

# The Wavesheaf Offering

by John W. Ritenbaugh

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The Old Testament describes and commands many offerings for the Israelites in their worship of God. We are most familiar with the burnt, meal, peace, sin and trespass offerings of Leviticus 1-5. However, other offerings, required to be given on special occasions, play significant roles in broadening our understanding of God and His way of life. These special offerings focus on specific parts of God's plan.

"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable," writes the apostle Paul in II Timothy 3:16. This includes "the begats," the Old Covenant laws and the ritual observances. Within them are principles, patterns and examples of God's way of life. Even though they may not interest us or seem irrelevant to life today, we cannot peremptorily exclude them from God's Word.

All of God's law is a teaching vehicle. The Hebrew word most frequently translated as "law" is *torah*, but *torah* more closely translates into the broader meaning of "instruction." Instruction spans a wide spectrum of information and methods of increasing understanding, including law but also principles, symbols and examples from people's lives. For example, the way Jesus kept the Sabbath should be understood as *torah* by those determined to follow in His steps. The goal of this broad teaching approach is to reveal God and His plan to us as clearly as possible. Paul writes in Galatians 3:24, "Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith."

This teaching theme continues in Hebrews 9:9: "It was symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience." Later, the writer notes:

For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect. . . . But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. (Hebrews 10:1, 3)

The sacrifices and offerings, though sincerely and fastidiously performed over centuries, could never accomplish what the offerers looked to them to do. They are symbols, shadows, of events and processes that have a far greater scope than most people ever realize. Though they are no longer necessary—because they were fulfilled primarily in the sacrifice of Christ "once for all" (Hebrews 9:11)—they can still teach us a great deal about this way to which we have committed our lives.

## Waving the Sheaf

The wavesheaf offering is an easily overlooked offering. Only those aware of the counting required to observe Pentecost notice it because the count for Pentecost begins with the day of the wave-sheaf offering. Possibly many of us were once unaware of the wavesheaf offering because the church supplied us with a calendar showing the holy day dates for many years in advance. Since the date of Pentecost had already been determined for us, we were unaware that the count began with the day the ancient Israelites made the obscure wavesheaf offering.

Occurring on only one day each year, the day of the wavesheaf offering is not designated a holy day by God. But it is far from minor or obscure in its meaning to salvation. In fact, we could say that, *without what it means to our salvation, there would be no salvation!*

The primary instruction regarding the wavesheaf is found in Leviticus 23:9-14:

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "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. 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. And you shall offer on that day, when you wave the sheaf, a male lamb of the first year, without blemish, as a burnt offering to the Lord. Its grain offering shall be two-tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with oil, an offering made by fire to the Lord, for a sweet aroma; and its drink offering shall be of wine, one-fourth of a hin. You shall eat neither bread nor parched grain nor fresh grain until the same day that you have brought an offering to your God; it shall be a statute forever throughout your generations in all your dwellings.

The wavesheaf consisted of an omer of barley, still on the stalk, cut at the beginning of the spring harvest. Since it came from the very beginning of the harvest of the firstfruits, it can be called the first of the firstfruits (Exodus 23:19). A comparison of Exodus 23:14-19; 34:22-26; Leviticus 23:10-11 and Nehemiah 12:44 confirms that each Israelite possessing a harvest was required to give an offering. A priest then lifted or "waved" each sheaf before God for acceptance. However, while the individual Israelite farmers did bring a firstfruits offering to the priests, the standard, recorded practice during the Second Temple period (the time of Christ) was to perform only one *official* waving of a sheaf by a priest in Jerusalem. This one sheaf and its waving represented all the others brought by individual farmers.

In its setting in the Old Testament, the wavesheaf offering represents a thankful acknowledgment to God as the Giver of the harvest, while dedicating or consecrating it to Him. Its waving set the stage for the rest of the harvest to proceed. In fact, the work of harvesting could not begin until the wavesheaf offering occurred.

Though Scripture specifies the *day* the wavesheaf was to be cut, it gives no specific *time of day* to cut it. Jewish history from the Second Temple period gives an interesting insight. The second-century *Mishnah* affirms that, when the Sadducees controlled the Temple, the sickle was put to the grain just as the sun was going down on the weekly Sabbath (Menahot 10:1-4, Jacob Neusner translation, pp. 753-754). The book, *Biblical Calendars*, states, "The Boethusians [Temple priests] reaped [the firstfruits sheaf] at the going out of the Sabbath" (p. 218. Additional information can be found in the section titled "Temple Service," p. 280, as well as in *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services* by Alfred Edersheim, 1994, pp. 203-205). The New Testament's silence on this Sadducean practice—along with its agreement with the ritual's fulfillment in Christ—must be construed as acceptance of its validity.

The priests began to make the first cutting right at the end of the Sabbath, continuing over into the first day of the week, when the bulk of the work would be done. The ritual, however, was not complete until the sheaf was offered (waved) before God the following morning, or more precisely, between 9:00 a.m. and noon. Some might object to the reaping of the sheaf in the closing minutes of the Sabbath because it is a day of rest when no work is to be done. After one understands the full

reason for it, as well as Jesus' direct statement that a priest is blameless in the performance of his required duties (Matthew 12:5), any objections to the practice disappear.

## **Spiritual Harvests**

The spiritual reason is supplied in the New Testament, when a major step in God's plan begins to unfold. The Old Testament situates the festivals of God within the agricultural harvests, but in the New Testament, these agricultural harvests become types of God's spiritual harvests of souls into His Kingdom. The New Testament uses this imagery extensively.

For instance, Jesus says:

Do you not say, "There are still four months and then comes the harvest"? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest! And he who reaps receives wages, and gathers fruit for eternal life, that both he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together. (John 4:35-36)

He obviously speaks of a spiritual harvest of people to eternal life. This was His work, the same work He was training the disciples to do also after His death and resurrection. It is this same work in which we all are engaged in varying degrees.

Matthew writes of something similar in Matthew 9:36-38:

But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, "The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest."

Another clear reference to a spiritual harvest is the Parable of the Wheat and Tares:

The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat. . . . [The owner said,] "Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, 'First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn.'" (Matthew 13:24-25, 30)

In His explanation of this parable, Jesus says, "The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels. . . . Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" (Matthew 13:39, 43). It is so plain! A harvest symbolizes a resurrection. More specifically and positively, a harvest is a type of a resurrection to eternal life—inheritance of the Kingdom of God!

## **Firstfruits of God**

Both Exodus 23:19 and 34:26 contain the phrase "first of the firstfruits." Speaking of the day of Pentecost, God says, "And the Feast of harvest, the firstfruits of your labors which you have sown in the field . . ." (Exodus 23:16). Elsewhere, Pentecost is called "the Feast of Weeks" (Deuteronomy 16:10) and "the day of the firstfruits" (Numbers 28:26). If the firstfruits were the early part of the harvest, the "first of the firstfruits" must surely have been from even earlier in the harvest season.

The wavesheaf offering represents this small, initial harvest. From the cutting of the wavesheaf, the count to Pentecost—the culmination of the early harvest—begins.

Though Christ is nowhere called the "First of the Firstfruits" in the New Testament, Paul titles Him "the firstborn among many brethren" in Romans 8:29. In I Corinthians 15:20 he clearly links firstfruits—and therefore a harvest—with a resurrection: "But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." He then repeats the first-fruits reference, adding us into the resurrection/harvest picture: "But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming" (verse 23).

James further solidifies us as part of the same spiritual harvest as Christ: "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). Revelation 14:4, speaking of the 144,000, firmly nails down just who the firstfruits are: "These are the ones who were not defiled with women, for they are virgins. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These were redeemed from among men, being firstfruits to God and to the Lamb."

### **The True Wavesheaf**

The resurrected Jesus Christ fits into this picture as the archetypical Wavesheaf. He was crucified "in the middle of the week" (Daniel 9:27), a Wednesday, and put into the grave near sunset (John 19:31, 38-42). Mark confirms this: "Now when evening had come, because it was the Preparation Day, that is, the day before the Sabbath [an annual Sabbath, the first day of Unleavened Bread]" (Mark 15:42). The holy day fell on a Thursday, followed by a second preparation day, then the weekly Sabbath (Luke 23:54-56).

Jesus explains in Matthew 12:39-40 that the length of time He would be in the tomb is the sign of His Messiahship:

An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

Counting three days and three nights from Jesus' burial in the tomb on Wednesday evening near sunset brings us to Saturday evening near sunset. As the Sabbath was ending, the Father burst the bonds of Christ's death by the power of His Holy Spirit and resurrected Him as very God.

He was now prepared to be accepted before the Father. But John 20:1 and 17 show that His ascension did not occur until sometime Sunday morning:

On the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. . . . Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God.'"

The Bible nowhere indicates that the priests understood the ritual they were performing on Saturday evening when Jesus Christ, the archetypical Wavesheaf, was "harvested" from the material world by

being resurrected from the dead. On Sunday morning, as the firstborn of many brethren, He was lifted into and through the heavens to God's throne to be accepted by Him as the sacrifice for our sins and as our High Priest.

What an exuberant and joyous reunion must have taken place then! What thunderous "Hallelujahs" and applause for a job well done! Revelation 5:11-12 pictures "ten thousand times ten thousand [angels], and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice: 'Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing!'"

God's plan had just taken a momentous step toward its completion. The Redeemer of mankind had triumphed and been glorified. "For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life" (Romans 5:10). Now the payment for our sins had been secured and a sinless and dynamic High Priest installed as our Mediator before the Father. Our salvation had now been assured and death conquered, preparing the way for many, many more to follow.

On the surface, the wavesheaf offering may seem an insignificant event lost in the more visible activities of Passover and Unleavened Bread. Though it may be lost on this world's "Christianity," it memorializes the most significant spiritual event that has yet taken place on earth: the resurrection and ascension of our Savior Jesus Christ! Thank God that He has given us understanding of it! We can be even more thankful when we understand that it signifies the real beginning of the spiritual work of harvesting human souls, culminating with us being resurrected and changed to spirit as Jesus' brothers and sisters at His return!

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### **Inset: Why Count?**

Pentecost is unique among the holy days because it is the only annual feast determined by counting. All the other festivals God commands us to keep on certain dates on the Hebrew calendar, but we must count for Pentecost. Whether we count fifty days or seven weeks or seven Sabbaths from the day of the wavesheaf offering, we must still go through the exercise of measuring the time to keep the feast properly. Why?

God does nothing without a purpose, and His purposes always include giving His people additional instruction for their ultimately eternal benefit. Counting to Pentecost is no exception. Even a cursory examination will expose several fascinating avenues of study.

First, God commands us to count. Counting is a means of calculating sequential items, events and measurements. The Bible equates counting to numbering and measuring, and it becomes a metaphor for judging and evaluating. When we understand what the period from the wavesheaf offering to Pentecost represents, the extended meanings come into play.

Passover symbolizes our redemption from this world and the forgiveness of our sins. Unleavened Bread typifies our lifelong task of coming out of sin and putting on the new man in sincerity and truth. We begin to count on wavesheaf day, which occurs during this period, and the fifty days extend to Pentecost, a festival that prefigures the harvest of God's firstfruits. The fifty days, then, represent the period of a Christian's conversion, the time between his calling and his resurrection to eternal life.

Thus, God wants us to count, number or measure the time of our conversion. This should bring several well-known verses to mind. For instance, Paul considers us wise if we are "redeeming the time, because the days are evil" (Ephesians 5:16). He cautions the Romans, "And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed" (Romans 13:11). In both instance, he is advising Christians to measure and make use of our time carefully.

A few Old Testament verses may be even more on point. David writes in Psalm 39:4, "Lord, make me to know my end, and what is the measure of my days, that I may know how frail I am." If we understand just how short our time is, we also realize how weak and insignificant we are next to God and eternity. It forces us to rely upon Him and strive to improve. This is the kind of attitude that God desires in us and will enhance our growth in character.

Moses, too, makes use of this imagery in Psalm 90:12: "So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom." Properly evaluating our lifetimes builds wisdom in us, and wisdom—the godly use of knowledge and understanding—will make our behavior pleasing to God. Wisdom will help us to prioritize our time properly so we can devote ourselves to what is truly important.

Second, God has us count fifty days. What is significant about the number fifty? Fifty is the round number of years human beings live in a normal adult life (compare Numbers 1:3; Psalm 90:10). Fifty years, then, represents the period during which we live, grow, overcome, bear fruit and prove our devotion to God through trials, tests, blessings, curses and life's other varying experiences. Fifty years corresponds to the span of our conversion.

Biblically, the number fifty has its closest association with two things: the Tabernacle/Temple (in some of its measurements) and the Jubilee. The apostles describe God's church as a temple, and Christians are individual "living stones" within it (I Corinthians 3:9, 16-17; Ephesians 2:19-22; I Peter 2:5). The fifty days thus symbolize the time it takes to complete the work of building a habitation for God.

Every fiftieth year in ancient Israel, the Jubilee was decreed on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 25:8-9), which, among other things, represents unity, being at one, with God. The Jubilee was a year of liberty, when all debts were cancelled and inheritances reverted to their original families (verse 10), foreshadowing "the restoration of all things" (Acts 3:21). It was also a year of rest (Leviticus 25:11), when no crops were sown or reaped, a foretaste of God's rest (Hebrews 4:4-10). Under this type, the fiftieth day of the count, Pentecost, represents the harvest of Christians into God's Kingdom by the resurrection.

Overall, then, we count to Pentecost for two major reasons:

1. God commands it, and
2. It teaches us to realize and use carefully the ever-shrinking time we have to come "to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13).

In His wisdom, God has us annually take stock of our procession through time so that we will devote ourselves to making the most of it. In doing so, we can gauge our progress toward God's Kingdom.