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God's Firstfruits Harvest

Many Christians celebrate 'Pentecost'.
Here's the little-known origin of the celebration.

by James McBride

Pentecost - or 'Whitsunday' - is generally celebrated as the time for mass baptisms. Dressed in white - hence 'Whit' Sunday - the year's crop of children will flock to church for baptism. Why this day?

On the first Christian Pentecost some three thousand Jews accepted Jesus as their promised Messiah - and were baptized. But it was the events of fifty days earlier which persuaded them to defy the wrath of their friends and family to commit to follow Jesus Christ.

That awesome event was the resurrection of Jesus. Most of them had been in Jerusalem for the Passover when the city was alive with the rumor that Jesus had risen from the dead. They had, perhaps, peered into the empty tomb with its undisturbed grave clothes. They had perhaps asked, *How did Jesus pass through them?* It was the same evidence that had convinced Peter and John.
[Request the free article *The Empty Tomb*]

But the resurrection of Jesus was only another step - though the pivotal one - in the cosmic drama of human salvation.

The Wavesheaf

Let's look at a neglected Bible ceremony which clearly typifies the earth-shattering and world-shaking event of the resurrection. It is known as "*the Wavesheaf Offering*".

During the Days of Unleavened Bread [*ie* the Biblical seven-day spring festival that began with Passover] there was a ceremony which is of vital significance for Christians.

As the weekly Sabbath during the Festival ended, Temple representatives went to a field on the outskirts of Jerusalem and scythed a measure of the first-ripe grain - the '*firstfruits*' of the crop - which had earlier been marked out

by delegates from the Jews' ruling body, the Sanhedrin. The Law stated that it was to be offered in the Temple "*on the morrow after the Sabbath*" (Leviticus 23:11). It was prepared the evening before. In the prescribed manner, the sheaf was "*lifted up*" (waved) before the LORD on the morning of the first day of the week, with the appropriate accompanying sacrifice of a lamb, fine flour and oil - a sweet-smelling offering to God.

[*'The Sabbath*' here - Leviticus 23:11 - is the weekly rest-day, the seventh day of the week, our Saturday, largely. The annual 'high day' - the first holy convocation is not in this text called a 'Sabbath']

Firstfruits

The significance of the firstfruits wavesheaf offering wasn't lost on the early Church of God. The Law stated "*...you shall bring the firstfruits of your harvest to the priest, and he shall wave the sheaf before the Lord*" (Lev 23: 10). This ceremony was traditionally (the text doesn't specifically link the two) carried out during the *Days of Unleavened Bread*, and was the starting point for the significant seven weeks leading to the Feast of Firstfruits - what we call *Pentecost*.

Contrary to what most Christians believe, Jesus was crucified on Wednesday morning, and killed about the time the Jews were to sacrifice the Passover lambs. By the end of the weekly Sabbath he had been in the grave three days and three nights - just as He had predicted (Matt 12: 40).

And around the time of the cutting of the wavesheaf on Saturday evening - Jesus was resurrected!

Paul's famed 'resurrection chapter' (I Corinthians 15) declares: "*But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep*"

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(v.20). Much of the chapter is devoted to the harvest - resurrection theme.

Here, then, embedded within the *Passover* and *Unleavened Bread* observance, is a pattern for calling to mind the astounding events of the last earthly days of Jesus the Messiah. As Passover lambs were being slain in the Temple, Jesus was himself sacrificed. As the Wavesheaf was being cut outside Jerusalem at the end of the weekly Sabbath he was resurrected. And as the priests lifted up (“waved”) the firstfruits offering before the altar on Sunday morning Jesus (perhaps after a night spent in thanksgiving, and intercession for his wayward disciples) ascended to present himself to the Father - the Firstfruits of the dead (see John 20:17 and Matthew 28:9).

Why Pentecost?

So, Jesus fulfilled the typology of the Wavesheaf - the firstfruits of the early grain harvest. Why, then, another seven weeks till Pentecost?

All the offerings and special times that were part of the divinely-revealed religion of ancient Israel had significance for future events - for us. Rooted in that firstfruits offering in spring was another celebration, this time in early summer.

God's instruction was that, depending on the beginning of the early harvest, they were to count fifty days - seven complete weeks - from the day following the Sabbath: “Count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath...and you proclaim on the same day [ie the first day of the week, Sunday] that it is a holy convocation to you. You shall do no customary work on it” (Leviticus 23:15-21).

[Pentecost is the Greek for *fiftieth*. The Hebrew name for this festival is *Feast of Weeks* (Exodus 34:22) and *Day of the Firstfruits* (Numbers 28:26).]

But what did this annual holy day signify?

That first cutting of the sheaf of grain in spring was the beginning of the harvest season. The Feast of Weeks, Pentecost, marked its culmination - a true harvest festival. Bible readers probably pass over some texts related to the Festival without putting them in context.

Firstfruits Harvest

We have noted that Jesus was ‘*the firstfruits*’. But there are others!

Hear James : “*Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth that we might be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures*” (James 1:18).

Paul tells us that Christians “*have the firstfruits of the Spirit*” (Romans 8:23). And in Revelation (*ch* 14:4), John informs us: “*These were redeemed from among men, being firstfruits to God and to the Lamb*”.

In sum, those who ‘follow the Lamb’ are a firstfruits spiritual harvest. The symbolic fifty days from the first of the firstfruits - the resurrected Jesus - until the ‘first resurrection’ (Revelation 20:5) represents the nearly two thousand years since that first Christian Pentecost (Acts 2) until the resurrection of all true Christians at the return of Christ.

There's much more to Pentecost than merely a time for baptism! But baptism - of mature, repentant men and women - is an early and necessary step to being part of the firstfruits harvest of the people of God.

[Request the articles: *Coming to Baptism* and *What Do You Mean Repent?*]

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