles observed *Shavuot* with the majority of those Jews who had traveled from afar to attend:

“Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven...Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—we hear them in our *own* tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God” (Acts 2:5, 9-11).

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<sup>24</sup> Susan E. Richardson, *Holidays & Holy Days* (Ann Arbor, MI: Vine Books, 2001), 58.

<sup>25</sup> Consult the editor’s article “You Want to Be a Pharisee.”

Were these Jews assembled observing *Shavuot* according to the method of the Sadducees—or the Pharisees? Aside from the calendar debates that ensued in First Century Judaism, it is notable that the majority of Diaspora Jews were Pharisaical in their theology—often with their Diaspora synagogues planted by Pharisees. The historical record indicates that the Temple priesthood, in spite of their favoring the Saddusaical view, had to conform to the majority view and offer of the sheaf offering on the 16th of Nisan, two days after Passover. The First Century historian Josephus attests,

“But on the second day of unleavened bread, which is the sixteenth day of the month, they first partake of the fruits of the earth, for before that day they do not touch them... They take a handful of the ears, and dry them, then beat them small, and purge the barley from the bran; they then bring one tenth deal to the altar, to God; and, casting one handful of it upon the fire, they leave the rest for the use of the priest; and after this it is that they may publicly or privately reap their harvest. They also at this participation of the firstfruits of the earth, sacrifice a lamb, as a burnt offering to God” (*Antiquities of the Jews* 3.250-251).<sup>26</sup>

The Jewish philosopher Philo also confirms,

“There is also a festival on the day of the paschal feast, which succeeds the first day, and this is named the sheaf, from what takes place on it; for the sheaf is brought to the altar as a first fruit both of the country which the nation has received for its own, and also of the whole land; so as to be an offering both for the nation separately, and also a common one for the whole race of mankind; and so that the people by it worship the living God, both for themselves and for all the rest of mankind, because they have received the fertile earth for their inheritance; for in the country there is no barren soil but even all those parts which appear to be stony and rugged are surrounded with soft veins of great depth, which, by reason of their richness, are very well suited for the production of living things” (*Special Laws* 2.162).<sup>27</sup>

The historical record is clear that the Pharisaic method for beginning the *omer* count was followed in the Jerusalem Temple in the First Century.<sup>28</sup> The Jews who had come to Jerusalem to

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<sup>26</sup> Flavius Josephus: *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 96.

<sup>27</sup> Philo Judeaus: *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. C.D. Yonge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 583.

<sup>28</sup> Many would argue that since the Saddusaical priesthood operated the Temple, only they would have the authority to control when and how *Shavuot* was commemorated. However, there are examples in Rabbinical literature of the contempt that the common people had for the Sadducees, as they were largely collaborators with the Roman occupiers of Judea, and how concessions did have to be made for those who favored Pharisaic traditions.

Consider that during the Second Temple period, a special water libation ceremony called *Simchat Beit ha-Sho'evah* (rejoicing of the house of water drawing) was practiced during the Feast of Tabernacles. This ceremony, referred to by Yeshua in the Gospels (John 7), was based on a Pharisaic interpretation of Isaiah 12:3, “Therefore you will joyously draw water from the springs of salvation,” and was codified in the Mishnah:

“*The water libation*: How so? A golden flask, holding three *logs* in volume, did one fill with water from Siloam. [When] they reached the Water Gate, they blow a sustained, a quavering, and a sustained blast on the *shofar*. [The priest] went up on the ramp [at the south] and turned to his left [southwest]...R. Judah says, ‘A *log* [of water] would one pour out as the water libation all eight days” (m.*Sukkah* 4:9; Jacob Neusner, trans., *The Mishnah: A New Translation* [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988], 288).

The First Century historian Josephus notes that this custom was rejected by the Sadducees, and the violent reaction of the people who sided with the Pharisees:

“As to Alexander, his own people were seditious against him; for at a festival which was then celebrated, when he stood upon the altar, and was going to sacrifice, the nation rose upon him, and pelted him with citrons [which they then had in their hands, because] the law of the Jews, required that at the feast of tabernacles, everyone should have branches of the palm tree and citron tree; which thing we have elsewhere related. They also reviled him, as derived from a captive, and so unworthy of his dignity and of sacrificing” (*Antiquities of the Jews* 13.372 [*The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 360]; cf. b.*Sukkah* 48b).

Alfred Edersheim holds the view that the Saddusaical priesthood, while adamant about their method of counting the *omer*, actually did have to offer up the sheaf of first fruits in the Temple on 16 Nisan because the Pharisees had the masses on their side:

“The Pharisees held, that the time between Easter and Pentecost should be counted from the second day of the feast; the Sadducees insisted that it should commence with the literal ‘Sabbath’ after the festive day. But despite argument, the Sadducees had to join when the solemn procession went on the afternoon of the feast to cut down the

observe *Shavuot* in Acts—and hence hear the gospel message proclaimed—followed the Pharisaic lead. Notably, many of them also probably used the Greek LXX as their main Scripture, which likewise instructed them to follow the Pharisaic method.

#### 8. What do you do with the method of the Essenes?

Even though the exegetical, theological, and historical evidence favors the counting of the *omer* and observance of *Shavuot* according to the Pharisaic method, it is interesting that the method of the First Century Essenes is often never considered by Messianics. While the theology of the early Messianic community had far, far more in common with the Pharisees than the Sadducees (in fact no Sadducee is ever recorded as having come to faith in Yeshua), there are strands of commonality with the Essenes who gave us the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The Essenes interpreted “the day after the sabbath” in Leviticus 23:11 to actually be the weekly Sabbath following the week of Unleavened Bread, not the Sabbath during the week of Unleavened Bread like the Sadducees. If we are basing our observance of *Shavuot* on theological commonality, while there is more evidence in favor of following the Pharisaic method than any other—why is the Essenic method often not mentioned or even considered? There is at least limited theological commonality between the early Messianic Believers and the Essenes—when compared to no theological commonality with the Sadducees.

### Synthesizing the Two Together: A Pragmatic Solution for the Current Trends

When a person weighs the arguments for and against the Saddusaical method of counting the *omer*, and for and against the Pharisaic method of counting the *omer*, there will be some divisions among Messianic Believers as one side will not find the other side’s argument convincing. In fact, it is not impossible at all that during the season between Passover and *Shavuot* that there will be entire Messianic congregations that are divided over this issue. Surely in a season when God’s people should be bound together—and not split apart—there is a reasonable way that unity can be maintained.

As an advocate of the traditional, Pharisaic way of counting the *omer* and remembering *Shavuot*, I would especially argue that this is a time of year that advocates of the traditional view **have a serious chance to demonstrate some of the truly progressive ideas of the Pharisees**. The venerable Rabbi Hillel once said, “*What is hateful to you, to your fellow don't do.*” That’s the entirety of the Torah; *everything else is elaboration. So go, study*” (b.*Shabbat* 31a).<sup>29</sup> Of course, these sentiments are surely seen in the Apostolic Scriptures (Matthew 7:12; 22:40; Romans 13:8, 10; Galatians 6:2; cf. Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 19:19; John 13:34), but distilling the Torah’s instructions **down to love** was first a Pharisaic invention.

What this means, is that those of us who adhere to the traditional determination of *Shavuot* may have to be the ones (at least temporarily) who make the concessions to our brothers and sisters who (currently) hold to the Saddusaical determination. Part of the Pharisaic progressivism that we see present in the ideology of Hillel, and later the Apostle Paul, is that a person can disagree on non-essentials yet still maintain some kind of unity or relationship if love is central.

There is in fact a way that the two views of counting the *omer* can actually be synthesized together, so congregations that are divided over the issue can still “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3, RSV), and **the needs of all** can be met. There are three points we need to consider in order to synthesize the Saddusaical and Pharisaical methods

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‘first sheaf,’ and to reckon Pentecost as did their opponents” (*Sketches of Jewish Social Life* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994]. 220).

See Edersheim’s further remarks in *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), pp 203-204.

<sup>29</sup> *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*. MS Windows XP. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005. CD-ROM.

together. These points specifically concern the crucifixion and resurrection of our Lord, and the totality of what we are to remember in His fulfillment of the First Fruits offering.

1. It is unavoidable that Sunday is somehow involved with Yeshua's resurrection, either with Him resurrecting on this day *or* with His empty tomb being found on this day.
2. It is obvious that the Saddusaical method of counting the *omer* ignores or discounts important hermeneutical factors such as the role of passages outside of Leviticus 23, the Greek Septuagint, and the recorded history of the First Century—key factors that should *never* be ignored in appropriate exegesis.
3. Both the Sadducees and Pharisees, or at least *certain factions* of both parties, had something to gain from the death of Yeshua—the least of which would have been the end of His prophetic declarations against them which condemned either their corruption or hypocrisy.

There are also some questions that we must ask ourselves when we weigh how things actually took place leading up to Yeshua's crucifixion and resurrection:

1. Must three days and three nights (Matthew 12:40) equal a full 72 hours?
2. If the Roman centurion at the cross can recognize the importance of what was going on (Matthew 25:54; Mark 15:39; Luke 23:47), is it *too much* to also suggest that Yeshua can be resurrected in concert with *both* the Sadducees' and Pharisees' expectations of the First Fruits wave offering for that specific year?

If one accepts a crucifixion-resurrection chronology of **three days and nights being a full 72 hours**, it looks something like this:

WED	THURS	FRI	SAT	SUN
crucifixion	High Sabbath of Passover	Omer #1 Pharisees		resurrection Omer #1 Sadducees
	grave #1	grave #2	grave #3	

The **traditional Christian chronology** of Yeshua's Passion Week places three days and three nights in a very compact time between Good Friday and Easter Sunday:

FRI	SAT	SUN
crucifixion		resurrection Omer #1 Sadducees & Pharisees

A **Synthesis View** rightly recognizes that the traditional Christian chronology is inconsistent with Yeshua's declaration, "for just as JONAH WAS THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS IN THE BELLY OF THE SEA MONSTER, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matthew 12:40). Yet, a Synthesis View will also hold that three days and nights *does not* need to be a full 72 hours, but still touch on three days and three nights:

THURS	FRI	SAT	SUN
crucifixion in afternoon	High Sabbath of Passover	Omer #1 Pharisees ( <i>moved</i> )	resurrection <i>or</i> empty tomb found
grave #1 day/night	grave #2 day/night	grave #3 day/night	<b>Omer #1 Sadducees &amp; Pharisees</b>

Both Messianic advocates of the Saddusaical and Pharisical methods of counting the *omer* have to make concessions in accepting the **Synthesis View**:

1. This view is guided by the hermeneutic that God wants to communicate to *both parties* of the Sanhedrin, the Sadducees and Pharisees, that had something to gain from the death of Yeshua.
2. The three days and nights between Yeshua's death and resurrection need not be a full 72 hours, but needs to touch on and somehow involve three days and nights.
3. The Pharisaic sheaf waving initiating the seven-week count to *Shavuot* is moved because it would have been considered "work" on a weekly *Shabbat*.

The Synthesis View presented in the chart above is designed to do several things, the foremost of which is maintain the integrity of all the key factors that are involved in rightly determining the counting of the *omer*: the witnesses of Leviticus 23:24 *and* Deuteronomy 16:9, the role of the Greek Septuagint, recorded history as seen in Josephus and Philo regarding how things were normally performed, and the Pharisaic doctrine of resurrection. The Synthesis View has the time between Yeshua's death and resurrection touch on three days and nights, certainly much more than the traditional Christian chronology.

The key difference, however, is seen on the weekly Sabbath after the High Sabbath of Passover. According to the Pharisaical method of counting the *omer*, this is when the wave offering should have been presented before the Lord to begin the count. Yet, we see discussions in the Talmud that the gathering and waving of the sheaf on the weekly *Shabbat* were considered by some to possibly be work. If we move these discussions into the equation, and the first day of the *omer* count were to occur on a weekly Sabbath, then could it be moved to the following day?

"Said Rabbah bar bar Hannah said R. Yohanan, 'R. Eleazar b. R. Simeon follows the principle of R. Aqiba, his father's master. *For we have learned in the Mishnah*: An operative principle did R. Aqiba state, "Any sort of labor [in connection with circumcision] which it is possible to do on the eve of the Sabbath does not override [the restrictions of] the Sabbath, and that which it is not possible to do on the eve of the Sabbath does override [the prohibitions of] the Sabbath" [M. Shab. 19:1]. *And he furthermore takes the position of R. Ishmael, who has said that reaping the barley for the sheaf of first barley is a religious duty. For we have learned in the Mishnah*: R. Ishmael says, "[Rather the verse teaches us that] just as ploughing, [which] is a voluntary act, [is prohibited on the Sabbath] so [only] harvesting [which likewise] is voluntary [is prohibited on the Sabbath]. This excludes harvesting the first sheaf [and is therefore permitted even on the Sabbath]" [M. Shebiit 1:4K-L]. *Now if you were to imagine that if the barley for the sheaf of first barley that has not been reaped in accord with the religious duty that pertains to it is valid, why in the world should it override the Sabbath? Do it the eve of the Sabbath. And since it does override the restrictions of the Sabbath, it must follow that he holds that if it was reaped not in accordance with its prescribed rite, it is invalid*" (b.Menachot 72a).<sup>30</sup>

Keep in mind that the discussion seen above took place several centuries after the time of Yeshua. By this time, the Rabbis clearly ruled that "*Doesn't he also know that the act of slaughtering the animal always has overridden the prohibitions of the Sabbath? So it must follow that Rabbi takes the view that reaping the barley for the first sheaf of grain does not override the prohibitions of the Sabbath*" (b.Menachot 72a).<sup>31</sup> By the Third-Fifth Centuries C.E., the Rabbis considered gathering the barley to offer before the Lord on the weekly Sabbath to not be "work." Yet, in the First Century the discussion was still probably going on and had not been finalized.

The fact that the question "Is offering the barley sheaf before God work if performed on the Sabbath?" was asked does leave us the distinct possibility that in the First Century, **it may have been considered work**. The Rabbis are reflecting centuries later, and leave us a unique window whereby Yeshua can fulfill the First Fruits expectations of *both* the Sadducees and Pharisees for that specific year. It is possible, however infrequent, that the Pharisees could have started their *omer* count on a Sunday, should their actual first day occur on a weekly Sabbath after a High Sabbath on Friday. Note that this would have occurred during a time when the Sadducees

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

controlled the Temple, and via the constant friction that took place between the two parties, clearly the Pharisees had to make concessions just as the Sadducees—especially when their respective *omer* counts began so close together.

These Rabbinical discussions, and the questions clearly asked, give us the impetus to see that Yeshua could have been resurrected in conjunction with a day when both the Sadducees and Pharisees presented the *omer*. The **Synthesis View** of Yeshua's crucifixion and resurrection harmonizes the Saddusaical and Pharisical methods of counting the *omer* in a very unique way **for that year**. In the years following Yeshua's crucifixion, resurrection, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon those gathered in Jerusalem we can assume that there were groups of Believers who kept *Shavuot* according to the method of the Sadducees or the Pharisees. **The Synthesis View only offers a solution for the year of Yeshua's crucifixion and resurrection**; it *does not* offer a definitive solution for the following questions:

1. Do we as Messianic Believers “memorialize” what happened the year of Yeshua's crucifixion and resurrection, using the specific days of the week on which the events (probably) occurred?
2. Do we as Messianic Believers observe *Shavuot* with the worldwide Jewish and Messianic Jewish community?
3. Do we offer accommodations to advocates of both the Pharisical and Saddusaical methods of counting the *omer*?

I ask these questions because we clearly want to be in unity with one another during the season between Passover and *Shavuot*. The Messianic movement does not need any more unnecessary divisions, and we do all need to learn to act like mature adults who are guided by the Holy Spirit. Surely, there are those on both sides of the debate who are too narrow-minded and rigid in their approach to the Scriptures, and they will not bend for allowances of any kind. The Synthesis View offers a peaceful and reasonable accommodation for congregations split between Saddusaical and Pharisical advocates, whereby Yeshua can fulfill the First Fruits expectations of both groups. Those of us who can truly live by Hillel's mantra of loving one's neighbor *first*, can certainly concede that memorializing the year of Yeshua's crucifixion and resurrection—whereby He fulfilled Pharisical expectations of the First Fruits offering—is not a bad thing.

Perhaps we all need a fresh look at Paul's words in Romans 14:5-6a:

“One person regards one day above another, another regards every day *alike*. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord.”

Hegg points out the distinct possibility that Paul could have written these words per the very debate circulating in today's Messianic movement between Passover and *Shavuot*. He writes,

“Is it conceivable that there were Pharisees and Sadducees in the synagogue at Rome? Certainly! And if there were, then it is equally conceivable that they debated over the exact date of *Shavuot* (and of counting the *omer*). If this were the underlying issue that Paul references, then the scenario would go like this: one person is not convinced of a particular position, but is willing to go with the majority. His conviction was that one could not know for sure, and therefore he was willing to consider all of the prescribed days equally. The other person, however, was fully convinced that his reckoning was the right one, and he was intent upon keeping the Festival day according to his calendar. If this were the case, then we must presume that Paul was no[t] able to be dogmatic on the issue either, and simply called the people to act in forbearance toward each other.”<sup>32</sup>

Messianic Jewish writer Kevin Geoffrey (who actually holds to the Essenic view of counting the *omer*), concurs,

“If you are a member of a congregation that observes the *Mo'adiym*, we strongly encourage you to participate in your congregation's *Shavuot* celebration, regardless of when it falls. If your understanding of the counting period differs from that of your congregation, feel free to

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<sup>32</sup> Tim Hegg, *Paul's Epistle to the Romans, Volume 2: Chapters 9-16* (Tacoma, WA: TorahResource, 2007), 415. Hegg does notably state, “While this scenario is possible, I have come to think it less and less probable...”

celebrate *Shavuot* on your own as well. We exhort you, however, to not allow any difference of opinion on this point to cause division within the community.”<sup>33</sup>

Indeed, regardless of which view one holds, **we each need to learn how to love and respect one another.** This alone will determine whether we uphold the message of *Shavuot*: God calling His people to His mountain to receive His Law, and being empowered to go out and fulfill His mission for the world.<sup>34</sup> This message is only enhanced by the death and resurrection of His Messiah, and the outpouring of His Spirit upon those assembled for the festival seven weeks later!

### Looking Ahead for the Future Observance of Shavuot

The way things stand in the Messianic community today, many of us who have weighed the arguments in favor and against the two sides counting of the *omer*, have to make accommodations to those who favor the opposite side. But when we look ahead at the Messianic movement several decades from now, how will *Shavuot* be commemorated?

Certainly, I would expect (today) a congregation evenly divided among Pharisaical and Saddusaical advocates to accommodate both groups, perhaps having a small *Shavuot* worship service during the week to remember the festival with the worldwide Jewish community. And later during the weekend, a much larger *Shavuot* service or celebration can occur.

However, while this might be more normal between those who want to accommodate all, I do believe that as today’s Messianic movement grows and matures—and most especially as its hermeneutics improve—that on the whole most in the future be celebrating *Shavuot* in tandem with the worldwide Jewish community. I do not favor the side of the Sadducees **not** because of any animosity I hold toward the Christian Church or Sunday as a day of the week, because God can clearly perform miracles on *any day of the week He wants to*. I do not favor the Saddusaical method for counting the *omer* because I do not believe it employs a responsible hermeneutical approach. I have to be honest with the broad scale of data that I believe supports the traditional method of observance, no different than how I would consider the same factors for issues that are far, far more important to our Messianic faith.

The issue of counting the *omer* is a relatively minor debate as far as our Messianic theology as a whole is concerned. *It is surely not a salvation issue. One day Yeshua the Messiah will return to sort it out all out.* For the short term, the independent Messianic movement will probably not have cohesion on this issue (and many other issues, for that matter), and we need to learn how to moderate potential divisions.

For the long term, I believe it is most likely, though, that a Quartodeciman style of remembering Yeshua’s resurrection—and consequently the traditional method of observing *Shavuot*—will win out. Yet, in the meantime each of us ***must be united around the fact that He did resurrect***, even though some fail to recognize that the belief in resurrection is Pharisaical. Likewise, the primacy of loving one’s neighbor above all other commandments is Pharisaical. If we can love one another and be reasonable, then we can work out the debate of counting the *omer* in a manner that brings glory to God and will accomplish His tasks in the Earth.

J.K. McKee (B.A., University of Oklahoma; M.A., Asbury Theological Seminary) is the editor of TNN Online ([www.tnnonline.net](http://www.tnnonline.net)) and is a Messianic apologist. He is author of several books, including: *The New Testament Validates Torah*, *Torah In the Balance, Volume I*, and *When Will the Messiah Return?* He has also written many articles on the Two Houses of Israel and Biblical theology, and is presently focusing on Messianic commentaries on various books of the Bible.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard, Updated Edition* (NASU), © 1995, published by The Lockman Foundation.

<sup>33</sup> Kevin Geoffrey, *Messianic Mo'adim Devotional* (Phoenix: Perfect Word, 2007), 155, fn 37.

<sup>34</sup> Consult the editor’s article “The Message of Exodus.”