

## **Pentecost Revisited: Counting Consistently**

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As many know, 2008 is another of those years in which Passover falls on a weekly Sabbath. As such, it again brings into question when the Wavesheaf was anciently presented before God. Counting fifty days from that event determines when the church should observe Pentecost.

Historically, the Jews disagreed over this matter, so it is not surprising that we find disagreement among today's Christian groups that are serious about observing God's festivals according to His will.

This and next month's article are not intended to cover every facet of this issue, but they will deal with areas that are most critical to the subject and need serious consideration. This article will briefly mention areas in which there is wide agreement—in fact, in some cases virtually universal agreement, whether between the Jews anciently or Christian groups today—before moving on to the issue of consistency.

### **Areas of Agreement**

The event that precipitated the 1974 Worldwide Church of God change from a Monday to a Sunday Pentecost was the discovery that Herbert W. Armstrong had unwittingly used the wrong method of counting. He counted as an English-speaking person would count—exclusively, that is, away from the starting position. He should have used the Hebrew inclusive counting method, that is, beginning with the day assigned for waving the sheaf. When the change was implemented, it produced a Pentecost observance one day earlier, moving it from Monday to Sunday.

Further research discovered that, despite their different opinions on when the count to Pentecost should begin, every Jewish group—whether the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Karaites, Ethiopians, or the later non-Hebrew Samaritans—in dealing with their own language, counted inclusively. This fact provided assurance to the leadership in the Worldwide Church of God that the counting change should be made.

The Church of the Great God agrees that the inclusive counting method is correct. However, we maintain that the count should *always* begin with the day following the weekly Sabbath that *without deviation* falls within the two annual high holy day Sabbaths that mark the beginning and end of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The first day of the count will always be a Sunday, thus the end of the fifty-day count will always be a Sunday.

This establishes a *rule* and *pattern* that are proved by the fact that Jesus—the First of the Firstfruits, the very Being symbolized in the Wavesheaf—perfectly fulfilled the type. He was "waved" before the Father by ascending to heaven on the morning of the first day of the week. This followed His resurrection at the end of the weekly Sabbath during the Feast of Unleavened Bread (John 20:1-17).

This rule does not mean every count will begin within the Feast of Unleavened Bread because every so often, once in eleven years on average, Passover will fall on a weekly Sabbath. This normal

calendar occurrence causes the first day of Unleavened Bread, a high holy day Sabbath, to be on a Sunday. Thus, the last day of Unleavened Bread, another high holy day Sabbath, falls on the weekly Sabbath.

This particular Sabbath—on the last day of Unleavened Bread—is the only weekly Sabbath within the Feast of Unleavened Bread in those years. Thus, to maintain a fixed, consistent, unswerving, unchanging, dependable rule, the count to Pentecost in those years begins the next day, one day outside the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Nothing in Scripture has been found to countermand this rule.

Apart from the Bible, *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Religion*, authored by R.J. Zwi Werblowsky and edited by Geoffrey Wigoder, in the article, "Weeks, Feast of," notes:

The interpretation of the words "on the morrow of the Sabbath" was a subject of controversy between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, the former maintaining that the word Sabbath in this context refers to the first day of Passover (with the result that the Feast of Weeks always fell on the same day of the week as the second day of Passover), while the Sadducees (as the Samaritans, and later the Karaites) maintained that the reference is to the first Sunday after the first day of Passover (according to which the Feast of Weeks would always fall on a Sunday).

A brief explanation may be helpful to understanding this quotation. The Jews call the Feast of Unleavened Bread "Passover." Thus, "the first day of Passover" is really the first day of Unleavened Bread, a high holy day. "The first Sunday after the first day of Passover," by Sadducean reckoning, is exactly the day the Church of the Great God always begins its count to Pentecost. It is the day following the weekly Sabbath that falls within the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

The Sadducees conclusion, like the Church of the Great God's, is consistent in its count to Pentecost regardless of when Passover occurs. It allows for no exceptions to the rule. God is not the author of a confusing set of rules that results when the count begins immediately after Passover ends, which requires an exception to the rule followed in all other years.

Another helpful principle to guide us is that *we should never allow symbolism to override a clear, God-established rule.*

### **Passover on a Weekly Sabbath**

In the last century, Passover fell on a weekly Sabbath less than 13 percent of the time. The conclusion reached by some church of God groups on when to begin the count to Pentecost in these years destroys church unity on this doctrine. A weekly Sabbath Passover causes the next day, a Sunday, to be the first day of Unleavened Bread, a holy day Sabbath. In 1974, the Worldwide Church of God began the practice of starting the count to Pentecost on the Sunday that falls within the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and following Herbert Armstrong's death, several groups have continued to use this method. However, the conclusion to begin counting with this day is wrong in a number of areas.

First, God warns us in Deuteronomy 12:32 and Revelation 22:18-19 neither to add to nor to take away from God's Word. Scripture contains no command or example that the sheaf *must* be waved during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Instead, Leviticus 23:10-11, 15-16 clearly implies that the weekly Sabbath's occurrence *within* the Feast of Unleavened Bread is of primary importance.

Second, Passover, though it occasionally falls on a weekly Sabbath, does not qualify at any time as a weekly Sabbath *within* the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Leviticus 23:5-6 clearly states that "on the fourteenth day of the first month . . . is the Lord's Passover. And on the fifteenth day of the same month is the Feast of Unleavened Bread." That Passover and Unleavened Bread are adjacent to each other is patently true, but they are *separate* festivals with distinctly different teachings. Passover teaches us of the death of our Savior to cover our sins. The Feast of Unleavened Bread instructs us to come out of sin, to overcome and grow from the trials of life. Though related, Passover is not part of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and therefore the Sabbath it infrequently falls on does not qualify as a weekly Sabbath *within* the Feast of Unleavened Bread. To use it is inconsistent with the counting method used in the other 87 percent of years.

Furthermore, Wavesheaf Day is directly associated with Pentecost by the fact that the count to Pentecost begins with it, as well as by their related teachings. Both days involve harvest symbolism. Wavesheaf Day begins the harvest, and Pentecost ends it.

Third, no one has ever found a record of Jews—whether Sadducees, Pharisees, Falashas, Karaites, or Essenes—in all of Jewish history, observing Wavesheaf Day on anything but a common workday. All of these groups began counting with a day following a Sabbath, but none of them ever permitted Wavesheaf Day to be observed on any type of Sabbath. All of these groups could plainly see that Scripture states that Wavesheaf Day falls on the day *after* a Sabbath, never *on* one.

Realizing that their conclusion is weak, some who place Wavesheaf Day on the day following a Sabbath Passover have had to devise a cunning argument for beginning the count with the first day of Unleavened Bread, an annual Sabbath. They conclude that, since Jesus, the First of the Firstfruits, was "waved" for acceptance before the Father following His resurrection within the Feast of Unleavened Bread, every Wavesheaf Day thereafter should conform to it.

However, consider this: Do we observe every Passover on a Wednesday because Jesus was crucified in a year that Passover fell on a Wednesday? No, we do not. Wavesheaf Day and the beginning of the count to Pentecost are, like all other festivals and their ceremonies, observed on the dates and days assigned them by God in Leviticus 23 (see verse 2) and in accordance with calendar rules.

There is no consistency to their argument and practice, but those who believe this reasoning are so insistent that at least one group has declared Passover to be a Day of Unleavened Bread, despite Leviticus 23:5-6 showing that they are two different festivals. Is the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven or eight days long? The question is ridiculous on its face. Exodus 12:15-20; 13:3-7 and Leviticus 23:6-8 all say it lasts for seven days. Adding Passover makes the feast an unscriptural eight days long.

No statement in the Bible says that Wavesheaf Day *must* fall within the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Instead, God uses the one weekly Sabbath falling within the seven days of Unleavened Bread as His marker that the following day begins the count. Thus, the day the count begins—a Sunday—can fall outside the Feast of Unleavened Bread in about 13% of years without destroying the count's spiritual ramifications because it is spiritually connected to Pentecost, not the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

## **The Weekly Sabbath**

Why are we so insistent that the marker God uses for triggering the count is the weekly Sabbath that falls between the two holy days of Unleavened Bread? First, and most importantly, is the fact that

Jesus, the true spiritual Wavesheaf, rose to heaven before God for acceptance on a Sunday morning after the weekly Sabbath during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, following the command in Leviticus 23. The vital element is that the weekly Sabbath immediately preceding Wavesheaf Day occurred during Unleavened Bread, and this pattern should be followed in all other years.

No more proof should be needed, but there is additional, helpful logic for this. If one begins the count on the day following a holy day Sabbath, the observance of Pentecost will annually occur on a fixed date (either Sivan 6 or Sivan 12, depending on which holy day is counted from). *This would render God's command to count unnecessary* because, like every other holy day, Pentecost would always fall on the same calendar date each year. But God does not give silly, worthless rules!

On the other hand, the date for the weekly Sabbath within the Feast of Unleavened Bread varies year by year, depending on which day Passover falls. Passover, Nisan 14, may occur on a Monday, Wednesday, Friday, or Sabbath. The Sabbath within Unleavened Bread, of course, always falls on a Saturday, but its *date* will be either Nisan 15, 17, 19, or 21. Pentecost, then, may occur on as many as four different dates in any given year (Sivan 6, 8, 10, or 12), depending on the date of the Sabbath within the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Thus, God's command forces us to count each year to ensure that we observe Pentecost on the correct day.

In next month's "Personal," we will consider Joshua 5 and Deuteronomy 12, along with the assumptions many bring to this critical issue.