

Omer Count

Do you follow the method of the Pharisees or Sadducees for the counting of the *omer* to determine *Shavuot*? It seems that most in the independent Messianic movement follow the counting method of the Sadducees.

The counting of the *omer* is commanded in Leviticus 23:11, “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.¹
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 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 the 6th of 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.²

Many in the independent Messianic community, outside of Messianic Judaism, prefer to follow the Saddusaical method for counting the *omer*—the same method followed by the Karaites—always remembering *Shavuot* or Pentecost on a Sunday. While some of these people do so because they are following a calendar different than the standard Rabbinical Jewish calendar used today, many others continue to follow the dates for the appointed times on the standard Jewish calendar with this being a notable exception.

There are likewise many in the independent Messianic community who believe that *Shavuot* should be observed on the traditional Jewish date of the 6th of Sivan, originally determined by the Pharisees, and that the Bible supports this viewpoint. **This includes Messianic Apologetics editor J.K. McKee**, although he does emphasize that we should respect those who hold to the Saddusaical view.

Making this disagreement about when to start counting the *omer*, into some kind of an issue about “Sunday,” entirely misses the point. The discussion about when to count the *omer* is really about 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.³ There are many people who get into a debate over this issue, and may argue quite strongly, but they are working from incomplete information.

¹ The entry for “Firstfruits” by R.O. Rigsby, in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, 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.

² 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.

³ Consult the author’s article “Getting Beyond Strong’s Concordance” (appearing in *Confronting Critical Issues*).

The following has been compiled to present you both sides of the issue of how to count the *omer*, and thus when to commemorate *Shavuot*. The points presented for the Saddusaical view have been listed first, with a counterpoint response by the Pharisical view. We would encourage you to make an informed decision for yourself based on what is provided below, should you have ever made any hasty conclusions about this in the past. We would also encourage you to not be unnecessarily divided with others who may share a different opinion at present.

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” (NASU).

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 temimot* (שִׁבְעַת שַׁבְּתוֹת תְּמִימוֹת) or “seven complete sabbaths” (Leviticus 23:15, NASU). This means that *Shavuot* will always occur on the first day of the week or a Sunday. Its date is not fixed by a number date on 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* (שַׁבְּתֹתָיִן) or “a sabbath of solemn rest” (NASU), 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 שַׁבְּתָה inasmuch as it is to be observed strictly and to be celebrated in a special way” (*HALOT*),⁴ hence “a High Sabbath.” If the counting of the *omer* were to begin after 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 firstfruits 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 firstfruits 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 when the firstfruits would have been offered. 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” (NASU). 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, NASU), 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 after the High Sabbath or the first day of Unleavened Bread, which does not occur on a Sunday. Why is this the case? Was this started to downplay Yeshua’s prophetic fulfillment of the firstfruits 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 firstfruits resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at *Shavuot* without any major complications.

⁴ *HALOT*, 2:1412.

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* (שבועות), the plural of the Hebrew *shavua* (שבוע), meaning “week.” Before examining any Scriptures, why would the designation of this festival be *Shavuot*, meaning “Weeks”—rather than *Shabbatot* (שבתות), 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 to represent “week.”

There is strong evidence in favor of the fact that the Hebrew term *Shabbat* (שבת) need not always refer to the Sabbath day. While the primary usage of *Shabbat* is undoubtedly “the day of rest, the sabbath” (*HALOT*),⁵ this does not disallow other possible usages—including “week” (*Jastrow*)⁶ 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.

Shortly after the listing of the *moedim* in Leviticus 23, instruction about the Sabbatical year and year of jubilee are given in Leviticus 25, notably including the command, “You are also to count off seven sabbaths of years for yourself, seven times seven years, so that you have the time of the seven sabbaths of years, *namely*, forty-nine years” (Leviticus 25:8, NASU). Here, it is undeniable that *sheva shabbatot shanim* (שבע שבתות שנים...) means “seven weeks of years” (RSV, NRSV, NJPS, ESV), and that the term “sabbath” is flexible enough to regard more than just the weekly Sabbath day.

Rabbinic literature itself indicates this flexibility. The Mishnah includes a usage of *Shabbat* used to represent “week”:

“[He who says,] ‘*Qonam* if I taste wine today,’ is prohibited only to nightfall. [If he referred to] ‘this week [*shabbat zo*],’ he is prohibited the entire week [*b’kol ha’shabbat*], and the Sabbath [which is coming is included] in that past week” (m.*Nedarim* 18:1).⁷

Even the Greek equivalent of *Shabbat*, the carryover term *sabbaton* (σάββατον) present in the Apostolic Scriptures, has a variance of usages. “The plural *tá sabbata* may mean one sabbath, several sabbaths, or the whole week (like the Hebrew term)” (*TDNT*).⁸ In the *Didache*, from the late First Century C.E., it is said that the Jews “fast on the second and the fifth day of the week” (8:1), *deutera sabbatōn kai pemptē* (δευτέρῃ σαββάτῳ καὶ πέμπτῃ), meaning twice a week.⁹ Here, the plural *sabbatōn* or “sabbaths” is used. It has to represent the “week,” as it would make no sense for one to fast two times on the Sabbath day or Saturday.

The term “sabbath” having some variance of usages should not be that disturbing to us. Consider that in a similar vein, the Hebrew term *yom* (יוֹם) primarily means “day of twenty-four hours” (*HALOT*),¹⁰ but there are most certainly instances when *yom* means “a period of time” such as a “year” (*HALOT*),¹¹ or simply “division of time” (*BDB*)¹² that may or may not be specified.¹³ 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” (NASU). The command here is not to count using “Sabbaths,” but rather to count *sheva shavuot*

⁵ Ibid., 2:1411.

⁶ *Jastrow*, 1520.

⁷ Neusner, *Mishnah*, 421.

⁸ E. Lohse, “*sabbaton*,” in *TDNT*, 989.

⁹ Cf. *BDAG*, 910.

¹⁰ *HALOT*, 1:399.

¹¹ Ibid., 1:400.

¹² *BDB*, 398.

¹³ The most debated of these for certain would be how *yom* is used in Genesis 1.

(שָׁבֻעַ שְׁבַע) 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,¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

The Hebrew of Leviticus 23:11 is vague, indicating that the counting of the *omer* is to begin *m'mochorat ha'Shabbat* (מִמּוֹחֳרַת 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 (also based on similar language seen in Joshua 5:10-12). 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.” Around 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 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? Obviously not. 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,” that “Here the Hebrew שַׁבָּת, *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.”¹⁶

Furthermore, in Leviticus 23:15, the LXX rendered the Hebrew *sheva shabatot temimot*, “seven complete Sabbaths,” with *hepta hebdomadas holoklērous* (ἑπτὰ ἑβδομάδας ὁλοκλήρους), meaning “seven full weeks” (LXE).¹⁷ This is more confirmation of how *shabbat* can be understood in a greater context beyond that of just the “Sabbath day,” and can also include “week.”

If we consider the Greek LXX to have any kind of relevance in our theological exegesis, then it supports the counting of the *omer* beginning immediately after the first day of Unleavened Bread on the 16th of Nisan, 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.

¹⁴ Consult the entries for the Pentateuchal books (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) in *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic* for a conservative analysis and response to the JEDP documentary hypothesis.

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ 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>>.

¹⁷ The LXX was obviously compiled before the New Testament term *sabbaton*, a carryover from Hebrew and Aramaic, was used by Greek-speaking Jews. Leviticus 23:15 employs the more classical term *hebdomas* (ἑβδομάς), used by Aristotle to represent “a period of seven days” (*LS*, 220).

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.¹⁸ 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* (שַׁבָּתוֹן) 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 after 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:

"[T]hen he said to them, "This is what the LORD meant: Tomorrow is a sabbath observance [*Shabaton*], 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, NASU).

"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, NASU).

"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, NASU).

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 Sabbath mentioned in Leviticus 23:3—which occurs every week—all of a sudden becomes a High Sabbath. 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; Joshua 5:10-12) to formulate a more well-rounded interpretation of what is being referred to.

4. The Apostle Paul said that Yeshua the Messiah was the firstfruits 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, NASU). Paul is the one who associates some level of prophetic fulfillment to the firstfruits offering, the ceremony that begins the counting of the *omer* during the Festival of Unleavened Bread, with the resurrection of Yeshua. David H. Stern remarks in his *Jewish New Testament*

¹⁸ 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. Hebrews is not the only book in the Apostolic Scriptures where the LXX is quoted proficiently.

Consult the commentary *Hebrews for the Practical Messianic* by J.K. McKee.

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).”¹⁹

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 after 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 safely 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 typology of firstfruits, while at the same time being a Pharisee and recognizing that the firstfruits offering would be made on the 16th of Nisan.

Likewise, we have to remember Yeshua’s own 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 (many of) the Pharisaic rulings. We have justified course, then, to observe *Shavuot* as Messianic Believers 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 the firstfruits offering:

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 the firstfruits offering. 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.”

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 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 nights: Thursday day/night, Friday day/night, and Saturday day/night.²⁰

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 in ancient times; cf. b.*Menachot* 63, 65, 72). Some Messianics who follow the Saddusaical method may have difficulty with seeing how Yeshua could possibly fulfill this prophetic typology, were He not resurrected on the specific “day” of the firstfruits offering. **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 or her 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

¹⁹ Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 488.

²⁰ For a further discussion, consult the author’s article, “The Last Seder and Yeshua’s Passover Chronology” (appearing in the *Messianic Spring Holiday Helper*).

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 barley 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."²¹

If the offering of firstfruits occurred immediately before Yeshua's resurrection, it does not at all mean that He does not fulfill the prophetic typology of the firstfruits offering via His resurrection. To insist on such binary Os and 1s precision is a product of a Twenty-First Century mind, but not a Jewish mind of the First Century.

Advocates of the Saddusaical view 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 a sect known as the Quartodecimans, from the Eastern Christian Church of the Second-Fourth Centuries, 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*.²² Once the Jewish community set the date for Passover, then claiming to follow a tradition from the Apostle John via Polycarp, the Quartodecimans 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:

“...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.”²³

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. (Do note that Messianic Apologetics editor J.K. McKee's 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 shortly 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:

²¹ Hegg, “Counting the Omer.”

²² Cf. “Quartodecimans,” in David W. Bercot, ed., *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 547.

²³ Susan E. Richardson, *Holidays & Holy Days* (Ann Arbor, MI: Vine Books, 2001), 58.

“For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all” (Acts 23:8, NASU; 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 who 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 basic theology, but instead their hypocritical attitudes. Furthermore, the Pharisaism of the Apostle Paul is often glossed over.²⁴

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—as we place ourselves within a viable Jewish tradition that adhered to many of the spiritual ideas and concepts that evangelical Christians and Messianics today hold dear.

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, NASU).

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 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).²⁵

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).²⁶

The historical record attests that the Pharisaic method for beginning the *omer* count was followed in the Jerusalem Temple in the First Century.

²⁴ Consult the author’s article “You Want to Be a Pharisee” (appearing in *Introduction to Things Messianic*).

²⁵ *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 96.

²⁶ *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, 583.

In response to this, many might 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).²⁷

Josephus notes that this custom was rejected by the Sadducees, and the violent reaction on one year, 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; cf. b.*Sukkah* 48b).²⁸

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 firstfruits 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 'first sheaf,' and to reckon Pentecost as did their opponents."²⁹

The Jews who had come to Jerusalem to observe *Shavuot* in Acts—and hence hear the gospel message proclaimed—followed the Pharisaic lead. Notably, those from the Diaspora 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 did not deny the resurrection.

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.

²⁷ Neusner, *Mishnah*, 288.

²⁸ *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 360.

²⁹ Alfred Edersheim, *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.

Discussing this Issue with Fairness

The debate over whether the method of counting the *omer* via the Sadducees (and now the modern-day Karaites) or Pharisees—and which one is correct—is a debate going back 2,300 years, and it is doubtful that the emerging Messianic community will reach a solution in the short term. We should not consider it a salvation issue, though. **One day Yeshua the Messiah will return to sort it 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 so we will need to learn how to moderate potential divisions. We will need to focus on the bigger issues that unite us during the Spring holiday season, and not divide over what are ultimately minor details.

The debate over counting the *omer* is probably a little more complicated than you originally thought. There is a great deal of information that is often left out of the deliberations by Saddusaical advocates, and there is often not a great deal of patience and forbearance that Pharisaical advocates have toward these non-traditionalists. How do we encourage a better way to investigate and analyze this issue in the future? How do we not leave important factors out of the conversation on how we are to count the *omer*? The burden of proof is actually more on the side of the Pharisaical advocates than the Saddusaical advocates—not because of the data that clearly supports their view—but because of how they will treat those who fail to consider such data should they defiantly reject and brand it as “traditions of men.”

Most who hold to the Saddusaical view have not examined the additional factors that play into one’s examination of this issue—factors that have a more significant impact on other, and far more important aspects of our theology. In the Messianic community right now (2009), **we must have the proper attitude that allows for some variance and respects others whether they celebrate *Shavuot* in concurrence with or in modification of the standard Rabbinical calendar.** We have to be able to be constructive with those who hold to the Saddusaical point of view, and wish them God’s blessings even if they do observe *Shavuot* on a date different from the rest of the Jewish and Messianic Jewish communities.

As today’s Messianic movement grows and matures—and most especially as its hermeneutics improve—most in the future will be celebrating *Shavuot* in tandem with the worldwide Jewish community.

We should not favor the side of the Sadducees **not** out of any animosity 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.* (And be reminded, *Shavuot* will occur on a Sunday sooner or later according to the Pharisaical method.) We should not favor the Saddusaical method for counting the *omer* because it really does not employ a responsible hermeneutical approach. We have to be honest with the broad scale of data that supports the traditional method of observance, no different than how we would consider the same factors for issues that are far, far more important to our Messianic faith and the salvation we possess in Yeshua. If these interpretational factors are forgotten for a small issue like the counting of the *omer*, we will get into the habit of forgetting them when presented with **real salvation issues** like Yeshua’s Messiahship. (And this has probably already occurred in far too many places already in the exegetical deliberations of various Messianic “teachers” and “leaders.”)

Also for the long term, we should encourage a Quartodeciman style of remembering Yeshua’s resurrection to emerge, as the traditional method of counting the *omer* for observing *Shavuot* wins out. This would likely be some kind of an intimate prayer service, where we reflect on His rising from the dead, immediately following the start of the *omer* count.

As we wait for more cohesion to come forth, 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 (b.*Shabbat* 31a). If we can love one another and be reasonable, then we can work out the debate of counting the *omer* in an appropriate manner that brings glory to God, and will accomplish His tasks in the Earth.