

## **TEMPLE OF THE SPIRIT**

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### **THE FEAST OF SHAVUOT**

[Leviticus 23:15-22](#); [Deuteronomy 16:9-12](#); [Numbers 28:26-31](#); [Exodus 23:16](#)

Three times a year, all God's people were to appear before him at the place he chose. The Jewish people determined that place to be the Temple in Jerusalem, where God's presence lived among the cherubim in the Holy of Holies. At *Pesach* (Passover), *Shavuot* (Pentecost), and *Sukkot* (Tabernacles), the Jews from around the world who were faithful to Yahweh went to the holy city on pilgrimage. The joyful crowd, speaking the languages of the countries from which they had come, crowded into the city-throngs of people singing, celebrating, making arrangements for their religious obligations, and finding places for their families. The city was alive with the passion and joy that only a religious festival could provide. The modern celebrations of Christmas and Easter pale in comparison to the magnitude of those great religious festivals. Their meaning and ceremony were deeply rooted in the past, but they also provided hope for the future as people were assured of God's continued care for them. It was no accident that those feast days were the times God selected for the great redemptive acts of Jesus, the Jewish Messiah. On the festival of Shavuot, he revealed his presence in a whole new way.

### **THE NAME OF THE FESTIVAL**

This feast had several designations in the Bible. In Hebrew it was called *Shavuot*, meaning "weeks" ([Ex. 34:22](#); [Deut. 16:9-10](#)), from which the English "Feast of Weeks" was derived. This designation was taken from God's command to celebrate "seven full weeks" after the Sabbath of Passover week ([Lev. 23:15](#)), placing the festival in the third month of the religious year, the month Sivan. Greek-speaking Jews referred to the feast as *Pentecoste*, meaning "50 days" ([Acts 2:1](#)), from which the English "Pentecost" was derived. This name was based on God's command that a special offering of new grain was to be made on the fiftieth day after the Passover Sabbath ([Lev. 23:16](#)). It was also called "the day of firstfruits" ([Num. 28:26](#)). (This is to be distinguished from the Feast of Firstfruits, which celebrated the beginning of the barley harvest-[Lev. 23:9-14](#).) This name was based on the offering of new grain and two loaves of bread baked from new grain as thanks for the wheat harvest. The name Feast of Harvest ([Ex. 23:16](#)) was based on the same harvest season.

### **CELEBRATION IN THE TEMPLE**

The people observed Shavuot by bringing gifts to the temple in Jerusalem and presenting them to the priests. An offering of new grain was presented as a gift of thanksgiving, along with two loaves of bread, baked from the finest flour made from new wheat grown in the land of Israel (1). According to tradition, each loaf was about 10 inches wide and about 16 inches long. In addition, a basket of the seven species of the fruit of the land was brought to the Lord by each family ([Deut. 8:8](#)).

Special sacrifices were made on the fiftieth day after Passover Sabbath. These included seven male lambs, one young bull, and two rams ([Lev. 23:18](#)) as burnt offerings. One male goat was offered for a sin offering and two lambs for a fellowship offering. Even the best thank offerings (the grain, the two loaves, and the baskets of the seven species) were affected by sin and required a sin offering seeking atonement and a fellowship offering seeking renewed relationship with God. These symbols and their meaning form the background to the events of the Pentecost on which God sent his Spirit

Following the ceremony of offerings, the Jewish people spent the afternoon and evening in a great festive meal, to which they were to invite the poor. This was both to rejoice in the renewed fellowship with God and to keep God's commandment to provide for the poor. Since true thanksgiving was demonstrated by a generous spirit toward those in need, God commanded the Israelites, "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and the alien" ([Lev. 23:22](#); see also [19:9-10](#)).

These special ceremonies took place after the normal morning sacrifice and worship service in the temple, which began at dawn and ended in midmorning. A great crowd of pilgrims would gather in the Temple courts, filling the massive courtyard, during the morning prayers. As the offerings were presented and the sacrifices were made, portions of the Bible were read. According to Jewish history, those portions were [Exodus 19-20](#) (the story of God's presentation of the Torah - including the Ten Commandments - to Moses on Mount Sinai) and [Ezekiel 1-2](#) (Ezekiel's vision of God appearing in fire and wind). The fact that these activities occurred around 9:00 in the morning had great significance for the celebration the year Jesus died and was raised. As God had met the Israelites on the "mountain of God" ([Ex. 24:13](#)), on Shavuot he met them on the Temple Mount, "the mountain of the Lord" ([Isa. 2:3, 66:20](#)).

## SHAVUOT AND MOUNT SINAI

Sometime before Jesus' birth, a new emphasis was added to the harvest festival of Shavuot. The rabbis determined that this feast was the time when the Law (the Torah, including the Ten Commandments) (2) had been given to Moses on Mount Sinai. Though the Bible does not specify the time of God's appearance to Moses, there are biblical reasons that indicate the rabbis' decision was probably right.

- Shavuot, celebrated 50 days after Passover, is in the month Sivan, the third month. The children of Israel reached Mount Sinai "in the third month" ([Ex. 19:1](#)). Since Passover and Sukkot were linked to the Exodus experience of Israel, it seemed right that the third pilgrim festival must be as well. At the very least, the giving of the Torah occurred in the third month, the month of Shavuot (3).
- Torah taught that "man does not live on bread alone" ([Deut. 8:3](#)), so it was appropriate to celebrate Torah on Shavuot, which emphasized God's gift of bread (the grain harvest symbolized by the two loaves).
- King Asa and the people of Judah assembled for a covenant (Torah) renewal in Jerusalem in the third month, which was the season of Shavuot, making another connection with Torah and the feast of the harvest.

The Essenes of Qumran, though they celebrated Shavuot on a different day than did the temple authorities in Jerusalem, apparently had a covenant renewal celebration that day. The book of Jubilees, written well before Jesus' time, referred specifically to the Torah being given on Shavuot. It is clear that the people of the first century celebrated this feast to thank God for the harvest and to praise him for the gift of Torah, which had been given in that same season. Though it is impossible to know whether the giving of the Law happened on the same day as Shavuot, the Bible clearly puts them in the same season at least. The Jewish people remembered them on the same day-a fact that had startling ramifications for the events of a certain Shavuot in New Testament times.

## A CHRISTIAN SHAVUOT

Jesus returned to heaven 40 days after his resurrection ([Acts 1:3](#)). He told his disciples to return to Jerusalem to wait for the Holy Spirit and the power it would bring. The belief in the Spirit of God was not new for the disciples, for the Old Testament spoke of the *Ruach HaKodesh* (literally the "Holy Wind"), which empowered God's people ([Isa. 63:10-11](#); [Ps. 51:11](#)). The disciples remained faithful as Jews, meeting continually in the courts of the Temple ([Luke 24:50-53](#)). They must have had great expectations for the upcoming Shavuot. After all, Jesus had made this an unusual feast season-he had died on Passover, had been buried on the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and had been raised on the Feast of Firstfruits.

When the day of Pentecost (Shavuot) came, the disciples were together in "one place." (4) Many Christians assume that the place was the Upper Room, where the disciples had been staying. Instead, the evidence indicates that the place was in or near the temple, possibly on the Temple Mount itself. Some scholars believe they were on the great staircase south of the temple, where the pilgrims entered the Temple Mount (probably more than 1 million pilgrims during a feast). Though it is impossible to pinpoint an exact location for these events, there is significant support for placing this Pentecost event in an area of the Temple.

- It was Shavuot. All pilgrims gathered in the temple for the service on this festive and holy day. Certainly, the disciples, who were "continually" in the temple courts ([Luke 24:53](#)), would have been in the temple on that day also.
- Great crowds from everywhere gathered to listen to Peter and the other disciples. Where would great crowds have gathered on a holy feast day at the time of temple service- Clearly, they would have been in the temple somewhere ([Acts 2:6-12](#)).
- The disciples were all in one place. The sound of a great wind filled "the whole house" ([Acts 2:2](#)) where they were. The temple is still called "the house" by Jewish people, referring to God's house. Even in Acts, it is called "the house" ([Acts 7:47](#)) (5).
- Peter declared that it was 9:00 in the morning, the time of the Pentecost service in the temple. Certainly, the crowds, to say nothing of the disciples, would have been in the temple at the time Shavuot ceremonies were conducted. Some believe that 9:00 was the time during which the selected passages were read, describing the appearance of God on Mount Sinai (in thunder, lightning, fire, and smoke) and Ezekiel's vision of his appearance (with the sound of wind and with fire).
- Peter spoke of the tomb of David as being there ([Acts 2:29](#)). The Bible recorded that David was buried in the "City of David" ([1 Kings 2:10](#)), the part of Jerusalem located near the temple Mount.
- Three thousand people were baptized in response to the teaching of the disciples ([Acts 2:41](#)). Near the Southern Stairs, the pilgrim entrance to the Temple Mount, were mikvoth, ritual baths used by the worshipers before they entered the temple grounds. There were not many places in Jerusalem with enough water for that many baptisms. The proximity of these many pools, already believed to symbolize the removal of the uncleanness of sin, is evidence that this location was near the temple.

The events that occurred that Shavuot morning must have exceeded all the disciples' expectations. God's Spirit filled them with power and gave them abilities and gifts they could not have imagined possible. That same Spirit opened the hearts and minds of thousands so the community of Jesus grew from around 100 to more than 3,000 within a few hours. And the 3,000 came from every nation in the world. When they returned to their own cultures, they were eager missionaries who had to spend no time getting to know new cultures or languages. God's plan for the descendants of the survivors of the destruction of Israel ([2 Kings 17](#)) and the captivity of Judah ([2 Chron. 36](#)) had been made thousands of years before. Now here they were, free under the government of Rome to return to Jerusalem and their temple for Shavuot. When they arrived, God acted, and they became the first members of a great community of

people. All Jews knew their Scriptures and the ways of God. At Pentecost they could add the final chapter-the coming of his Messiah.

## THE MEANING OF SHAVUOT FOR CHRISTIANS

No event has been more significant for the ministry of the church than what happened on Shavuot that year. So much has been written over the centuries seeking to explain the meaning and significance of being "filled with the Spirit." We as Christians can learn from the Jewish setting of Shavuot in which these events took place.

There are remarkable parallels between the fulfillment of Pentecost and the events that occurred on Mount Sinai more than 1,200 years earlier. Since the Jews of Jesus' day believed that Pentecost celebrated the gift of Torah to Moses, these parallels would have been powerful to those Jewish believers. Note the following:

- Both events occurred on mountains known as "the mountain of God" ([Ex. 24:13](#); [Isa. 2:3](#)).
- Both involved similar sounds and symbols, such as wind, fire, and voices ([Ex. 19:16-19](#); [Acts 2:1-3](#)). Note that the Hebrew for "thunder" (*kolot*) means "voices" ([Acts 2:4](#)). Jewish tradition said that the Israelites heard God speak in 70 languages.
- Both events involved the presence of God ([Ex. 19:18,20](#); [Acts 2:4](#)).
- About 3,000 people died because of their sin when Moses received the Torah ([Ex. 32:28](#)). About 3,000 people believed (were born again into new life) when the Spirit came ([Acts 2:41](#)) (6).
- At Mount Sinai, God wrote his revelation on stone tablets ([Ex. 31:18](#)). On the fulfillment of Pentecost, God wrote his law on people's hearts as he had promised He would ([2 Cor. 3:3](#); [Jer. 31:33](#)).
- *Torah* means "teaching." The Spirit, given on Shavuot, also became the "Teacher" of the new community of Jesus' followers ([John 14:26](#)) (7)

These parallels are amazing evidence of God's careful planning, ensuring that the coming of the Spirit occurred in a context in which it was understood. The followers of Jesus were to be God's community. Their teacher, applying Torah in light of Jesus' work, was to be the Spirit of God. When the Spirit applies God's teaching to the hearts of people, there will always be life. Shavuot for the believers was as foundational and formative as Sinai had been for God's congregation, Israel. As Christians, we are in the tradition of Sinai, but Shavuot declares that God's Spirit brings us life.

The fulfillment of Pentecost provided another image that explains the Spirit's work. As noted above, Shavuot was the feast that celebrated the end of the wheat harvest. Jesus had frequently talked of the "harvest" of people who were to join his community ([Matt. 9:37-38, 13:24-29, 36-43](#); [Luke 10:1-2](#); [John 4:34-38](#)). On Shavuot, the day of celebrating the harvest, his promise came true. Thousands believed and were brought to God (probably in the temple).

There is another image of Shavuot that can help us understand the meaning of the events that year. God's presence had always been symbolized in the temple since Solomon had built the First Temple. That was God's way of living among his people.

- [Exodus 25:17-22, 40:34-38](#). God had agreed to meet his people on the cover of the ark. The ark was placed in the Tabernacle, where God's presence was symbolized by cloud and fire.
- [2 Chronicles 5:1-14, 7:1-3](#). The ark and God's presence, symbolized by fire, moved into the temple.
- [Ezekiel 1:4-28](#). Ezekiel's vision of God's presence in the temple included fire and wind.

- [Acts 2:1-3](#). The Spirit of God came to "the house" where the disciples were. God's presence was symbolized by wind and fire.

The symbolism seems clear. God's presence was in the temple. It had been accessible to the people only through the high priest once a year ([Heb. 9:25](#)). When Jesus died, the veil that blocked the people's access to God was ripped ([Matt. 27:51](#)), showing that through Jesus' blood, God can be approached at any time, by anyone.

On Pentecost, God moved out of "the house" (temple) where he had revealed himself and moved into a new temple-the community of the followers of Jesus ([1 Cor. 3:16-17, 6:19](#)). They became God's new dwelling, his temple.

The implications of this change are staggering. As the temple had demonstrated God's presence to the world, the Christian community must demonstrate God's presence to our hurting world. We must bring his love, his truth, and his redemption to our culture, our communities, and our families. If the people around us are to see and know God, they will see him through us. We have received the power to be his witnesses ([Acts 1:8](#)).

It is hard to comprehend why God would choose flawed human beings to be his temple, representing his presence. Of course, it is not easy to understand why God would dwell in a temple made with human hands, either ([2 Chron. 2:6](#)). It is the infinite wisdom of God that led him to choose to be present in our world through his people.

The question we must face is simple: How well do we represent God's presence- his love- His healing touch- If we believe in his Son, we have been empowered. Now we must be faithful as the Spirit writes his Torah (Law) on our hearts so that the world may know that he is God.

## CONCLUSION

A final connection to the Jewish festival of Shavuot concerns the care for the poor. The feast provided opportunity for the people to give thanks to God and to bring gifts, expressing this gratitude. But true thankfulness involves not only thanking God the provider, but also sharing with others. In God's original instruction for this feast, he concluded by commanding the farmers to leave some of their crops in the field so the poor could harvest with dignity and also experience God's provision ([Lev. 19:9-10; 23:22](#)). In a sense, God was saying, "Don't come to say thanks to me if you have no concern for those in need."

If the New Testament Pentecost is to be understood on the basis of the Old Testament feast of Shavuot, fulfillment must include concern for those in need. Many of the gifts of the Spirit described by Paul ([Gal. 5:16-26](#)) involve concern for others. But the clearest sign that the Spirit's coming was a fulfillment of the spirit of Shavuot is found in the event itself. The early believers, who were filled with the Spirit, held everything in common and shared with everyone who had need. This was a true Pentecost. As the new temple of God's presence, these people could not help but be concerned for others, who learned of God and his love through their acts of generosity.

Christians today are called to the same mission. Jesus' community and its members are his temple, his presence in our world. The Spirit teaches us (and others through us) that God is alive and real. We can share his love and his ways with others so they can know him, too. People in need become the litmus test of the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. If we claim to have experienced Shavuot but have no

concern for others, we are wrong. The Spirit leads his people to bring the presence and power of God to bear on all who need his healing, caring, correcting touch.

## NOTES

1. The Mishnah (Menahoth 11:4) indicates that the loaves were seven handbreadths long and four wide. These loaves had protrusions of dough in each corner to represent the horns, or protrusions, on the corners of the altar.
2. *Torah* means "teaching," not "law" in the sense that Christians might think. This designation stressed a vibrant message for life, for it was to be continually taught and applied to all situations. Though it did provide "laws," or rules for life, it was not simply an organized collection of rules. It was much more-it was life itself.
3. *Passover* commemorated the deliverance the Israelites experienced when they became a nation. *Sukkot* celebrated the end of the 40 years of wandering, which resulted in the possession of the land God had promised. *Shavuot* celebrated the covenant God had made with Israel, which provided the life his people were to live.
4. The story is told in [Acts 2](#).
5. The Old Testament frequently used this designation for the temple. See [Ezek. 40:5, 42:15, 43:10](#); [2 Chron. 3:4, 5:7, 6:9, 7:1, 7:3](#). See the King James Version, which translated the Hebrew as "house" rather than "temple," the structure referred to as "the house" or "the house of the Lord."
6. Paul spoke of the comparison between the Torah for Israel and the Spirit for the church. He pointed out that the letter kills, but the Spirit (which did not negate Torah) brings life as the Torah is written on the heart ([2 Cor. 3:3-6](#)).
7. I am indebted to David Stern for this point. His work *Jewish New Testament Commentary* is an excellent study of the Jewish context of the New Testament. His treatment of [Acts 2](#) is exceptional in providing understanding of Shavuot as it was described in the New Testament.