



Joseph and the Wave Sheaf

by Tim Kelley

The Wave Sheaf offering is one of YHVH's moedim (festivals) listed in Leviticus 23. For over 2000 years, there's been an ongoing debate as to when it is to be observed. A lot rides on having a correct understanding of this very special day, though in reality, it has never been a "deal breaker" in regards to a person's salvation or his place in the kingdom. There are many of the "non-deal breakers" in the Bible. For instance, another part of Leviticus 23 tells us (in regards to the Feast of Tabernacles, or in Hebrew - "Sukkot") to –

^{NKJ} **Leviticus 23:40** ' . . . take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of beautiful trees, branches of palm trees, the boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God for seven days.

Now this seems pretty straight forward . . . take these various plant species and rejoice with them. But how are we to "rejoice" with them? The tradition among the ancient Jews was to cut them into three-foot long branches, bind them together, and dance with them – waving them to and fro. But according to Ezra, we are to do something else with them. He said -

^{ESV} **Nehemiah 8:15** . . . "Go out to the hills and bring branches of olive, wild olive, myrtle, palm, and other leafy trees to make booths, as it is written."

Ezra's understanding was that we were to take not four, but at least five species and build booths out of them . . . and he stated that it was "written" that way, but when you study the text of the Torah, it never specifically states that you were to build booths (sukkah) with them, and certainly not with five species. But that's not all . . .

The scripture also said to "take for yourselves on the first day". This seems to indicate that on the first day you were to cut these various species, and if Ezra is correct, you are to build your sukkah on the first day, but the first day of Sukkot is a "high day" – a Sabbath – a day that work is not permitted. Is building a Sukkah work? And if so, is it to be done on the Sabbath or before the Sabbath?

From this example we see that Leviticus 23 lists at least two commandments that leave one to ask the question "What does God mean by that?" These are just a couple of examples of where YHVH has concealed the true understanding of His mitvot (commandments) in one way or another, and I believe He did it for a number of reasons. First – He wanted us to always be searching for the truth, never thinking we've got it all figured out. After all –

^{NKJ} **Proverbs 25:2** *It is the glory of God to conceal a matter, But the glory of kings is to search out a matter.*

If God had made everything perfectly clear, we would read the Bible through one time, note all the commandments, then put it on a shelf. But that's not what He wants. He wants our nose in His word, striving to learn more about Him.

Another reason He conceals His desire to some degree is to make us realize that we don't have all the answers. If we did, we would have no excuse, but because we know we don't clearly understand everything, we also know that we're dependant on His mercy when we err in understanding.

So with that said, I want to give my understanding of this often overlooked ceremony that takes place during the spring festival of Hag haMatza – the Days of Unleavened Bread. In this study, I'll explain:

- The importance of the sheaves and the barley

Joseph and the Wave Sheaf

- How the wave sheaf offering took place
- The timing issues and my understanding of what YHWH presented through Moses
- The Messianic significance of this ceremony.

Let's begin by looking at what we can glean from the Leviticus 23 passage –

^{ESV} **Leviticus 23:9-14** And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ¹⁰ "Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you come into the land that I give you and reap its harvest, you shall bring the sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest to the priest, ¹¹ and he shall wave the sheaf before the LORD, so that you may be accepted. On the day after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it. ¹² And on the day when you wave the sheaf, you shall offer a male lamb a year old without blemish as a burnt offering to the LORD. ¹³ And the grain offering with it shall be two tenths of an ephah¹ of fine flour mixed with oil, a food offering to the LORD with a pleasing aroma, and the drink offering with it shall be of wine, a fourth of a hin.² ¹⁴ And you shall eat neither bread nor grain parched or fresh until this same day, until you have brought the offering of your God: it is a statute forever throughout your generations in all your dwellings.

As you can see, the word “feast” is not in this passage. Why? Because the Wave Sheaf offering is not a feast, but is instead a ceremony that takes place during the 7-day festival of Hag haMatza which is traditionally called “Passover”. According to the popular web site “Hebrew4Christians”, it should be called “Kashit Retzir” or “the Beginning of the Harvest”.¹ I believe this is correct because the festival is not about the *firstfruits* per se. Instead, it's about the first of the firstfruits.

To gain a better understanding, it's important to note that in the middle east, the barley was the first crop to become ripe each year . . . it was the “firstfruits” of each year's harvest. From those *firstfruits* - that *first* harvest - a small amount had to be offered to God before any of the harvest could be consumed.

There are a number of points in this passage that we'll cover, but for right now let's focus on the term

“sheaf”. In the text, the Hebrew word for “sheaf” is “omer” (עֹמֶר – Strong's 6016) which according to scripture is a *dry measure of grain*. Because of that understanding, the Jews refer to this ceremony as the “wave omer offering”. But the word “omer” doesn't always mean “a dry measure of grain”. Of the 14 times it's used in the scripture, only 4 times does it fit that definition, and then only in regards to the manna that came from heaven. All other times, it's clearly refers to a sheaf of grain. For example, Moses instructs the Israelites to take care of the poor by not harvesting the corners of their fields, thus leaving a portion from which the poor could “glean”.

^{NKJ} **Deuteronomy 24:19** " When you reap your harvest in your field, and forget a sheaf (omer) in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.

This is the meaning by which the word “omer” is most often used, and thus when Moses gave the instructions to the Israelites, the concept of a sheaf would have likely reminded them of a very special sheaf that they had just a year ago made a side trip to gather themselves. That, of course, was Joseph, or better – the bones of Joseph. Let's recall the story of Joseph, which of course, began with a dream.

Joseph was the second youngest son of Jacob, yet he was the one that was most favored by his father. This caused friction in the family – especially after Joseph had a dream which he shared with his brothers. Here's what Joseph said –

^{ESV} **Genesis 37:7** Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf."

¹ http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Holidays/Spring_Holidays/First_Fruits/first_fruits.html

Joseph and the Wave Sheaf

You might think that the brothers would question who the sheaves represented, but they didn't . . . they clearly understood the meaning and responded –

^{ESV} **Genesis 37:8** . . . "Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?" . . .

Yes – they understood that Joseph's sheaf represented Joseph, and the other sheaves represented them. And what's more, they clearly saw that the dream implied that Joseph would rule over them. So the first chance they had, they decided to kill the 'sheaf' of Joseph and get rid of him.

^{ESV} **Genesis 37:20** Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams."

As we know, Joseph didn't die, but for all practical purposes, he was dead to them.² He was placed in the ground, left to die, and probably would have died if it had not been for a band of Midianite traders passing by. Never-the-less, he was forever out of their lives . . . at least that's what they thought.

Joseph's "death" took place so that one day he would rise to prominence and become the leader of Egypt – second only to Pharaoh himself. As the leader of Egypt, Joseph became the savior of his family. It was only after this "death" that his brothers accepted him.

Thus in this story, the many sheaves represent Israel, and the one sheaf represents Israel's savior – which in this case is Joseph.

In the middle east, the grain that becomes ripe during the spring festival season is barley. Barley is a grass that grows wild. In its wild form, it has brittle ears of grain that break off easily when the wind blows or if an animal brushes up against it. Because of its high nutritional value, it was "domesticated" over time in order to be harvested. This was accomplished by gathering ears of grain that were less brittle and replanting those in a field. Over a period of time, those less-brittle heads of grain could be harvested since the "seed" remained intact.³ Thus barley became a staple of life in the middle east.

Because domestic barley no longer "replanted" itself in the natural way (by wind or animal movement), it had to be planted in the ground by hand, but as a result of this hand planting, it would produce a field of grain that could be harvested. Thus we have a picture of grain dying (i.e. being planted in the earth) and being resurrected, and this is the picture Yeshua was trying to present to

Thus we have the statement by Yeshua –

^{ESV} **John 12:24** Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

Thus we have a picture of the barley dying (i.e. being planted in the earth) and later being resurrected in order to be a part of the harvest. Going back to the story of Joseph, he was the sheaf of barley (or wheat) that was planted into the ground (the pit) and was later resurrected in order to produce much fruit. His brothers were also sheaves of grain, but they could only produce fruit after they accepted their brother.

How was the wave sheaf offering performed? The only record of the details that I'm aware of are found in the Babylonian Talmud. It describes the process as:⁴

- After the Sabbath⁵ ends, the priests would go out into a field of ripe barley and cut a pre-determined amount of barley, bind it together into a sheaves, and bring it to the Temple.
- They would roast the barley the grind it into very fine flour

² Gen. 42:38; 44:20

³ <http://archaeology.about.com/od/domestications/g/barley.htm>

⁴ https://www.templeinstitute.org/the_omer_offering.htm

⁵ According to the Talmud, this would be Nisan 15

Joseph and the Wave Sheaf

- They would sift the flour through 13 different sieves until it was so fine it would not stick to their arms.
- They would collect an omer (2 quarts) of the flour, mix it with oil, and wave it over their head toward heaven.
- After it was waved, it would be baked into bread, part of which was given to the priests and part of which was burned on the altar.
- The additional sacrifices were performed.

Because of the additional sacrifices, and because the byproduct of the offering (the bread) was to be given to the priests, the wave sheaf offering is considered to be “Temple dependant”, and thus cannot be performed today.

Never-the-less, the timing of the festival and the underlying purpose of the festival are still very important because the day on which the ceremony is performed has a bearing on when the summer festival of Shavuot is observed. Herein lies the debate.

In the Leviticus passage it simply states that –

^{ESV} **Leviticus 23:11** . . . on the day after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it

Being that the wave sheaf offering pertained to all Israel, it would seem correct that it would be offered as part of the spring pilgrimage festival. During the festival you would always have at least one weekly Sabbath and one yearly Sabbath, the first or last day of unleavened bread.⁶ The question is whether the Sabbath mentioned in verse 11 is the weekly Sabbath or the first day of the festival. To answer that question, we need to look at the Hebrew.

We’ll start by noticing that YHVH listed all the yearly festivals as well as the weekly Sabbath in one place – Leviticus 23. This is important, because God defines the word Sabbath right here, just to make sure we know what He’s talking about.

^{NKJ} **Leviticus 23:3** ‘ Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day *is* a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation. You shall do no work *on it*; it *is* the Sabbath of the LORD in all your dwellings.

In this verse, God clearly shows that the Sabbath is the seventh day, and that the Sabbath and the six preceding days of work make one week. The Hebrew word that’s used for *Sabbath* in the phrase *Sabbath of the Lord* is *Shabbat* (שַׁבָּת - Strong’s 7676). It’s the feminine noun form of the verb *Shabbat* (שָׁבַת - Strong’s 7673). God is very specific in regards to what he’s saying. He’s not indicating that this is just another Sabbath. He’s being very clear, the day that the Hebrew word שַׁבָּת goes with is the seventh day Sabbath. Notice the vowel points⁷. Under the *shin* (שׁ) is a short horizontal line. It’s a vowel point called a *patah* and it gives the *shin* an *ahh* sound as in *aqua*. The next letter is a *beit* (בּ). Under it is a *kamatz*, which like the *patah*, gives the *ahh* sound as well. We see this particular spelling of Sabbath a number of places in the Torah, and in every place but two, it refers to the seventh-day Sabbath.

The two places it does not refer to the weekly Sabbath is when it refers to the seventh year of a seven year cycle that God calls the *Land Sabbath*. Though this is not the weekly Sabbath, it is indeed a year of

⁶ Occasionally one of these days would fall on a weekly Sabbath

⁷ Vowel points were not a part of the original Hebrew text, but were added by the Masorites at about 1000CE in order to preserve the pronunciation of many Hebrew so that the meaning of words with the name consonantal structure could be determined. The same holds true today in English, the English consonants “rd” can indicate a color, something that is done with the eyes

Joseph and the Wave Sheaf

rest. It's certainly not a cycle where the day or year of rest would be something other than the day or year that ends the cycle. Thus Shabbat spelled like this (שַׁבָּת) always refers to the seventh day of a seven day cycle, or the seventh year rest at the end of a seven year cycle..lit never refers to a cycle that ends on any other day of the week, nor is it used to describe just any period of seven days.⁸

Now that we've defined the meaning of the Hebrew word שַׁבָּת (Shabbat), and have determined that it never refers to any day of the week other than the weekly Sabbath, let's move on down to verse 9.

^{NKJ} **Leviticus 23:9-11** And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ¹⁰ "Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: 'When you come into the land which I give to you, and reap its harvest, then you shall bring a sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest to the priest. ¹¹ 'He shall wave the sheaf before the LORD, to be accepted on your behalf; on the day after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it.

According to the text, the grain must be gathered and refined, then on the day after the שַׁבָּת (Shabbat), it is to be waved. The spelling of Shabbat in this passage is exactly the same as in the passages describing the weekly Sabbath with the exception that the Hebrew definite article *hey* (ה) precedes the other Hebrew letters thus emphatically stating that the Shabbat being referred to is "the" Shabbat (הַשַּׁבָּת) – the weekly Sabbath.

Now think about it . . . unless the word has changed its meaning from what it was just nine verses earlier (vs. 3), it's still the seventh day Sabbath.

The Jews claim that the word did change its meaning and now means the first day of unleavened bread, which is a day of rest, but it is not a Shabbat. Instead, it's called a "yom ha'rishone" (יום הראשון) or *first day* (Lev. 23:7). In fact, the scripture indicates that on this day (First Day of Unleavened Bread) some types of work are permitted whereas on Shabbat, no work is permitted.

To further clarify when the ceremony is observed, we can look at the passages discussing the 50 day count down to the day of Shavuot or Pentecost.

^{NKJ} **Leviticus 23:15** ' And you shall count for yourselves from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering: seven Sabbaths shall be completed.

The word *Sabbath* appears twice in this passage. The first occurrence defines when you are to begin the count, which in this case is the day after the Sabbath. Here again the Hebrew word is *haShabbat* (הַשַּׁבָּת) – the Sabbath, and the vowel pointing is the same as in verse 11. Unless the meaning of the word has changed, it's still the weekly Sabbath

The second occurrence is where we're shown that you are to count *seven Sabbaths*. The Hebrew word here is *shabbatot* (שַׁבָּתוֹת) which is simply the feminine-plural form of the Hebrew word Shabbat⁹. The root spelling has not changed, only the suffix. So God is simply telling us to count seven complete seven day cycles, all of which end on the Sabbath, which, of course, is the normal way of counting the seven day cycle.

Verse 16 repeats it again, and again it uses the Hebrew word שַׁבָּת (Shabbat) with the "patah-kamatz" vowel pointing.

⁸ FYI – this holds true throughout the Tnakh

⁹ The Shabbat is considered to be a feminine word and is often called in Jewish writings "Queen Shabbat"

Joseph and the Wave Sheaf

^{NKJ} **Leviticus 23:16** 'Count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath; then you shall offer a new grain offering to the LORD.

In order to support the view that the Shabbat in verse 11 is actually the First Day of Unleavened Bread, one would have to believe that שֶׁבֻעַת changed its meaning from being the weekly Sabbath in vs. 3 to being the First Day of Unleavened Bread in vs. 11, then to being the word “weeks” in the second part of verse 15 and in verse 16 . . . three changes in meaning in 13 verses. What’s more, there is a perfectly good word that God could have used for “weeks”, and that’s “Shavuot”!¹⁰

To be fair, there are a couple of issues that crop up when we go outside the Hebrew Scriptures while trying to come to a clear conclusion.

- The LXX sometimes substitutes the Greek word for first in passages where the Hebrew text says Shabbat.
- During the first century, the New Testament writers use the word “sabbaton” where the implied meaning is “week”, even though there is a perfectly good Greek word for week. But in each of these cases, the idea of the omer count would fit the context of what they were saying.

Never-the-less, the Hebrew is quite clear. Thus, I believe that YHVH’s instructions to Moses are quite clear . . . the Wave Sheaf was offered on Sunday morning, the morning after the weekly Shabbat.

So how does that affect our understanding of the Messiah? To better understand, we’ll need to understand a very important first century Jewish expectation of the messiah. According to Jewish tradition, there would be two messiahs – Messiah ben Yoseph and Messiah ben David.¹¹ Messiah ben Yoseph would come as a humble servant riding on a donkey, while Messiah ben David would come as a conquering king. They believed that these Messiahs would either come concurrently or come separately, which if the later were to be correct, they could come through the same person but at differing times. This, I believe, is the basis for John the Baptist’s question shortly before he was beheaded.

^{ESV} **Matthew 11:2-3** Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples³ and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

With this question, John was asking whether Yeshua was going to fulfill both messianic expectations or if there would be another messiah? Up to this point, Yeshua had made no moves to restore the kingdom to Israel, thus to John, Yeshua seemed to be fulfilling the role of Messiah ben Joseph, and indeed that’s exactly what He was doing. It was not Yeshua’s role AT THAT TIME to restore the kingdom, but to instead die for the sins of His people. Thus, like Joseph, He would be put into the earth (killed), then be brought out of the earth to become second in command of a great world empire. And just like Joseph’s dream, his brothers would not accept him until after He had died and been resurrected. Thus Yeshua is the sheaf of Joseph in Joseph’s dream.

As was mentioned earlier, Yeshua likened Himself to a seed planted in the ground -

^{ESV} **John 12:24** Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

Yeshua made this statement just a couple of days before He was to be crucified, knowing that He was going to die and be resurrected three days later. Though we don’t know for sure when Yeshua died, the

¹⁰ See Deut. 16:9

¹¹ http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Articles/Mashiach_ben_Yosef/mashiach_ben_yosef.htm and <http://www.menorah.org/tsmbj13.html>

Joseph and the Wave Sheaf

gospels make it quite clear when He was resurrected. All four gospels imply that it was very early on the first day of the week, and three of them imply that it was on the “first of the weeks” – a term that would imply the beginning of the 7-week count to Shavuot (Pentecost). If indeed this was the message they were trying to convey, it shows that they saw a connection between the wave sheaf offering and the Messiah’s resurrection.

For whatever reason, God has clouded our understanding of the timing of the wave sheaf offering and thus the day of Pentecost. What’s more, it was something that was hotly debated during the time Yeshua walked on this earth. He had every opportunity to clear the question up for His followers, but He chose not to, at least it’s not recorded in our Bibles.

Maybe He wanted us to focus our attention not on the timing issue, but on the meaning of the day. It’s my conclusion that the wave sheaf offering looked back to the sheaf of Joseph, the first “savior” of Israel, but has its ultimate fulfillment in Messiah Yeshua – the sheaf that was cut before all the other sheaves and presented before YHVH. Yeshua represents the beginning of the harvest, and Israel is the harvest. We can commemorate this day by celebrating this very important occasion, after all, Paul clearly states that

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 15:17** And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.

Shalom Alechem!