

OIM UPDATE

May 2014

One of the many blessings of pursuing a Messianic lifestyle includes the annual reminders to diligently search one's heart during the appointed times of the Lord (cf. Leviticus 23; et. al.). But beyond the weekly *Shabbat*, there are two eight-day commemorations of the Spring feasts and Fall feasts, when followers of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob can truly meditate on applicable Scriptures and seek His face. Furthermore, there is another eight-day period, when one can commemorate the Festival of Dedication or *Chanukah* during the Winter months. It is a great blessing to have these annual convocations to enhance our walk with the Holy One of Israel!

However, the Almighty wants more than just these occasional appointed times with His children. He desires intimacy on a daily, if not a moment-by-moment basis, as we are encouraged to rejoice always and pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:16-17). While constant communion is a worthy goal, another practical way to maintain daily communion was instituted in the Torah, with a specific direction to take the time from the Feast of Unleavened Bread to the Feast of Weeks or *Shavuot*, to count the *omer* (עֶמֶר) or sheaf daily:

"You shall also count for yourselves from the day after the sabbath, from the day when you brought in the sheaf of the wave offering; there shall be seven complete sabbaths. You shall count fifty days to the day after the seventh sabbath; then you shall present a new grain offering to the LORD" (Leviticus 23:15-16).

When challenged by this passage ten years ago, I was prompted to write a series of daily reflections, which were later compiled into the book *Counting the Omer: A Daily Devotional to Shavuot*. Our ministry offers this as a key guideline to meditate on certain Biblical themes throughout the fifty-day period from Passover/Unleavened Bread to *Shavuot*. It is available in both paperback and eBook for Amazon Kindle.

With the concept of intimacy with the Lord in mind, this past month during the remembrance of Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Holy Spirit used a confluence of circumstances which challenged me to reconsider the magnitude and majesty of Yeshua the Messiah *and* my personal relationship with Him. As a result of this examination, I have written this month's lead article, "**Doubting Thomas**," about how beneficial private introspection can be. Hopefully some of my thoughts will be used to encourage others to periodically examine and test their hearts, in order to enhance their walks of faith.

Our **Prison Ministry-Free Book Outreach** continues to be challenged by all of the requests we are receiving from inmates incarcerated in the U.S. Penal System. We believe that the Lord must be quietly preparing an army of saints with the balanced, Messianic study materials that we are providing—because we have no other explanation for the unheralded growth and exposure! Your contributions to this critical outreach are greatly appreciated!

We also need your faithful, financial support for the **Theological Defense Trust**, which is one of the principal means of maintaining our ministry efforts. Ever since we were commissioned to devote our lives to serve the Lord, we have been aware that a **credible and written Messianic-oriented theology** is something desperately needed by the broad Messianic community of faith. Thankfully, scholars such as our own J.K. McKee have been called to this task, with the spiritual and academic gifting needed. But most critically, persons, such as him, have a unique understanding that it will take an enormous amount of time and labor to bring many of the required writing projects to fruition. Partner with Outreach Israel and TNN Online today, in order to bring the Messianic restoration understandings to the world at large!

Enjoy Counting the Omer this month, as you prepare your heart for *Shavuot*!
Mark Huey

DOUBTING THOMAS

by Mark Huey

Periodic spiritual inventories are healthy for the soul—perhaps even more so than the annual Passover rites of physically cleaning one’s home of dust, crumbs, and cobwebs. In Paul’s writing to the Believers in Corinth, a Passover-referenced seasonal prodding from the Scriptures, admonishes Messiah followers to remove any “leaven”—which is likened to sin—from their lives, during the Festival of Unleavened Bread:

“Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are *in fact* unleavened. For Messiah our Passover also has been sacrificed. Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Corinthians 5:7-8).

With such an exhortation to remember the Spring appointed times of the Lord with sincerity and truth, my heart this year has been focused on beseeching the Holy One to expose anything hidden in my heart which might be cleverly concealed from view. Even with trusting in the Lord for many years, as a born again Believer committed to serving Him, there always remains the persistent need to consciously confess any revealed sin (1 John 1:7-10) when it is exposed to the light of truth. For when we are totally honest with ourselves, we know that even a human heart filled with the Spirit of God (cf. Ezekiel 36:26-27), can still to some degree have some final traces of deception within it. As the Prophet Jeremiah admonishes,

“Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD and whose trust is the LORD. For he will be like a tree planted by the water, that extends its roots by a stream and will not fear when the heat comes; but its leaves will be green, and it will not be anxious in a year of drought nor cease to yield fruit. The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it? I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give to each man according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds” (Jeremiah 17:7-10).

Much to my delight, between Margaret and me coordinating our congregational Passover *sedar* here in Dallas, and later hosting a formal dinner with my parents and brother that same week, the Holy Spirit brought to my attention for further reflection, the testimony of **“doubting Thomas.”** The first mention of Thomas came during the weekly *Shabbat* message preached by our congregational leader, who was contending with the difficult words spoken by and about Yeshua, which categorically declared His Divine nature. Further on at our family meal, my brother posed an open-ended question directly to me about the story of **“doubting Thomas,”** in order to clarify some things he had heard at a church service he had attended for Easter Sunday.

Quite frankly, I was caught off guard with his query, because typically, my brother and my parents do not spend an inordinate amount of time, if any, pursuing spiritual matters or conversing about them. *However, I should not be surprised.* Since 1978, when I became a Believer in Yeshua, I have prayed for their salvation innumerable times. Here was a Divinely appointed opportunity to share with them some of the details of what occurred when Thomas was finally confronted by the risen Savior. Thankfully, many of the specifics were fresh in my mind, as elements of the passage from John’s Gospel had been reviewed the day before. I was able to recollect the basics of what had been recorded **without** retrieving a Bible and going through the

account verse-by-verse. Needless to say, from my limited perspective, nothing profound took place other than my reiteration of the basic truths about the Divinity of Yeshua, His resurrection from the dead, and His ascension into Heaven. However, I was led to emphasize the fact that many people require absolute proof in order to believe. **This aspect of “doubting Thomas” was contrasted with the multitude of future Believers like us (deliberately including them), who will not place their hands in the literal wounds of the Messiah, but be blessed by faith in the resurrected Yeshua, as written in the account.**

My unwavering conclusion did not elicit any significant follow up questions or comments, other than me asking my brother if he had heard the story of Thomas before, which he nodded in affirmation. But I did notice that while sharing this testimony from the Scriptures, that my parents, my brother, and his daughter were listening with open hearts, **because I was not “preaching,”** but simply sharing the story of “doubting Thomas” as a matter of fact. Twice during my explanation, knowing that my family members have all heard the gospel message multiple times from me and others, and that they are not yet openly committed to the Lord, I was reminded of a passage from Scripture regarding the work of the Almighty when it comes to leading someone to faith in the Messiah, and causing spiritual growth:

“I planted, Apollos watered, **but God was causing the growth.** So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, **but God who causes the growth.** Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor” (1 Corinthians 3:6-8).

With the principle that only God causes spiritual growth in mind, I felt like I was simply watering a seed of truth that had been cast earlier in the day at the church service where these modern-day “doubters” had attended. *I know that by the testimony of two or three witnesses, a matter is confirmed* (cf. Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15; Matthew 18:16; 2 Corinthians 13:1; 1 Timothy 5:19; Hebrews 10:28). So I was, in essence, merely confirming a truth that had been contemplated earlier. Whether those kernels of truth germinate and take root in the hearts of my loved ones, is ultimately up to our Heavenly Father. But my frequency of prayers for their salvation has certainly been accelerated, with fervency and thankfulness for the opportunity to witness the power of the Holy Spirit orchestrating all of these circumstances!

Nevertheless, as I contemplated what had providentially transpired during the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the more I was impressed to take a further look at my personal walk of faith through the grid of “doubting Thomas.” This self-examination was conducted in order to cast light on any hidden leaven (sin) or lack of faith which might be present in my life. Some verses came to mind, such as Paul’s admonishment to Believers to judiciously test and examine their faith on a regular basis:

“**Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves!** Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Yeshua the Messiah is in you—unless indeed you fail the test?” (2 Corinthians 13:5).

After all, if the Apostle Thomas had doubts about who Yeshua was *after* three years of witnessing miracles—and *then* needed to directly confront the Risen Savior—I know that my measure of faith (Romans 12:3) could always be enhanced (2 Corinthians 10:15) in order to receive Yeshua’s promised blessing!

Having just participated in a Passover *sedar*, the description found in 1 Corinthians, where Paul recounts how during the Last Supper Yeshua made some dramatic statements during the service, came to mind. Here, the Messiah claimed that the third cup of the *sedar* represented His blood, and the bread depicted His broken body—

with Paul's additional exhortation to **constantly examine personal worthiness**, in order to properly eat of the bread and drink of the cup:

"For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Yeshua in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, '**This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me.**' In the same way *He took* the cup also after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink *it*, in remembrance of Me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. **Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly.** For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world" (1 Corinthians 11:23-32).

Finally, with testing faith, examining the heart, and doubting in mind, a passage from James the Just came to mind. Here in the context of considering all the trials of life, including prayer for loved ones and their salvation, and seeking wisdom on how to witness to them, the half-brother of Yeshua reminded Believers to maintain a faith without any doubting:

"Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, **knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.** And let endurance have *its* perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. **But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.** But the brother of humble circumstances is to glory in his high position; and the rich man *is to glory* in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with a scorching wind and withers the grass; and its flower falls off and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away. **Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which *the Lord* has promised to those who love Him"** (James 1:2-12).

The figure of the Apostle Thomas, is one with whom many can perhaps identify. He was one of the Galilean fishermen who followed Yeshua during His years of ministry, and is one of the relatively few Disciples quoted multiple times in the Gospel accounts. *Thōmas* (Θωμάς) is the Greek transliteration of the Aramaic *Toma* (ܛܘܡܐ), meaning twin, also represented by Greek *Didumos* (Δίδυμος) or "twin." Thomas' outspoken nature is captured three times in John's Gospel, giving the Bible student a glimpse into his zealous, yet inquisitive nature.

The first account is found in the recollection about the death and resurrection of Lazarus. Here, we find that despite the noted concern by the Disciples about the possibility of Yeshua being stoned, Thomas displayed a vociferously loyal willingness to stand with the Lord, and die with Him, if confronted:

"Now Yeshua loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when He heard that he was sick, He then stayed two days *longer* in the place where He was. Then after this He said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again.' **The disciples said to Him,**

'Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone You, and are You going there again?' Yeshua answered, 'Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.' This He said, and after that He said to them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, so that I may awaken him out of sleep.' The disciples then said to Him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.' Now Yeshua had spoken of his death, but they thought that He was speaking of literal sleep. So Yeshua then said to them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead, and I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe; but let us go to him.' **Therefore Thomas, who is called Didymus, said to his fellow disciples, 'Let us also go, so that we may die with Him.'** So when Yeshua came, He found that he had already been in the tomb four days" (John 11:5-17).

The resuscitation of Lazarus, after being in the tomb for four days, was in reality an immediate foreshadowing event of Yeshua's resurrection. But note that when queried, Yeshua declared that this exercise to revive Lazarus was **primarily for His followers to believe in Him** and His power to raise people from the dead. As the passage continues, one sees not only the symbolism of what is to occur at His death, but that this specific miracle had many believe in Him:

"So Yeshua, again being deeply moved within, came to the tomb. Now it was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Yeshua said, 'Remove the stone.' Martha, the sister of the deceased, said to Him, 'Lord, by this time there will be a stench, for he has been *dead* four days.' Yeshua said to her, 'Did I not say to you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?' So they removed the stone. **Then Yeshua raised His eyes, and said, 'Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. I knew that You always hear Me; but because of the people standing around I said it, so that they may believe that You sent Me.'** When He had said these things, He cried out with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come forth.' The man who had died came forth, bound hand and foot with wrappings, and his face was wrapped around with a cloth. Yeshua said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.' **Therefore many of the Jews who came to Mary, and saw what He had done, believed in Him"** (John 11:38-45).

The Father accomplished His goal to have certain people believe that Yeshua was sent from Him. In this case, the image of removing a stone from the burial site (cave) was emblematic of what happened to Yeshua after His death. Certainly, one would think that the zealous Thomas, who traveled with the Messiah as one of His intimate Disciples *and* who voiced such bravery and loyalty, would be further convinced of the Son's unique relationship to the Father. But intimate proximity to Yeshua, and in this case, an eyewitness observation of a person resurrected from the dead, did not necessarily convince a (deceptive) heart with a free will that Yeshua was the Savior. To personalize this reality, consider your own walk and reflect upon the times when you had blessed intimacy with the Lord, in contrast to the times when your faith was challenged. Perhaps the name Thomas or Didymus (twin) has another meaning? Is it possible that **"doubting Thomas"** serves as a universal, symbolic character carved out of the Holy Bible to remind Believers of the common, human tendency for **"double mindedness"**?

On the other hand, despite Thomas' wavering and inquisitive nature, he did remain absolutely loyal to the Messiah to the point of being one of the Twelve who participated with Yeshua at what is commonly known as the Last Supper, recorded in John chs. 13-17. Here at their unique Passover gathering, some of the most profound statements made by the Messiah are found. After Yeshua washed the feet of

His Disciples, dealt with the betrayer Judas, and confronted Peter about his imminent lack of loyalty when His execution would occur, Yeshua shared some intimate knowledge with His Disciples. **Belief in the Messiah is critical.** To affirm the need to believe on Him, Yeshua tried to comfort His Disciples with these words about what would happen in the future. At this juncture, we get another peek into the inquiring heart of Thomas, who in many regards represents various followers of the Messiah when confronted with trials, tribulations, and the trauma of the unknown:

“Do not let your heart be troubled; **believe in God, believe also in Me.** In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, *there* you may be also. And you know the way where I am going.’ Thomas said to Him, ‘Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?’ Yeshua said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me. If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; from now on you know Him, and have seen Him” (John 14:1-7).

Thomas was simply being honest. He did not know where the Messiah was going. But wherever He was going, Thomas wanted to know the way so that he could follow after his Teacher.

At this point in the narrative, despite personally witnessing the resurrection of Lazarus, and numerous miracles, deliverances, and healings, Thomas was still not fully aware of Yeshua's Divine nature. But Jerusalem was stirring with excitement as the the Passover and Festival of Unleavened Bread were upon them, as Yeshua kept hinting about His death. *Thomas was perplexed by all of the mixed signals.* Judas had rushed out. Peter was told that where His teacher would be going, he would have to wait to follow. Peter declared that he would lay down his life for Yeshua. But Yeshua told Peter in front of the Disciples that he would deny Him. One can only imagine how upset the Disciples were becoming in an attempt to understand what was happening and being said. Then to top things off, Yeshua stated back categorically to Thomas' question about where to go and what was the way, this absolute declaration:

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me” (John 14:6).

Even today, when you quote this verse to someone about the exclusive source of salvation in Yeshua, it causes people to stop and react in one of two ways. Either people accept it, which requires faith and belief—or people deny its very narrow application. Then, if you carry on the context of the quotation and hear what Yeshua further declared, His claim of Divinity is unconditional, when He said without hesitation:

“If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; from now on you know Him, and have seen Him” (John 14:7).

Yeshua was making it abundantly clear to His Disciples. *You are in the presence of the Living God in Me.* From this statement forward, during the balance of the meal, other than a few questions, the Disciples just sat in awe listening to His words. Thomas did not ask any more questions, but just listened intently, as those words were clearly imbedded into the hearts of those in attendance. Thankfully, the Apostle John recorded them for posterity, because in them one truly hears the heart of the Almighty and His love for His own. In many translations of the Bible, the great majority of these words are in red, indicating that they were spoken by Yeshua. **Would it not be wonderful if everyone who claimed to be a follower of Yeshua the Messiah**

took these statements of His to heart and did what He said to do? (Try reading John chs. 13-17 every day for a week and see what it does to your heart.) Perhaps the Body of Messiah does not faithfully adhere to these words because it is overpopulated with “Thomas-like” doubters? While many might believe that Yeshua is God in the flesh, they are unwilling to make Him their Lord.

This brings us to the final passage, where Thomas again spoke his mind, and why historically he has been labeled by the characterization of “doubting Thomas.” Toward the very end of John’s Gospel, after the resurrection, a number of anecdotes are recorded so that people reading the account would know that the resurrected Messiah was more than just a ghost or figment of one’s imagination. Instead, when He appeared in His resurrected body, He was physically touchable as evidenced by Mary clinging to Him (John 20:17). However, the most profound description of the physical resurrection of the Messiah, is seen in Yeshua’s interaction with Thomas and the Disciples, as they were dealing with the challenging loss of their revered Teacher, who claimed to be God, and was now standing before them as the resurrected Savior. In this passage, a description of what the resurrected body is going to be like is found. It appears from the details that a resurrected body can move through solid objects like doors, and does not bleed through open wounds. One can only imagine what it must have been like to be in the presence of the Risen Savior! Note the reaction of Thomas, who was still not convinced about Yeshua’s resurrection, *until* Thomas touched the pierced holes on the body of the Messiah:

“So when it was evening on that day, the first *day* of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Yeshua came and stood in their midst and said to them, ‘Peace *be* with you.’ And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side. The disciples then rejoiced when they saw the Lord. So Yeshua said to them again, ‘Peace *be* with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.’ And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, *their sins* have been forgiven them; if you retain the *sins* of any, they have been retained.’ **But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Yeshua came. So the other disciples were saying to him, ‘We have seen the Lord!’ But he said to them, ‘Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe.’** After eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Yeshua came, the doors having been shut, and stood in their midst and said, ‘Peace *be* with you.’ Then He said to Thomas, ‘Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing.’ Thomas answered and said to Him, ‘My Lord and my God!’ Yeshua said to him, ‘Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed *are* they who did not see, and *yet* believed.’ Therefore many other signs Yeshua also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Yeshua is the Messiah, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:19-31).

Thomas is a lot like the rest of humanity. He needed tangible proof that something is true. In this case, despite that he had seen up close and personal in his association with Yeshua, he was not convinced of His resurrection. Even after he heard from his fellow Disciples that the Messiah had risen from the dead, he still wanted visible proof. However, when he had the unique opportunity to literally see and touch the scars of the Savior, it did not take more than an instant for him to exclaim the hal-

lowed word, “my Lord and my God!”

Yeshua, knowing that human beings are inherently skeptical about supernatural aspects of the created order, did not hesitate to respond in a way that has brought great comfort to millions of Believers down through the intervening centuries. In a gentle admonishment, Yeshua quizzed Thomas with a statement that might have had Thomas think back to when Peter was told that he would deny Yeshua three times. Thankfully, Thomas’ declaration was emphatic without any other thoughts than that he was in the presence of not only his Lord, but his God. Thomas’ testimony was faithful and true for the remainder of his life. Ancient Christian tradition records that Thomas eventually sojourned eastward to India and was martyred declaring the good news to whomever would pay heed.

During the course of reflecting on the testimony of Thomas as a Twenty-First Century Believer, I had to not only recollect many of Yeshua’s Biblical statements which indeed indicated that He is the incarnate God of Creation, but also examine my own heart for any tinge of doubt that might exist. In so doing, I was led to revisit a book written by the intellectual lay theologian C.S. Lewis, who years ago in his seminal work, *Mere Christianity*, wrote the following:

“I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), pp 50-51.

Lewis, a self-confessed “reluctant” Christian, ultimately came to the same conclusion as Thomas, in what can precisely be stated as the “trilemma” of Yeshua’s claim to Deity. By Yeshua’s own testimony, He was a liar, a lunatic, or Lord.

Thankfully years ago, like the Apostle Thomas and the writer Lewis, I realized that Yeshua was my God and my Lord without having to place my fingers in His wounds. Correspondingly, I have been blessed according to His word. But the blessing of salvation, believing in the sacrificial blood of the Passover Lamb Yeshua, has never been a doubt in my mind, until I took a deeper look into my heart, and asked Him to reveal anything that was impeding my relationship to the Holy One. ***Wanting to know the Lord has always been my passion.*** During the Festival of Unleavened Bread, arrangements by my Heavenly Father, to use the testimony of “doubting Thomas,” pleasantly surprised me, as I sought Him with all my heart:

“You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart” (Jeremiah 29:13).

What a blessing to know that the Father loves us so much, that He would use the elementary principle of doubt (or lack of faith) to draw me closer to Him! I praise Him for His faithfulness to me—and that like Thomas who no longer doubted—I can joyfully concur regarding Yeshua: **my God and my Lord!**

May you likewise second the refrain...while we together, advance His Kingdom, until the restoration of all things...

A SUMMARIZATION OF SHAVUOT TRADITIONS

by Margaret McKee Huey and J.K. McKee

Shavuot (שבועות)¹ is one of three pilgrimage festivals that is commanded in the Torah (Exodus 23:14-17; Deuteronomy 16:16). In Hebrew, its name means “weeks,” derived from the command in Deuteronomy 16:19, “You shall count seven weeks for yourself; you shall begin to count seven weeks from the time you begin to put the sickle to the standing grain.” Many Christians know *Shavuot* from its Greek-derived name “Pentecost,” as *Pentēkostē* (πεντηκοστή) means “fiftieth,” indicative of the fifty days that are to be counted between Passover and this time.

In Biblical times, *Shavuot* was originally celebrated as a harvest festival. The Torah calls it “the Festival of the Harvest, first fruits of your labor that you sow in the field” (Exodus 23:16, Alter). It would occur at the end of the barley crop and the beginning of the wheat crop, also known as *Chag haKatzir* or Harvest Festival. In Rabbinical literature it is commonly referred to as *Yom haBikkurim* or the Day of First Fruits to commemorate the new wheat crop. The Mishnah records that this was a time of great rejoicing:

“Those [who come] from nearby bring figs and grapes, but those [who come] from afar bring dried figs and raisins. And an ox walks before them, its horns overlaid with gold, and a wreath of olive [leaves] on its head. A flutist plays before them until they arrive near Jerusalem. [Once] they arrived near Jerusalem, they sent [a messenger] ahead of them [to announce their arrival], and they decorated their firstfruits. The high officers, chiefs, and treasurer [of the Temple] come out to meet them. According to the rank of the entrants, they would [determine which of these officials would] go out. And all the craftsmen of Jerusalem stand before them and greet them, [saying], ‘Brothers, men of such and such a place, you have come in peace’” (m.*Bikkurim* 3:3).²

Surely, when we come to celebrate *Shavuot* as one of the Lord’s appointed times as Messianic Believers today, we are to remember how it was commemorated in ancient times. Wherever we may be from, we are to open our arms to our fellow brothers and sisters and tell them “*Shalom*, you have come in peace!” and be hospitable in the Spirit of the Lord.

Going Before the Lord

“You shall bring in from your dwelling places two *loaves* of bread for a wave offering, made of two-tenths of an *ephah*; they shall be of a fine flour, baked with leaven as first fruits to the LORD. Along with the bread you shall present seven one year old male lambs without defect, and a bull of the herd and two rams; they are to be a burnt offering to the LORD, with their grain offering and their drink offerings, an offering by fire of a soothing aroma to the LORD. You shall also

¹ Pronounced as *Shavuos* in the Ashkenazic Jewish tradition.

² Margaret Wenig Rubenstein and David Weiner, trans., in Neusner, *Mishnah*, pp 172-173.

offer one male goat for a sin offering and two male lambs one year old for a sacrifice of peace offerings. The priest shall then wave them with the bread of the first fruits for a wave offering with two lambs before the LORD; they are to be holy to the LORD for the priest” (Leviticus 23:17-20).

When celebrating *Shavuot*, it is clear that the Torah itself does not offer that many instructions concerning its observance. The first command is to bring “two loaves made of two-tenths of an ephah of fine flour, baked with yeast, as a wave offering of firstfruits to the LORD” (NIV). Also to be offered before God are “seven yearling lambs without blemish, one bull of the herd, and two rams, with their meal offerings and libations, an offering by fire of pleasing odor to the LORD” (NJPS). The third set of offerings to be delivered up are “one he-goat as a sin-offering, and two lambs in their first year as feast peace-offerings” (ATS). All of the offerings are to be, as the Hebrew states, *qodesh yih'yu l'ADONAI l'kohen* (קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶי לַיהוָה לַכֹּהֵן), “holy to the LORD for the priest.”

The challenge when considering *Shavuot* today, either as Messianic Believers, or simply as a member of the Jewish community, is that much of it is focused around being a harvest festival with animal sacrifices. Without a doubt, *Shavuot* is intended to be a time when we are **to go before God and rejoice**. Simply being alive and healthy are adequate reasons enough for us to go before the Lord. But, much of this was intended to be done in Jerusalem at the Temple. How are we to celebrate *Shavuot* today?

Shavuot and the Word of God

The most significant Jewish tradition associated with *Shavuot* is the connection between the Feast of Weeks and the giving of the Torah. This belief was extant sometime during the Second Temple era, as the Talmud refers to “*Pentecost*: it is the day on which the Torah was given” (b.*Pesachim* 68b).³ Consequently, most celebrations of *Shavuot* following the destruction of the Temple are focused as an anniversary of commemorating the giving of the Ten Commandments to Moses. The Torah portion associated with *Shavuot* is the reading of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 19:1-20:26), and apparently “This section was read daily in the Temple.”⁴

Much of our celebration surrounding *Shavuot* should be focused around the Word of God as a great gift that our Father has given us. Of course, the Word of God was not *exclusively given* at Mount Sinai, but the scene of Sinai covered in fire and smoke and surrounded by the very presence of the Almighty is something awesome to contemplate, and *Shavuot* is a worthy time for us to remember it. When we all enter into fellowship with one another and focus on the goodness of what He has done for us, we need to remember that the easiest way to focus on our Creator is to examine the Scriptures He has given us for our life’s instruction.

It is interesting that just as during Passover we are commanded to eat unleavened bread before the Lord, that on *Shavuot* the priest was to offer two leavened

³ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*.

⁴ Ronald L. Eisenberg, *The JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 299.

loaves. Many Jewish commentators have connected the offering of leavened loaves to the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. Ronald L. Eisenberg summarizes this view in *The JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions*:

“Bringing the leavened loaves on Shavuot may indicate that the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai on that date should be understood as the culmination of the process of redemption from slavery that began on Passover, when only matzah could be consumed. Just as the two loaves marked the staple of our physical existence, so the historical process that began with the Exodus from Egypt and culminated with the giving of the Torah reflected the essence of our spiritual existence.”⁵

The teachings of Yeshua the Messiah mirror the fact that bread alone is not sufficient for our well-being. Yeshua refuted Satan in the wilderness, “It is written, ‘MAN SHALL NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE, BUT ON EVERY WORD THAT PROCEEDS OUT OF THE MOUTH OF GOD’” (Matthew 4:4; cf. Luke 4:4). Of course, Yeshua was quoting directly from Deuteronomy 8:3, where Moses reminded the Ancient Israelites, “He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD.” When we celebrate *Shavuot*, how many of us stop to consider the importance of the Word of God in our lives, and how important it is to not only know the Scriptures—but actually be able to *live them out*?

Miscellaneous Jewish Traditions

Some Jewish traditions have developed since Second Temple times that can be edifying to the Messianic community. However, it is important to note that since *Shavuot* is so innately connected to the Temple service, that not all of the traditions intended to augment the absence of the Temple are necessarily good. Obviously, the study of God’s Word *at any time*, including *Shavuot*, is **something to be encouraged**.

A major custom that is observed in many segments of the Orthodox Jewish community is *Tikkun leil Shavuot*, meaning “the Prepared [texts] of the night of Shavuot.” This is an all-night vigil that was actually developed by Jewish Kabbalists, and the tradition became “devoted to the study of passages from the Bible, Talmud, and Zohar. The popular explanation is that staying up all night on the eve of Shavuot atones for the behavior of the Israelites at Sinai, who according to tradition slept late that morning and had to be awakened by Moses...an opposite view is that this practice is based on the legend that thunder and lightning kept the Israelites awake and trembling all night while Moses was on Mount Sinai receiving the Torah.”⁶

Some in Messianic congregations choose to observe a kind of all-night vigil during *Shavuot*, studying the Scriptures or focusing on some kind of Biblical topic. This should not be discouraged, but it should be noted that this custom gained popularity by Kabbalists who believed the study would help atone for them. As

⁵ Ibid., 298.

⁶ Ibid., 299.

Believers in Messiah Yeshua, He alone provides our atonement, and any kind of study should be to uplift Him and thus edify one another. It is interesting that “In some communities, the Shavuot eve study session concludes with the only sunrise service of the Jewish year, a symbol either of the light of the Torah or of the Jews as a ‘light to the nations’ (Isa. 49:6).”⁷ Certainly, if you choose to stay up all night on the eve of *Shavuot*, do so with the intention of the Lord using you as a light to others.

Common Scriptures that are examined by the Jewish community may include an all-night reading of the entire Book of Psalms during the eve of *Shavuot*. This is influenced by a belief that David, author of many of the psalms, was born and died on *Shavuot*. In certain Sephardic Jewish communities, a *ketubah* or marriage contract is read before the ark containing the Torah scroll in the synagogue, per the opinion that God was “married” to Israel at Mount Sinai. Another common text read at *Shavuot* is the Book of Ruth, as Ruth is connected closely to David as his great-grandmother, and because the story occurs at harvest time (Ruth 2:23).⁸

During *Shavuot* as a harvest time, it is also not uncommon for Jewish synagogues to be elaborately decorated in plants and flowers. This is frequently based on Proverbs 3:18, which says that the Torah “is a tree of life to those who take hold of her, and happy are all who hold her fast.” Rabbinic exegesis on Exodus 34:3 connects Mount Sinai to originally being a great green mountain with trees and shrubs, and so by decorating one’s place of worship, we are connected back to that idyllic setting.

Dairy foods and honey are traditionally eaten during *Shavuot* for a number of important reasons. One reason is the Jewish view that Song of Songs 4:11, “honey and milk are under your tongue,” pertains to the Torah. Another view is that the prohibition of boiling a kid in its mother’s milk is given right after the offerings for *Shavuot* are detailed: “You shall bring the choice first fruits of your soil into the house of the LORD your God. You are not to boil a young goat in the milk of its mother” (Exodus 23:19). Yet another opinion is “that the Israelites [were] exposed for the first time to the wondrous world of Torah...like newborns...[and] just as babies drink only milk, so Jews commemorate the moment at Sinai by drinking and eating only dairy foods.”⁹

A traditional food eaten among Ashkenazic Jews during *Shavuot* are cheese blintzes. These are thin crepes filled with various sweet cheeses, and often topped with fruits or jams. In some other communities triangular dumplings are eaten stuffed with three types of cheese, because the Bible consists of three parts (Law, Prophets, Writings), the Torah was given by God in the third month, through Moses who was the third child born to his parents, to a people divided into three groups (priest, Levite, and Israelite).¹⁰

Another important feature among non-Orthodox Jews is a ceremony of confirmation, where teenagers are acknowledged as having completed a formal

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 300.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp 300-301.

course of study on the Torah and commit themselves to its teachings. Sometimes these are *bar/bat mitzvah* proceedings, but not always.¹¹

Shavuot for Messianics

“Pentecost” in Christian tradition has some equal theological significance as does *Shavuot* for Judaism. The Day of Pentecost is most commonly associated as being the time when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon those gathered at the Upper Room. Yeshua the Messiah had promised His Disciples, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). This was the time when the 120 Believers gathered were miraculously empowered to speak foreign languages or “tongues” (Acts 2:6), and three thousand new converts were evangelized and saved (Acts 2:41). From this point onward the Book of Acts records a massive evangelistic campaign throughout the Mediterranean world. In fact, many of the first Messianic congregations outside of the Land of Israel were likely started by those who had traveled great distances to come observe *Shavuot* at the Temple.¹²

In Christianity, though, Pentecost is commonly viewed as “mark[ing] the shifting of God’s redemptive purpose from a particular people (the descendants of Abraham via Isaac and Jacob) to all peoples. On that day the Church was formed and empowered for its worldwide mission; the event thus marks the resumption of universal history, with which the Bible begins (Gen. 1-11)” (*ISBE*).¹³ As Messianic Believers, who understand ourselves to all be a part of the Commonwealth of Israel (Ephesians 2:11-12), how are we to understand *Shavuot*? Even though *Shavuot*, as a Biblical festival, was not the “birth of the Church,”¹⁴ the *Shavuot* when the Spirit was poured out did signal the beginning of a worldwide expansion of the good news of the God of Israel and His Messiah Yeshua. How many of us as Messianic Believers, because of the high focus on “Israel,” often forget that Israel is to be a light to the whole world?

Consider the fact that there are two loaves of bread commanded to be offered by the high priest before God at *Shavuot*. Why is this the case? What do these two loaves represent? These two loaves represent Israel *and* the nations—because the high priest did not *serve Israel exclusively*. The author of Hebrews writes that “every high priest taken from among men is appointed on behalf of men in things pertaining to God, in order to offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins” (Hebrews 5:1). Every priest of Israel that served before God serves “mortals” (NRSV) or “humans” (Grk. *anthrōpōn, ἀνθρώπων*). Those who came to the *Shavuot* event when the Spirit was poured out came from all over the Jewish

¹¹ Ibid, pp 302.

¹² This notably includes the mixed congregation(s) of Jewish and non-Jewish Believers in Rome, to whom Paul wrote in his Epistle to the Romans, and who many expositors (ourselves included) believe could have possibly been the primary audience of the anonymous Epistle to the Hebrews.

¹³ A.F. Glasser, “Pentecost,” in *ISBE*, 3:757.

¹⁴ Consult the article “When Did ‘the Church’ Begin?” by J.K. McKee.

¹⁵ We do note that the priesthood of Melchizedek, which supersedes the Levitical priesthood, with much further clarity serves all people. For a further discussion of this subject, consult *Hebrews for the Practical Messianic* by J.K. McKee.

Diaspora, and this included proselytes. They did not just come from among Jews living in Israel:

“Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” (Acts 2:9-11, NIV).

Shavuot is a time when we as Messianic Believers certainly need to focus on the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. But *Shavuot*, perhaps more than anything else, is a time when we need to understand the global vision of God. According to some Rabbinical opinions on Deuteronomy 1:5, when God delivered His commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai, they were delivered in the seventy languages of humanity that existed at the time—*meaning that they were not for Israel exclusively*. Israel just happened to be the vessel God would use to convey His good news to others.

That has still not changed. As Believers in Yeshua, we are all a part of Israel via our faith. The responsibility is still the same, but the means are much easier. The Torah was given by God to Israel at the first *Shavuot*, and many years later the Holy Spirit was poured out on another *Shavuot*. We now have to take God's two most powerful evangelistic tools: His Law and His Spirit, and be empowered to change the world. *Shavuot* is one of the most significant displays of our Heavenly Father's *salvation history* plan for the world.

When we celebrate *Shavuot*, we need to be committed to do the work of the evangelist—making sure that all know Yeshua as their Lord and Savior. We as Messianics can do this by not only knowing Yeshua for who He is in the writings of the Apostles, but also in the Scriptures that precede Him. It begins by us knowing that the Torah is to reveal the sin in our lives, and why we desperately need Him. At each *Shavuot*, let us celebrate the festival with a fullness that only those who have both the Torah *and* the Holy Spirit can experience!

TNN ONLINE EDITOR'S UPDATE

May 2014

Dear Friends:

I have had a great deal going through my mind the past month, partially due to the recent graduation of my sister Maggie from the University of Oklahoma, and also due to the ongoing research projects with which I am involved.



Just this past weekend (08-11 May), I attended the graduation of my youngest sister from college. She attended the same university as I, had many of my same professors, and has done quite extraordinarily well in her academics. She maxed out her under-graduate career much more than I, and she has a bright future on her horizon with two more years of graduate school, followed by a commissioning in the United States Navy as an officer. Inevitably, while this past weekend was indeed about celebrating her achievements, I did have a few short moments of thinking about where I was when I graduated from OU in 2003 *and* when I graduated from Asbury Theological Seminary in 2009. Suffice it to say, without reflecting too much, I came to the forthright conclusion that this was my sister's weekend and that I had thrown out the proverbial "book" on what it meant for me to live a more "normal" life a long, long time ago...

I have hardly lived a mundane or mediocre life the past eleven years, something which is evidenced by the volume of theological writing that I have accumulated. For some reason or another, the Lord has really impressed upon me that there are an entire range of not only topics, but also Biblical books, that needed some level of Messianic engagement *yesterday*. This year, TNN Press will be releasing its ***Messianic Kosher Helper***, a massive resource which I do think now will exceed 600 pages—because of all the Bible passages which our faith community has never really considered, that need to be discussed. In my "free time," as a matter of "busy work," I have been opening files on additional publications on new topics of importance, classifying Bible passages to be analyzed, so that preliminary notes can be added. Five years ago, I would not have thought that so many things would still need to be addressed. Eleven years ago, I would have thought (like so many others still do), that only five or six titles should suffice for our ministry publications.

I am very proud of my sister Maggie, and am excited about the life she has set before her. I have also learned in my own life, that even with one or two regrets over the past eleven years, that I would not go back and change things, as decisions made and experiences having taken place, have brought me to where I am today. *You* are a significant beneficiary of the experiences that I have had, and the convictions that have been instilled in me about our Messianic future and the labor it will take in order for us to get there.

Until next month... J.K. McKee

