COUNTING TO SHAVUOT

Carrie Kokoska

The time of counting between Firstfruits and Feast of Weeks (Shavuot, Pentecost) has always confused me. Scripture says to count 50 day or seven full weeks and that is about the extent of it. But what is the real significance to this time? Surely there is a meaning, an application, if YHWH asked his people to do it. As I studied Scripture and the historical context I found some interesting things that may help us in understanding and internalizing the command to count these days to Shavuot.

> *And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "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, 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. 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. And the grain offering with it shall be two tenths of an epah 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. 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. You shall count seven full weeks from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering. You shall count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath. Then you shall present a grain offering of new grain to the Lord.*
>
> *Leviticus 23:9-16*

The appointed time of Firstfruits, the time of offering the sheaf of the wave offering, just occurred. From this day, the day of Firstfruits, we are to count 50 days. The English word "sheaf" in these verses is *omer*. It is a unit of measurement or also a referring to a bundle of grain stalks. This is why the Jews refer to this period as the days of the omer or the counting of the omer. In reality we are counting days after the day of the omer offering, not anything else. I had thought that it was somehow connected to counting baskets of barley or something, and that is not commanded in Scripture. Most Jewish teachers say that verbally counting these days fulfills the requirement.

So why are we supposed to count? Scripturally speaking it gives us the exact day for Shavuot, when the wheat firstfruits offering was to be presented. This is never an exact day, such as the first day of the third month, but it moves around. It is counted from Firstfruits, which is also a moving appointed time based off of the weekly Sabbath during Passover. So logistically, we must count in order to find the exact day of the next appointed time.

If the practical point of counting 50 days is to bring us to the next appointed time, what is the spiritual meaning of counting? There almost always is a spiritual meaning, and this is what I really wanted to dig into. In historical times this was the most critical for the agricultural season. In the middle east, these days are sometimes called “the time of mourning” due the extreme stress and agonization over the potential destruction of the maturing grain. Firstfruits had signaled the beginning of the new growth. The first of the barley had been offered, and it signaled that in 50 days the wheat would be matured. But those 50 days were agonizing. It is the end of rainy season in that area and any rain near the end of the wheat maturation could be devastating. The other concern was the hot wind that could occur during this time, called *khamsin*. This word is an Arabic word, which means ”50”. This prematurely dries the wheat before it has become full size, drastically reducing the yielded volume.

Historically, the days of counting are a time of trepidation. Will the life that has begun come to maturity? Not only does Shavuot mark the firstfruit of the wheat harvest but it is a day that commemorates a fulfilled promise of life. What YHWH began with the resurrection of Yeshua on Firstfruit is only the proof that life exits. We then wait in trepidation for 50 days before the firstfruit is fulfilled as the promise of the Spirit.

What is the point today for us to count these 50 days? First, it helps us focus on the upcoming fulfilling of the giving of the Spirit. But also, we are metaphorically living in this in-between stage. We have seen evidence of the promise of new life in Yeshua, the Spirit has been given, but live each day in desperation, struggling to believe that what was promised will be completed. Each day that we count, He succeeds in bringing us closer to the realization of the full promise. Our promise is new and everlasting life with YHWH.

What an incredible time. It is not an appointed time, but a time of intense longing and relying on YHWH to bring us the next phase of the redemption. It is a time to reflect on how precarious our life is without the promise. Without YHWH it would be a time of mourning, being easily tossed and blown by all the trials of life. But with Him, those long days of counting become a clinging to the promise of the future fulfilment of all that YHWH has planned.

In the era to come, the time of tribulation before the day of YHWH, we will need to cling even more to this promise. As we count the 50 days or seven sets of seven, we will need to persevere in the promise that YHWH will fulfil what He has started. Maybe the seven weeks are somehow correlated to the seven bowls poured out. Maybe the symbolism relates to something else, but the fact remains that daily counting on the promises of YHWH will be the only way to persevere. Often 40 in Scripture indicates that a period of time is sufficient. 40 days of rains, 40 days of fasting on the mountain, 40 years in the wilderness. This goes beyond 40. 50 is more than what we can handle on our own. The fear, the trepidation are founded because without YHWH we will not survive the trials of this time. New life is evident; it has been witnessed by the world through Yeshua and the Spirit. Now we persevere in this faith, counting each day by relying on the power of YHWH to complete this new life in us.

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the

gospel. For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Ephesians 1:6-11

There is another aspect for reflection and, interestingly, it relates back to the *omer*. Exodus 16:16-30 gives an account of another *omer*, an *omer* of manna every single day to sustain YHWH's people in the wilderness. If we remember what was commanded on the 6th day, the people were to collect a double portion of manna, a double *omer* so that they could keep Sabbath on the 7th day. Looking forward to Leviticus 23:10, YWHW instructs his people to gather one *omer* of grain (barley) to be waved by the priest. But in verse 13, with the lamb offering, they were to add a grain offering of two tenths of an *ephah* of four with oil. The measurement of an *omer* happens to be one tenth of and *ephah*, which makes two tenths of and *ephah* equal to a double *omer*. So, during Firstfruits, the people were to measure out a double portion, just like the manna in preparation for Sabbath. I think this is related to the counting to Shavuot.

We are told to count 50 days starting on Firtsfruits. An alternate counting is given, in Leviticus 23:15, to count seven full weeks, or seven sets of seven, and then celebrate the following day as Shavuot. Anytime we hear the number seven, several implications come to mind. First, it is the number associated with YHWH; completeness, fullness, the end. Secondly, it reminds us of Sabbath and the time for resting in His provision. And even more so, seeing a duplication or multiple of seven, like seven sets of seven, amplifies this meaning. It may even indicate an infinite or never-ending aspect. It is possible that this time of counting is to remind us of the future eternal Sabbath, resting in the provision and redemption of YHWH. The double *omer* may be a reminder that Firstfruits, and the death and resurrection of the Messiah, is our heavenly provision, our manna, as we count towards the future fullness of that provision and eternal Sabbath. So maybe the Jews are on to something calling it "the counting of the omer". It can be a reminder that YHWH is our provision daily, just like the manna, and that double *omer* is a promise that Sabbath is coming.

One last connection is important to consider when trying to understand counting to Shavuot. This is the year of Jubilee.

"You shall count seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the time of the seven weeks of years shall give you forty-nine years. Then you shall sound the loud trumpet on the tenth day of the seventh month. On the Day of Atonement, you shall sound the trumpet throughout all your land. And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property and each of you shall return to his clan.

Leviticus 25:8-10

Notice the pattern; seven times seven years and declaring the entire fiftieth year the Jubilee. This whole year was a Sabbath in a sense. The land and people are commanded to reset

their lives. Land and property return to original owners, people are to return to their own clans. People are not to sow or reap in this year but collect provision from the land. Interestingly, the beginning of the Year of Jubilee did not begin on the first day of the first month, or even the first day of the seventh month. On the tenth day of the seventh month, which is the Day of Atonement the trumpet should be sounded and liberty proclaimed, thus beginning the year of Jubilee. So, the day of Firstfruit, where Yeshua conquered death and promised the future fulfillment of life for YHWH's people, is the beginning of the seven sets of seven to Shavuot. The Day of Atonement, where Yeshua will ultimately be our covering of righteousness thereby fulfilling the promise of eternal life, is the beginning of the seven sets of seven to Jubilee.

Sadly, over the millennia people have walked away from the instructions of YHWH and lost count of when the Jubilee is to occur. On one hand, the year of Jubilee was to be a time of socio-economical reset that doesn't necessarily affect those outside of the economy of Israel. On the other hand, this time points to the eternal reset; the time when the enslaved people of YHWH are gathered back to his family, all the property that is YHWH's is returned to him and all of creation will rest in the provision of YHWH. How wonderful it is that, though the socio-economical Jubilee has been forgotten and forfeited by Israel, every year we have to opportunity to count in expectation of the spiritual Jubilee of eternal liberty!

As an aside, I discovered that during the 1st century AD the Sadducees and Pharisees disagreed over which sabbath to begin counting from; the weekly Sabbath during unleavened bread or the high Sabbath which was the first day of Unleavened Bread. The Pharisees followed the Oral Torah which explains that this sabbath refers to the high sabbath of Unleavened Bread, while the Sadducees believed it to be the first weekly Sabbath during Unleavened Bread. While this doesn't seem that significant, it is because these differing interpretations can lead to almost a week off in the timing of Shavuot.

Eventually the Pharisees won this debate and it was established that according to rabbinic Judaism, Firstfruits would be celebrated on the day after the high day of Unleavened Bread, essentially the third day of the overall Passover-Unleavened Bread celebration. If this were the case, why would Scripture not tell us on that Firstfruits was to be on the 16th day of the first month? Instead, we have a complicated counting method that connects to a Sabbath disconnected from any date. I think it is more likely that Firstfruits was to be on the day after the weekly Sabbath within the week of Unleavened Bread. The year Yeshua was crucified and resurrected Firstfruits was celebrated on a Sunday, first day of the week. We know this because Yeshua from Scriptural context that calls him the firstfruits.

> *But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead.*
>
> *1 Corinthians 15:20-21*

I wonder if this is the reason the pharisees and Sadducees disagreed on the timing of Firstfruit in the 1st century. Maybe the pharisees wanted to distance themselves from the fact that Yeshua rose on Firstfruit. If they changed the day, it was celebrated it could only occasionally, and circumstantially, be connected with the resurrection. It would illegitimize the resurrection all together. But we know that the timing of these days was deliberate and symbolic. Yeshua is the

Firstfruit of new life, conquering death for eternity. And from this day forward we are literally to count the days of promise until that life is matured and becomes our eternal sustenance.