

Counting to Pentecost

By Larry & June Acheson

Many of you already know that the debate over the Scripturally-sanctioned way to count to Pentecost is a very controversial and divisive topic. Over the years we have read several passionate opinions outlining the proper way to count, including one that calls for us to count fifty days *twice*. Nevertheless, we are persuaded that only two views are truly worthy of consideration and those are the two that we will compare and offer our perspective in this study. Both sides present outstanding arguments, but in the end each of us must choose which ones are the most sound. Analyzing and compiling all the evidence proves to be a daunting challenge; in fact, we have previously authored a detailed study on this topic that eventually grew to over 100 pages of pertinent information.¹ In this condensed version we hone in on the primary arguments while simultaneously weaving in our personal conclusion.



Going by “Scripture and Scripture Alone”

Before delving into the two primary arguments, I think we need to address the common claim of going “by Scripture and Scripture alone.” Please don’t get me wrong here: Ultimately, Scripture is the Word on which our foundation of faith is built. It is the Almighty’s Word for His people; but let’s face it: Lots of people claim to go by “Scripture and Scripture alone,” yet there are still hundreds of denominations out there, even including several divisions within what is known as the Sacred Name Movement. Think about it: If we *all* go by Scripture and Scripture alone, then why don’t we all share the same, exact beliefs? For example, why aren’t we all lunar sabbatarians? After all, in my many discussions with lunar sabbatarians, going by “Scripture and Scripture alone” has been a common mantra offered by the opposition. Other groups make the same claim, so I don’t need to dig very deep to come up with additional examples, such as the fact that many folks are persuaded that the Scriptural day begins at dawn instead of sunset and yes, they claim to go by “Scripture and Scripture alone.” We can also claim to go by Scripture and Scripture alone and hold to the belief that New Moon day is the day of the conjunction. I once attended a debate between a man who advocates the sighting of the crescent moon after sunset (as we do) versus a man who claims that the Scriptural New Moon day falls on the day of the

conjunction. During the Question & Answer Session that followed, I asked the conjunction proponent if he had any historical evidence to support his conviction. His response was simply to raise his Bible in full view of the audience. He proudly displayed his “historical evidence.” It was Scripture and Scripture alone.



Sola scriptura was one of the main theological beliefs that Martin Luther proclaimed against the Catholic Church during the Protestant Reformation

From Wikipedia

The claim to go by “Scripture and Scripture alone” is a Protestant cry going back at least as far as Martin Luther (“Sola Scriptura”), but Luther’s cry didn’t include a call to follow in the Messiah’s steps of obedience to our Heavenly Father’s Torah, nor did he even suggest that we go back to honoring any of Yahweh’s festivals/*moedim*, such as Pentecost. To make a long story short, when we claim to go by Scripture and Scripture alone, what we are *really* claiming to go by is our interpretation of Scripture and our interpretation alone. Shouldn’t we all have a unified desire to make certain

¹ See [Facing the Pentecost Controversy](http://www.ponderscripture.org), first published in 2002, at our web site, www.ponderscripture.org.

our interpretations match the practices and beliefs of the ancients? In other words, let's say we interpret a certain Scriptural instruction to be carried out a certain way, even though those around us interpret it differently. Wouldn't it be gratifying to learn that our interpretation just happens to fall in line with the way the ancients understood that same instruction? If this method makes sense to you, then you may be interested in what I'm about to present.

The Meaning of Shabbat

When it comes to thoroughly examining how the Almighty intends for His children to count to Pentecost, there are several features that need to be addressed, but none are as important as determining the originally-intended meaning of the Hebrew word *Shabbat* (שַׁבָּת) as it appears in Leviticus 23:11 and 15. In fact, the reason so many are persuaded that we should always count to Pentecost from the morrow after the weekly Sabbath is because the Hebrew word "Shabbat" is the word that appears in the priest's instructions for observing the Feast of Unleavened Bread as found in Leviticus 23:11:

11 And he [the priest] shall wave the sheaf before Yahweh, to be accepted for you: on the morrow after the sabbath (*ha-shabbat*, הַשַּׁבָּת) the priest shall wave it.

Surely, if we go by "Scripture and Scripture alone," then we MUST understand that the Sabbath referred to above can be none other than the weekly Sabbath, right? Well ... not so fast. The fact of the matter is, the Hebrew word *Shabbat* can refer to *any* time period of rest. When referring to a specific year, the "Sabbatical Year," it's essentially a 365-day *Shabbat* (Lev. 25:4). The Day of Atonement is also called a *Shabbat* (Lev. 23:32), even though it can fall on any day of the week. For those of us who understand that the Messiah was not crucified on the day preceding a weekly Sabbath, we know that the Greek word *sabbato*, which is the equivalent of the Hebrew *Shabbat*, is the word the author used for the day following the Passover day in John chapter 19:

31 The Jews therefore, because it was the preparation, that the bodies should not remain on the stake on the sabbath day (σαββάτω), (for that sabbath day (σαββάτου) was an high day,) besought Pilate that their legs might be broken, and *that* they might be taken away.

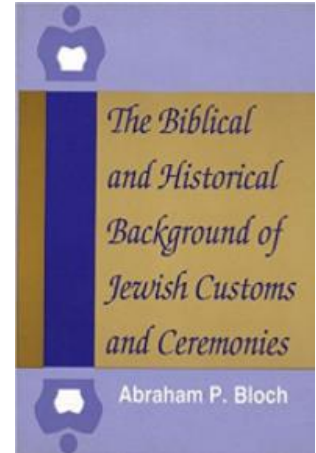
It is worthy of note that the same Greek word used for the word "Sabbath" is also rightly rendered "week." For example, we read in Luke 4:16 that the Messiah's custom was to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath day (*sabbaton*, σαββάτων). We also read in John 20:1 that Mary Magdalene went to the tomb where the Messiah was buried on the first day of the week (*sabbaton*, σαββάτων). The fact that this one Greek word can have a dual meaning raises the question of whether or not it is possible for the Hebrew word *Shabbat* to likewise have a dual meaning, depending on context.

Solidifying the view that the word "Shabbat" in Leviticus 23:11 refers to the weekly Sabbath instead of the "festival sabbath" is the fact that we are told in verses 15-16 to count *seven Sabbaths* (*Shabbatot*, בַּשְּׁבִיעִתָּהּ) unto the morrow after the "seventh Sabbath." We are obviously not expected to count seven "festival Sabbaths," so it follows that we are to count seven *weekly Shabbatot*. By deduction, then, if we are to count seven *weekly* Sabbaths from the morrow after the Sabbath, it is reasonable to assume that "morrow after the Sabbath" *also* refers to the day following the weekly Sabbath.

15 And ye shall count unto you from the morrow after the sabbath, from the day that ye brought the sheaf of the wave offering; **seven sabbaths** (שַׁבְּתוֹת) shall be complete.

16 Even unto the morrow after the seventh sabbath shall ye number fifty days; and ye shall offer a new meal offering unto Yahweh.

The late Jewish author Abraham P. Bloch, in his book *The Biblical and Historical Background of Jewish Customs and Ceremonies*, offers specific details validating the Hebraic understanding that the word “Shabbat,” as it appears in Leviticus 23:11, is not necessarily a reference to the weekly Shabbat, but then he proceeds to validate the understanding that the plural form of this word (*Shabbatot*, שַׁבְּתוֹת) can *only* refer to the weekly Sabbath. Here are his seven guidelines for understanding how to best translate the word *Shabbat*:



1. *Shabbat* and *shabbaton* are not proper nouns and therefore may apply to any day of rest, unless otherwise indicated in the text.
2. The phrase *bayom hashabbat* (“on the day of the Sabbath”) refers to the weekly Sabbath exclusively.
3. Where the phrase *bayom hashabbat* appears in a passage to indicate a reference to the weekly Sabbath, all subsequent mentions of the Sabbath in the same passage omit the *bayom*.
4. ***Shabbatot*, the plural form of *shabbat*, always refers to the weekly Sabbaths.**
5. *Shabbaton* means a recurring period of rest.
6. *Shabbat shabbaton* is best translated as “a day of complete rest.”
7. The aforementioned pentateuchal guidelines are followed by some of the texts of the Scriptures and Prophets and are ignored in others. The gradual change reflects an emerging trend to convert *shabbat* into a proper noun. The trend culminated in the Talmud and the nonrabbinic literature of the talmudic period, where *shabbat* is used exclusively as a proper noun.²

For the purpose of this study, it is important to note that author Abraham Bloch supported counting to Pentecost from the morrow after the Festival Sabbath, yet in point #4 above he clearly states that the plural form of *Shabbat* (*shabbatot*) can only be regarded as a reference to *weekly* Sabbaths. From the perspective of those who are persuaded that the word *Shabbat* as used in Leviticus 23:11 refers to the weekly Sabbath, it would seem that Bloch needs to explain how *shabbatot* in Lev. 23:16, in that particular instance, really means “weeks.” Regrettably, he doesn’t offer the needed explanation for his apparent contradiction. Bloch goes on to write:

The noun *shabbat*, a time of rest, is elastic in its duration. Thus the entire sabbatical year (*shemittah*) is called *shabbat* (Lev. 25:4). When *shabbat* is preceded by *bayom* (“in the day”) the duration of this time of rest is narrowed to one day. The only Sabbath which comes regularly once a week is Saturday. “The day of the Sabbath” is therefore synonymous with Saturday (second conclusion).

When the specific identification of the *shabbat* has been made clear in the text, the qualifying *bayom* may be dropped. Thus the *shabbat* in the incident of the manna dispensed with the *bayom* because its identification was indicated by the designations “tomorrow” (Exod. 16:23), “today” (16:25), and the “seventh day” (16:26). The same is true of the injunction “and you shall observe the sabbath”

² From *The Biblical and Historical Background of Jewish Customs and Ceremonies*, by Abraham P. Bloch, KTAV Publishing House, Inc., New York, NY, 1980, pp. 164-165.

(Exod. 31:14). Its precise definition is clarified by the subsequent reference to “the seventh day” (Exod. 31:15; third conclusion).

Significantly, the *shabbat* mentioned in connection with the ritual of the Omer (Lev. 23:11) is not qualified by hyphenation with *bayom* or by any other identifying term. Consequently one must interpret this *shabbat* as a day of rest which refers to the previously mentioned festival of Passover (Lev. 23:6).

The definition of the *shabbat* in the passage of the Omer was in contention between the Sadducees and the rabbinic sages (Menachot 95b). The Sadducees erroneously assumed that *shabbat* was a proper noun, synonymous with Saturday. This is disproved by our first conclusion. Furthermore, the broad definition of *shabbat* is evidenced by the biblical description of the festivals of Rosh HaShanah and Sukkot as *shabbaton*, another form of *shabbat* (Lev. 23:34, 39).³

Abraham Bloch’s understanding that the “Sabbath” mentioned in Leviticus 23:11 refers back to the first day of the festival was shared by ancient Judaism during the first century CE:

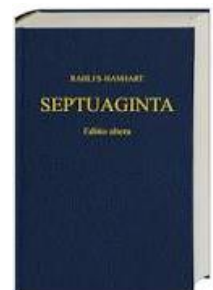
R. Jose says, On the morrow of the Sabbath means on the morrow after the Festival, but perhaps it is not so, but rather on the morrow after the Sabbath of Creation! I will prove it to you. Does Scripture say, ‘On the morrow after the Sabbath that is in the Passover week’? It merely says, ‘On the morrow after the Sabbath’; and as the year is full of Sabbaths, then go and find out which Sabbath is meant. Moreover, ‘Sabbath’ is written below, and ‘Sabbath’ is written above; just as the former case it refers to the Festival, and indeed to the beginning of the Festival, so in the latter case, too, it refers to the Festival, and indeed to the beginning of the Festival.⁴

The rabbi from the above ancient discussion agrees with modern-day author Abraham Bloch when it comes to expressing the understanding that the word Sabbath in Leviticus 23:11 refers to the “Festival Sabbath.” However, neither the ancient rabbi nor Abraham Bloch address what is the proper understanding of the plural seven Sabbaths (*shabbatot*) that we are to count to Pentecost. This is a key phrase that cannot be ignored if we are to go with the Hebrew text of Scripture. However, what some dismiss without further consideration or study is the fact that there is *another* important text of Scripture that should not be ignored: the Septuagint.

The Hebrew Text Versus the Greek Septuagint Text



When all is said and done, I am persuaded that the Pentecost Controversy ultimately boils down to which version of the Bible each individual believes conveys the original intent of the Creator. Is it the extant Hebrew Torah or is it the translation made in the 3rd Century BCE – known as the Septuagint (LXX)? We have already seen that the only proper way of reconciling the various instances of the words *Shabbat* and its plural form *Shabbatot* in the Hebrew Bible is to understand that they must



refer to the *weekly* Sabbath. Since even top rabbinic scholarship recognizes that the plural *shabbatot* refers to *weekly* Sabbaths, and since we are to therefore count seven *weekly* Sabbaths, then the morrow after that seventh *weekly* Sabbath is the 50th day – the Day of Pentecost. The morrow

³ Ibid, pp. 165-166.

⁴ Quoted from Tractate Menahoth 65b, as found on pages 387-388 of *The Babylonian Talmud*, Vol. 1, Seder Kodashim, published by The Soncino Press, London, 1948. Note: We do not normally recommend reading the Talmud, except for gleaning historical information.

after the weekly Sabbath has always been the first day of the week, so when examined with the above reasoning, it is clear that Pentecost must fall on the first day of the week each and every year – that is, if we agree that the extant Hebrew text conveys the original intent of the Creator. Many conclude that we need look no further than the extant Hebrew text and for them, that’s where the discussion ends. Although I find it regrettable that so many are not willing to look any further, I am nevertheless compelled to respect their position.

For those who are willing to examine the Septuagint text, it doesn’t take long to discover that if this were the only text available to us, we would all be counting to Pentecost from the morrow after the “Festival Sabbath” instead of the weekly Sabbath. That’s because, after giving us the basic details about the timing of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the LXX version of Leviticus 23:11 enjoins the priest to wave the sheaf (*omer*) of first-fruits, not on the morrow after the Sabbath, but on the morrow of the *first day* – the first day of the feast:

9 And Yahweh spoke to Moses saying,
 10 Speak to the children of Israel, and thou shalt say to them, When ye shall enter into the land which I give you, and reap the harvest of it, then shall ye bring a sheaf, the first-fruits of your harvest, to the priest;
 11 and he shall lift up the sheaf before Yahweh, to be accepted for you. **On the morrow of the first day the priest shall lift it up.**⁵

We know that “first day” refers to the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread because in verses 7-8 we are plainly told that the first and seventh days of the feast are days of holy convocation on which no servile work is to be done. Then, to make it absolutely clear that we are to count *weeks* (Gk *hebdomadas*, ἑβδομαδας) and not *sabbaths*, we read the following in the Septuagint’s rendering of Leviticus 23:15-16:

15 And ye shall number to yourselves from the day after the sabbath (Gk σαββάτων), from the day on which ye shall offer the sheaf of the heave-offering, **seven full weeks** (Gk ἑβδομαδας):
 16 **until the morrow after the last week (ἑβδομαδος): ye shall number fifty days** and shall bring a new meat-offering to Yahweh.⁶

You may recall my having pointed out that the Greek word for “Sabbath” (σαββάτων) may also be correctly translated *week*, depending on context. However, another Greek word for “week” is used in the Septuagint translation: **ἑβδομαδας**. This is significant because the Hebrew scholars who translated the LXX *could* have used the Greek word *sabbaton* (σαββάτων), since it *can* be translated either “Sabbaths” or *weeks*. Their decision to go with a separate Greek word that can only mean *weeks* clearly demonstrates how those scholars understood the instructions for when to begin the count to Pentecost, but it also begs the question of why the extant Hebrew text uses a word that may only be understood as meaning *weeks* by *interpretation*. As we’ve previously pointed out, the Hebrew word used in Leviticus 23:15 is the plural of *Shabbat*, which is *shabbatot* (בַּשַּׁבָּתוֹת), which as rabbinical scholar Abraham Bloch explained, is only used in reference to *weekly Sabbaths*. Why don’t we instead see the actual Hebrew word reserved for *weeks* (*Shavuot* שַׁבְּעָה) in the Hebrew text of Leviticus 23:15?

⁵ From *The Septuagint with Apocrypha: Greek and English*, translated by Sir Lancelot C.L. Brenton, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 1995. Brenton’s translation was originally published by Samuel Bagster & Sons, Ltd., London, in 1851. The Greek text in Brenton’s edition is based on Vaticanus, an early fourth-century manuscript, with some reliance on other texts, particularly Alexandrinus, a fifth-century manuscript.

⁶ Ibid.

We can see from the Septuagint's use of the word "sabbath" in verse 15 that it agrees with the Hebrew text in referring to the day prior to the wave sheaf offering as being the "sabbath," and as Rabbi Abraham Bloch testifies, "sabbath" in that verse can technically refer to either a weekly sabbath or a Festival Sabbath, depending on context. The Septuagint plainly regards the "sabbath" of Leviticus 23:15 as being a reference to the Festival Sabbath because the day from which the counting is reckoned is the "morrow of the first day" of the feast, which is a day of rest – a special Sabbath. Since the first day of the feast is always Abib 15, the counting is reckoned from the morrow of that day, i.e., Abib 16, at least according to the Septuagint translation. One important aspect of the Septuagint translation that needs to be considered is the fact that this translation was carried out by Hebrew scholars who were tasked with conveying the Hebraic understanding into Greek words for a Greek-speaking audience. If we can set aside the possibility that they may have mistranslated some words (which is by no means certain), we need to address the fact that these Hebrew scholars were attempting to convey the Almighty's intent, which in their view was that the count to Pentecost begins on the morrow of the *first day* of the feast. This is how those ancient Hebrew scholars understood the instructions as found in Leviticus 23:11-16.

One final note about the Septuagint: The Hebrew text of Joshua 5:10-12 is often used as evidence that the Israelites offered the Wave Sheaf Offering on the morrow after the weekly Sabbath. Here's the *New Revised Standard Version* rendering of this passage:

¹⁰While the Israelites were camped in Gilgal they kept the Passover in the evening of fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho. ¹¹On the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. ¹²The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna: they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year.

When reading the above passage, we need to bear in mind that according to Leviticus 23:14 we aren't supposed to eat bread, parched corn, or green ears until the same day on which the Wave Sheaf offering (the *omer*) is brought unto the Almighty. When we do the math we find that the only possible day of the week on which the Israelites could have eaten the produce of the land on the day after Abib 14 would have been if the Wave Sheaf Offering took place on a Sunday following an Abib 14 "Weekly Shabbat Passover." As those who begin the count to Pentecost on the morrow after the weekly Sabbath often remind us, the above scenario can never occur if the Wave Sheaf Offering takes place on the morrow after the festival sabbath of Abib 15 because the morrow after Abib 15 is Abib 16, which cannot be the day after the Passover.

So what does all this have to do with the Septuagint text? Well, the critical phrase in Joshua 5:11 is "On the day after the Passover," and that phrase is *missing* from the Septuagint text, which in turn leaves open the possibility that the produce of the land wasn't eaten until Abib 16:

¹⁰And the children of Israel kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the month at evening, to the westward of Jericho on the opposite side of the Jordan in the plain. ¹¹And they ate of the grain of the earth unleavened and new corn. ¹²In this day the manna failed, after they had eaten of the corn of the land, and the children of Israel no longer had manna; and they took the fruits of the land of the Phoenicians in that year.⁷

⁷ From *The Septuagint with Apocrypha: Greek and English*, translated by Sir Lancelot C.L. Brenton, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 1995. Brenton's translation was originally published by Samuel Bagster & Sons, Ltd., London, in 1851. The Greek text in Brenton's edition is based on Vaticanus, an early fourth-century manuscript, with some reliance on other texts, particularly Alexandrinus, a fifth-century manuscript.

As displayed above, the Septuagint text of Joshua 5:10-12 is removed from the controversy of when to begin the count to Pentecost because it makes allowance for the produce of the land to not have been eaten until Abib 16, i.e., the morrow after the Festival Sabbath in full compliance with the instruction found in Leviticus 23:14.

Which Version Was Recognized by 1st Century Believers?

I am accustomed to hearing lots of railing against the Septuagint version by various individuals, all of whom insist that the only Scriptural way to count to Pentecost is to count from the morrow after the weekly Sabbath. Thus far they haven't satisfactorily explained how or why the Septuagint is quoted by the *Brit Chadashah* (New Testament) writers over and above the Hebrew text. One of the clearest examples of this is taken from the account of Stephen's famous sermon before the Jewish Sanhedrin, wherein he recounted the history of Israel, saying, "Then sent Joseph, and called his father Jacob to him, and all his kindred, ***seventy-five souls***" (Acts 7:14).

The question is, Where did Stephen come up with the number ***seventy-five***? According to Exodus 1:5, there were only ***seventy souls***, not seventy-five, that joined Joseph in Egypt. Note what it says in that verse:

⁵And all the souls that came out of the loins of Jacob were seventy souls: for Joseph was in Egypt *already*.

Did Stephen have a memory lapse when he mentioned there being ***seventy-five souls*** instead of the ***seventy souls*** as recorded in Exodus 1:5?

The answer is no. Stephen came up with the same "number of souls" that is recorded in the Septuagint. Notice how Exodus 1:5 reads in the Septuagint version:

⁵But Joseph was in Egypt. And all the souls *born* of Jacob were seventy-five.

When Stephen mentioned ***seventy-five*** souls, he was not misquoting Scripture. He was merely backing up the Septuagint account. This same discrepancy can be found when comparing Genesis 46:27. According to the Hebrew text of Genesis 46:27, the number was ***seventy***. According to the Septuagint, it was ***seventy-five***, which, again, is the number cited by Stephen before being martyred for his faith. This is just one of many pieces of evidence supporting the fact that the early believers relied upon the Septuagint as being "Scripture." Since the NT writers had no qualms about quoting from the Septuagint, it is obvious that they did not share the antagonism of the modern-day anti-Septuagint crowd.

Another question that frequently comes up in "Count to Pentecost" discussions has to do with "who was in charge" of the temple services during the days leading up to the Messiah's death, burial and resurrection. For the purpose of this study, I must be brief, but in our in-depth study on this topic I demonstrate that according to the historian Josephus, the Pharisees' authority was completely restored upon the death of Alexander Jannaeus in the year 76 BCE and according to modern historians, the Sadducees never again regained their previous authority.⁸

⁸ Cf., *The Works of Flavius Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews*, Book XIII, ch. xv., 5.

We have mentioned first-century historian Josephus, who offers invaluable insights into what things were like in the first century. I have seen fellow believers' eyes light up with excitement when I share Josephus' testimony of how the priests' trumpet blasts would warn his fellow Jews that it was time to put down their work as the sixth day was about to end and the Sabbath was about to begin "in the evening twilight," which validates ancient Jewish understanding of when the weekly Sabbath begins and ends.⁹ These same believers proceed to scoff at Josephus when they learn that he understood the count to Pentecost as beginning on the morrow of the *Festival Sabbath*.¹⁰ There is a second witness testifying to the first-century Jewish understanding that the count to Pentecost begins on the morrow after the *Festival Sabbath* as outlined in the Septuagint text. Here is what Philo (c.25 B.C. - c.50 CE) wrote:



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;¹¹

Philo goes on to explain that is from the day of the "sheaf offering" that the count to Pentecost is reckoned:

The solemn assembly on the occasion of the festival of the sheaf having such great privileges, is the prelude to another festival of still greater importance; for from this day the fiftieth day is reckoned, making up the sacred number of seven sevens, with the addition of a unity as a seal to the whole; and this festival, being that of the first fruits of the corn, has derived its name from the number fifty, (*pentēkostos*).¹²

It is obvious from the above that Philo understood the count to Pentecost as beginning on the morrow of the *Festival Sabbath*, precisely as presented by the Septuagint text. Just in case I haven't made it clear enough as to how first-century witnesses understood when to begin the count, nineteenth-century Biblical scholar Alfred Edersheim offers the following summary of what conclusions we can draw from both Josephus and Philo:

The testimony of Josephus, of Philo, and of Jewish tradition, leaves no room to doubt that in this instance [Lev. 23:11] we are to understand by the "Sabbath" the 15th of Nisan, on whatever day of the week it might fall.¹³

We understand that those who reckon the count to Pentecost from the morrow after the weekly Sabbath reject the testimony of Josephus and Philo, but in their defense they seem unable to produce their own ancient witnesses validating their interpretation of how this Torah command was historically practiced during the first century CE. To those individuals, I can only ask why, if the *omer* truly was

⁹ Ibid, *The Wars of the Jews*, IV, ch. ix., 12.

¹⁰ Ibid, *The Works of Flavius Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews*, Book III, ch. 10, 5-6.

¹¹ From *The Works of Philo*, "The Special Laws, II," translated by C. D. Yonge, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 1993, p. 583.

¹² Ibid, pp. 584-585.

¹³ From *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services*, by Alfred Edersheim, D.D., Ph. D., Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI, 1988, p. 257 (originally published in 1874).

presented in the temple on the day after a *weekly* Sabbath each year, then why did first-century Jews such as Philo and Josephus write otherwise? And if Philo and Josephus' testimony is true that the *omer* was indeed offered on the morrow after the *Festival* Sabbath during the New Testament period, then why do we not read of any condemnation of this practice by Yeshua the Messiah or any of His disciples? Given how Paul proudly lauded his heritage as a Pharisee (Acts 26:5) with the only apparent change being that he now recognized Yeshua as the Son of Yahweh and our High Priest, why didn't he reveal that he now understood a "better way" of counting to Pentecost? These are looming questions to which I have not read satisfactory answers from the "Sunday-only" Pentecost folks. Historically, the only ancient witnesses to how Judaism understood the count to Pentecost tell us that they began the count from the morrow after the *Festival* Sabbath instead of the morrow after the *weekly* Sabbath. They followed the steps as outlined by the Septuagint text, counting seven *weeks*; the morrow after the seventh *week* was day #50 – the day of Pentecost.

Was there Really a Controversy?

I generally put a lot of stock in the information supplied by scholarly references, but I try to temper that trust with a healthy balance of skepticism. Since all the scholarly references I have consulted over the years affirm that the Pentecost controversy dates back to centuries before the Messiah, why should I question their findings? Nevertheless, they never seem to present irrefutable historical evidence validating such an understanding, which should certainly leave their conclusion open to questioning. According to these scholarly sources, the Sadducees have always maintained that the count to Pentecost begins on the morrow after the weekly Sabbath that falls within the Feast of Unleavened Bread and the Pharisees have always contended that it begins on the morrow after the festival "high day" Sabbath. Curiously, the only two historical sources I'm aware of that so much as *hint* at an ancient controversy between the Pharisees and Sadducees are rabbinical sources. The rabbis are essentially the surviving remnants of the Pharisees, so I find it surprising that the



"antagonists" of the Sadducees are the only ones who recorded even the semblance of an ancient controversy. I say "semblance of a controversy" because it's difficult to ascertain from the rabbinical record that there truly was one at that time. Here's the first reference, an excerpt from Tractate Menahoth 65b:

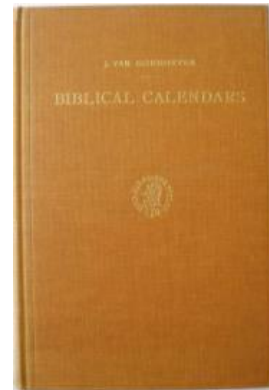
Our Rabbis taught: *And ye shall count unto you*; that is, the counting is a duty upon every one. *On the morrow after the Sabbath*, that is, on the morrow after the Festival. Perhaps it is not so but rather on the morrow after the Sabbath of Creation. R. Jose b. Judah says, Scripture says, *Ye shall number fifty days*, that is, every time that you number it shall not be more than fifty days. But should you say that the verse refers to the morrow after the Sabbath of Creation, then it might sometimes come to fifty-one and sometimes fifty-two and fifty-three and fifty-four and fifty-five and fifty-six. R. Judah b. Bathyra says, This is not necessary, for Scripture says, *Thou shalt number unto thee*, that is, the numbering depends on [the decision of] the Beth-din; accordingly the Sabbath of Creation cannot be intended as the numbering would then be in the hands of all men. R. Jose says, *On the morrow of the Sabbath* means on the morrow after the Festival, but perhaps it is not so, but rather on the morrow after the Sabbath of Creation! I will prove it to you. Does Scripture say, 'On the morrow after the Sabbath that is in the Passover week'? It merely says, 'On the morrow after the Sabbath'; and as the year is full of Sabbaths,

then go and find out which Sabbath is meant. Moreover, ‘*Sabbath*’ is written below, and ‘*Sabbath*’ is written above; just as the former case it refers to the Festival, and indeed to the beginning of the Festival, so in the latter case, too, it refers to the Festival, and indeed to the beginning of the Festival.¹⁴

When I read the above, I perceive that the questions being asked were internal inquiries posed within the ranks of the rabbis. The questions were not challenges fueled by an ongoing debate; they were asked and they were answered, apparently to the satisfaction of the enquirer because that’s where the discussion ended. Why should we believe, based on the above testimony of “hostile witnesses,” that there was a “heated debate” going on between the Pharisees and Sadducees over when to begin the count to Pentecost?

The other ancient record that historians often turn to in pointing out proof of an age-old debate concerning when to begin counting to Pentecost is the Mishnah. In his book *Biblical Calendars*, author J. Van Goudoever highlights the Mishnaic hint of a rift between the Pharisees and Sadducees over when to start counting:

In the Mishnah we get a lively picture of the reaping of the *omer*, with a ceremony directed against the Boethusians (a group within the Sadducean priests). ‘The messenger of the court used to call out on the eve of the festival [i.e. 15 Nisan] and tie the corn in bunches while it was yet unreaped to make it easier to reap; and the towns near by all assembled there together that it might be reaped with pomp. When it grew dark he called out “Is the sun set?” and they answered “Yea!” “Is the sun set?” and they answered “Yea!” “Is this a sickle?” and they answered “Yea!” “Is this a sickle?” and they answered “Yea!” “Is this a basket?” and they answered “Yea!” “Is this a basket?” “Yea!” On the Sabbath he called out “On this Sabbath?” and they answered “Yea!” “On this Sabbath?” and they answered “Yea!” “Shall I reap?” and they answered “Reap!” “Shall I reap?” and they answered “Reap!” He used to call out three times for every matter and they answered “Yea, yea, yea!” Wherefore all this? **Because of the Boethusians who used to say “The omer may not be reaped at the close of a festival day.”**



The last sentence is the clue to the ceremony. The question was how to count the 50 days. Leviticus xxiii. 15 prescribes, ‘From the morrow after the “Sabbath” you shall count.’ What is the meaning of ‘Sabbath’ here? Seventh day of the week or festival day? The Boethusians apparently interpreted, ‘You shall count from the day after the seventh day of the week’, so from the Sunday (to Sunday). The Pharisaic (first century rabbinic) standpoint was, ‘You shall count from the day after the festival day’, i.e. Passover, so from 16 Nisan. The Boethusians reaped at the going out of the Sabbath, the Pharisees at the close of the Festival day (Passover).¹⁵

Author J. Van Goudoever reached the same conclusion shared by modern-day scholarship. In summary, he believed that the Pharisees repeated their ritualistic reaping questions and answers three

¹⁴ Quoted from Tractate Menahoth 65b, as found on pages 387-388 of *The Babylonian Talmud*, Vol. 1, Seder Kodashim, published by The Soncino Press, London, 1948. Note: We do not normally recommend reading the Talmud, except for gleaning historical information..

¹⁵ From *Biblical Calendars*, by J. Van Goudoever, E. J. Brill Publisher, Leiden, Netherlands, 1959, pp. 17-18. Note: The author’s quote from the Mishnah is taken from *The Mishnah*, The Fifth Division: Holy Things, *Menahot* 10:3.

times in order to shame the Boethusians because of an apparent disagreement over which *day* to begin the count to Pentecost. I would like to propose that this “Boethusian-shaming ceremony” had nothing to do with the *day* on which to begin the count, but rather which *time of day* to begin it. Notice that the reason stated in the Mishnah is, “...the Boethusians who used to say “**The omer may not be reaped at the close of a festival day.**” This disagreement had nothing to do with the *day* on which to begin the count, but rather the *time of day* on which to begin it. The Pharisees believed it should begin at the close of the festival day; the Boethusians were apparently persuaded that it should begin at a different time of day, whether it be at the beginning portion or at midday. Please notice that there is nothing in this Mishnaic account suggesting that the argument was over whether to begin the count on the morrow after the weekly Sabbath versus the morrow after the festival Sabbath. The disagreement was over the *time of day*, not over one day versus another day.

As outlined above, unless I can be shown otherwise, I am persuaded that there is no historical support for an ancient debate between the Pharisees and Boethusians (Sadducees) over the *day* on which to begin the count to Pentecost. Adding to the odd nature of this question is the fact that the only historical evidence offered in support of the claim that there *was* such a controversy is taken from the Sadducees’ adversaries, i.e., *hostile witnesses*. But please do not take my word for it; if you can find an actual ironclad ancient historical record of a disagreement between the Pharisees and Sadducees over the *day* on which to begin the count to Pentecost, please let me know! Moreover, if you can locate an historical record validating that the alleged Sadducean understanding was actually practiced and observed in the temple, please let me know. I would also like to know the approximate years during which such a practice can be validated.

Room for Speculation

As mentioned previously, the Septuagint (the LXX version) is the Greek translation of the Hebrew that was done in the 3rd century B.C.E. I also mentioned that it is the Septuagint version that the first-century believers used and quoted from most frequently, as evidenced by the Scripture quotations found in the *Brit Chadashah* (the New Testament). Many scholars are open to the possibility that the Septuagint, although it was obviously translated from a Hebrew text, was not necessarily translated from the same text as the Masoretic Text.¹⁶ Many possibilities exist, all of which are theories, as the parent text from which the LXX was translated is certainly lost at this time. My wife and I often do Torah readings while comparing the Masoretic Text with the Septuagint, and in many cases, when there is a translation discrepancy, the Septuagint reading makes the most sense and in some instances it even *corrects* the Masoretic Text’s reading. I would like to cite one example to illustrate this point. In Leviticus chapter 13, we read about the skin discolorations the priest was to look for in determining whether or not his patient was leprous. In verses 29-30, the priest was instructed to examine the individual to see if the sore is deeper than the skin, plus if it had *yellowish* hair. If so, then the person was to be declared “unclean.” The concern has to do with the color and *yellowish* is not a positive sign. *Blackish* hair, on the other hand, is considered an encouraging sign of healing. Both the Septuagint and the Masoretic Text readings agree on this point. However, the discrepancy occurs in verse 31.

In verse 31 of the Masoretic Text (MT), we are told that if the priest examined the patient and the sore was not beneath the skin, plus the hair in it had not turned *black*, he was to shut him up for seven days as a precaution. We then learn in verse 32 that if, after those seven days, the sore had not spread,

¹⁶ Cf., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 5, published by Doubleday, New York, 1992, article “Septuagint,” section F, p. 1102.

plus the hair was not *yellow*, he was to be shaven, then shut up for an additional seven days. If, after that period of time, it still had not spread, he was to be pronounced “clean.”



In view of the above instructions, one might legitimately ask, “Why the abrupt concern about the *black* hair in verse 31, then readdressing the concern about *yellow* hair in verse 32?” We have already learned from verse 30 that it is the *yellowish* hair that was a deciding factor in determining whether or not a man is unclean. But according to Leviticus 13:31-34 of the MT, the man is considered clean so long as the hair in his sore has not turned *yellowish* or *black*.

According to the Septuagint translation of Leviticus 13:31, the concern is not over *black* hair at all. We read that so long as the sore is not beneath the skin, plus there is no *yellowish* hair in it, the patient is shut up for seven days, then reexamined. If nothing has changed, i.e., the sore has not spread, he is shaved and shut up for an additional seven days as a precaution. If there is still no change, he is then pronounced “clean.” As we can see, the Septuagint only addresses the concern over whether or not the hair in the sore has turned *yellow*.

For comparison purposes, we are displaying a side-by-side English translation from both the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint reading of Leviticus 13:31:

Masoretic Text (*King James Version*)

³¹ And if the priest look on the plague of the scall, and, behold, it *be* not in sight deeper than the skin, and *that there is* no **black** hair in it; then the priest shall shut up *him that hath* the plague of the scall seven days.

Septuagint (*translated by Sir Lancelot C.L. Brenton*)

³¹ And if the priest should see the plague of the scurf, and behold, the appearance of it be not beneath the skin, and there is no **yellowish** hair in it, then the priest shall set apart *him that has* the plague of the scurf seven days.

Sealing the matter that *black* hair was not the original concern of the author of Lev. 13:31 lies in the fact that, according to verse 37, black hair is the sign that the sore has healed. We suggest reading Leviticus 13:1-37 in its full context, paying special attention to the “color discrepancy” that exists between the MT and the Septuagint in verse 31. When the word translated “black” in verse 31 of the MT is changed to “yellow,” the reading makes more sense. C. F. Keil, in *Commentary on the Old Testament*, recognized the problem posed by the reading of the Masoretic Text:

In **שֹׁהַר אֵינּוֹ** (v. 31) there is certainly an error of the text: either שֹׁהַר [the Hebrew word for “black”] must be retained and אֵין [the Hebrew expression translated “there is no”] dropped, or שֹׁהַר must be altered into צָהָב [the Hebrew word for “yellow”], according to verse 37. The latter is probably the better of the two.¹⁷

In other words, C. F. Keil states that he believes a better translation of Lev. 13:31 would have the word “yellow” instead of the word “black.” I’m not sure if he was even aware of the fact that this is precisely how the Septuagint translation renders this verse, as he made no mention of the Septuagint’s translation.

¹⁷ From *Commentary on the Old Testament*, by C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, Vol. 1, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 2001, p. 574. Originally published by T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1866-91.

I would rather not make this into a Septuagint vs. Hebrew debate, but ultimately, the factors presented in this study are what I was faced with when making my decision of which translation of Leviticus 23:11-16 best represents the will of the Father. If there is a glaring error in the Hebrew text of Leviticus 13:31, did other errors creep in as well — such as Leviticus 23:15? How can we know for sure? In the scribe’s translation of Leviticus 23:15, did he unintentionally (or purposefully) render the original word *Shavuot* (שבועת) as *Shabbatot* (שבתות)? We may never know. In the above scenario, the Greek text of the LXX clearly corrects the Hebrew text of Lev. 13:31. But how is this possible if the Hebrew text pre-dates the Greek text? Answering that question requires considerable research into the history of Judaism dating back to the destruction of the first temple. Please bear in mind that, unlike today, there was not a “Bible in every home” and according to the apocryphal book of 2 Esdras 14:21, the few books of the law in existence at that time had been burned. According to this same passage in 2 Esdras, the Almighty gave Esdras (Ezra) understanding and he dictated the words of the law to five scribes. If we fast-forward approximately 350 years to the time of Antiochus Epiphanes’ reign of terror on Judaism, at which time 80,000 Jews were massacred within the space of three days (II Maccabees 5:14), we learn that those who survived were forbidden to study Torah. Were any copies of the Hebrew Torah preserved? Yes, but the oldest Hebrew manuscripts are those found among the Dead Sea Scrolls and regrettably, none of the Dead Sea Scrolls that we are aware of include the text of Leviticus 23:11-16. Even if a pre-first-century text should be found that agrees with the Masoretic Text, this still would not prove or validate what was in the original text; all we would have is the same dilemma we are faced with today: Why did Judaism count seven *weeks* from the morrow after the *Festival Sabbath* when the Hebrew text says to count seven *sabbaths*? Why did they go with the instruction found in the Greek Septuagint text over and above the apparent instruction found in the Hebrew text?

I’m not saying the copies of the Septuagint available to us today are perfect. One of the most glaring concerns involves dating errors.¹⁸ Nevertheless, as previously mentioned, during our Torah readings I occasionally read from the Septuagint version while other participants read from various translations of the Hebrew Masoretic text, including the King James Version. It is amazing the number of times in which the LXX corrects the Hebrew Masoretic text. The above-cited example from Leviticus chapter 13 is just one of the more noteworthy instances.

When I consider all the instances in which the LXX corrects the extant Hebrew text, I am compelled to consider the possibility that the Hebrew text currently available to us may actually be a translation from a Greek text that was itself a translation from a more original Hebrew text, which in turn was actually more in line with the Septuagint when it comes to counting to Pentecost. Speculation? Of course. But is it possible? Let’s just say that scholarship recognizes the possibility and it is certainly something worthy of our consideration. In the meantime, the research I have done to this point validates believing that the early believers, Pharisees and Sadducees alike, used the instructions from the LXX to influence how they counted to Pentecost. Their practice and belief, in stark contrast to some articles we have read on this subject, was to begin the count on the morrow after the *Festival Sabbath* – a method that certainly did not meet any rejection from the Messiah, nor from the Apostle Paul, whose only rejection of his former Pharisaic lifestyle was that of recognizing Yeshua as the Son of Yahweh – the promised Messiah.

¹⁸ Update as of 11/07/2020: Although I’m still not about to claim the Septuagint is perfect, the dating concerns I had when I originally composed this study in 2017 have since been resolved. In fact, a claim made against the Masoretic Text is that if you base the timing of world events on its chronology, the pyramids would have been built *before* the Flood, an impossibility with the cataclysmic Flood as described in Scripture. This dating concern is resolved by the Septuagint text. I cover this more extensively in an online article titled “[Evolutionist Exposes Critical Flaw in Hebrew Bible.](#)”

Messiah the Firstfruits

Another argument sometimes used in support of the belief that the *omer* was waved on the morrow after the weekly Sabbath comes from John 20:1-18. The *King James Version's* reading of verse 17 indicates that Yeshua told Mary not to touch Him because He had not ascended to the Father, suggesting that His being touched would somehow defile Him before presenting Himself to the Father. Regrettably, the *King James Version* translators offered a poor translation of the Greek verb *aptomai*, which is more correctly translated “(do not) cling to me.” Those who promote this belief are persuaded that the reason Yeshua couldn't be touched is because He needed to present Himself to the Father as an undefiled fulfillment of the Wave Sheaf Offering and being touched by a flesh and blood being would somehow defile Him, ruining the process. Of course, if Yeshua truly didn't want to be touched, He could have easily hidden Himself from any and all life forms! It is worthy of note that Matthew records this same incident, but the women “held Him by the feet” (Matt. 28:9), obviously touching Him, and Yeshua offered no rebuke for their actions. Adding to the confusion of this interpretation is the fact that the Apostle John, who typically offered explanations of how Yeshua on various occasions fulfilled Scripture¹⁹, made no mention that this account fulfilled the Wave Sheaf Offering. Gleaning such an understanding of this passage introduces an interpretation that, as it turns out, is not the only one. When a certain passage of the Bible may be interpreted in more than one way, we need to be very careful about using our interpretation as a key validation “proving” our doctrinal view. What's more, if Yeshua did indeed ascend to the Father, then return again to present Himself to His disciples later that same day (John 20:19), then wouldn't that have been His “Second Coming” and His future return must now be regarded as the “Third Coming”?

Granted, Yeshua is the firstfruits of them that slept (I Cor. 15:20, 23). However, He is not alone because according to Revelation 14:4, the righteous saints are also regarded as the firstfruits unto Yahweh and to the Lamb. In our attempts to find the fulfillment of the Wave Sheaf Offering, we need to balance our reasoning with the fact that the Wave Sheaf Offering represents, not one, but *many* grains, which in turn means that this offering will be “fully fulfilled” in the resurrection by the redeemed saints. Yeshua is the Lamb; we are the grain offering that can only be accepted *after* the sacrifice of the perfect Lamb.

Over the years, we've heard and read several attempts to refute counting from the morrow after the *Festival Sabbath* and I feel we've addressed the most challenging ones in this brief paper. I cannot hope to cover everything; nevertheless, I feel I should at least mention the common charge that using the morrow after the *Festival Sabbath* as a starting point will result in Pentecost falling on the same date of the third Scriptural month each year (Sivan 6). The question usually asked is, “Why bother counting if you always end up on the same date each year?” For those who, like modern-day Judaism, go by a fixed calendar, Pentecost will indeed fall on the same day of the month each year (Sivan 6). However, June and I go by a calendar that is based on visual sighting of the crescent moon after sunset and I can personally attest that for seven out of ten years (from 2007 – 2016), my family and I observed Pentecost on a date *other than* Sivan 6. If there had been two witnesses to sighting the moon on May 26, 2017, it would have been eight out of eleven years. That, for us, justifies counting! Regardless of how you choose to count, we hope we can mutually agree that each of us is doing our best to please the Father. By now we should all know that until His Son returns we are not going to see “eye-to-eye” on everything and when to begin the count to Pentecost is one of those issues. Who knows? Maybe Yahweh deliberately left things wide open for this controversy just to see how well His children would deal with it. May we be found dealing with it in love and with mutual respect for each other's views.

¹⁹ Eg., Jn 2:18-22, 8:25-27, John 12:12-16

10/23/2017 (Updated 11/07/2020)

