

Why are there two different dates for Shavuot?

You may have noticed that different people celebrate the Feast of Shavuot at different times. Each person or group is convinced that they have the correct day for celebrating the feast. Why do we have this ambiguity about when to celebrate this appointed time of the LORD? The issue comes from interpreting the passage of scripture that defines when to celebrate this feast. The Feast of Shavuot is the fiftieth day after counting seven Sabbaths, or forty-nine days. That part is clear.

Leviticus 23:15-16 NKJV 15 'And you shall count for yourselves from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering: seven Sabbaths shall be completed. 16 'Count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath; then you shall offer a new grain offering to the LORD.

The question is when does the count begin? It begins from the day of Firstfruits when the first sheaf of barley is waved as an offering to God. Let's look at this passage to learn exactly what it says.

Leviticus 23:10-11 NKJV 10 "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. 11 '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.

Did you notice that there is not reference to a date or month in this passage? There is no mention of which Sabbath either. When we see the word Sabbath, we think the seventh day of a week. However, in addition to the weekly Sabbaths, certain days celebrated in the Appointed Times of the LORD were also celebrated as Sabbaths and called Sabbaths. Leviticus chapter 23 details these appointed times that we call feasts in the order in which they are celebrated. Firstfruits and the Feast of Shavuot fall between the Feast of Unleavened Bread in the spring and the Feast of Trumpets in the fall. We can further limit this time by noting that the barley harvest begins in the same month as the Passover. It is, in fact, the defining characteristic of the month containing the Passover.

Exodus 23:15 NKJV 15 "You shall keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread (you shall eat unleavened bread seven days, as I commanded you, at the time appointed in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt; none shall appear before Me empty);

The word “abib” is #24 in Strong’s Concordance meaning to be tender or green referring to a young ear of grain. The first harvest of the year in Israel is the barley harvest. Before any new grain could be eaten, it first had to be offered to the LORD.

Leviticus 23:14 NKJV 14 '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.

Since the barley is the first harvest occurring in the month of Abib, this grain is the first to be offered each year. It is the first of the firstfruits!

We’ve narrowed down the timing of the beginning of the fifty day count up to the Feast of Shavuot. It was in the month of Abib, the same month that the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread occurred. During the Feast of Unleavened Bread, every male had to appear before the LORD and he wasn’t to appear empty handed.

Deuteronomy 16:16 NKJV 16 "Three times a year all your males shall appear before the LORD your God in the place which He chooses: at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, at the Feast of Weeks, and at the Feast of Tabernacles; and they shall not appear before the LORD empty-handed.

At each of these feasts, each man was to bring an offering to the LORD. He was also to bring the firstfruits of the barley harvest. Since the harvest of the barley and the Feast of Unleavened Bread coincide, it makes sense that the firstfruits of the barley are offered during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The real question is when during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. We know it was to be on the day after the Sabbath, but which Sabbath? Since it is during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, there are three possible Sabbaths to choose from. The Feast of Unleavened Bread begins and ends with a Sabbath, so the Sabbath could be one of those. It could also be the weekly Sabbath that falls during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. At the time of Yeshua and even before, the exact timing from offering the Firstfruits, was debated with different opinions being held. To complicate things further, some sects of Judaism concluded that the offering of the barley didn’t have to be during the Feast of Unleavened Bread; it only had to be on the day after the Sabbath when it was first harvested. This could be either earlier or later in the month of Abib!

By the time of Yeshua, the debate was mostly between three points of view. The sects of the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes promoted these three different views. The Pharisees held that the Sabbath referred to was the Sabbath observed on the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread fixing the day of Firstfruits and the beginning of the fifty day count as the 16th of the month. The Essenes held the opposite view, insisting that the day of Firstfruits was separate from

the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and, thus, must be on the day after the Sabbath observed at the end of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. It fixed the day of Firstfruits and the beginning of the fifty count as the 23rd of the month.

Finally, the Sadducees believed that the day of Firstfruits was on the weekly Sabbath during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. This meant that the actual date for this appointed time would vary from year to year. This is how we in the United States observe Thanksgiving. It is always on the fourth Thursday of November but the actual date changes from year to year! It can be as early as November 22nd, and as late as November 28th. The same is true of the Sabbath during the Feast of Unleavened Bread; it could be as early as Nisan 16 and as late as Nisan 20.

Placing the day of Firstfruits on a day that changed from year to year made many of the Jewish leaders uncomfortable. They could not envision that God would vary it from year to year. But, what evidence do we have for each point of view? Leviticus 23:16 said that the count was to end on the fiftieth day, the day after the seventh Sabbath. There seems to be no ambiguity here; the count ends on the day after a Sabbath which means it begins on the day after a weekly Sabbath.

So, why do the Pharisees and the Essenes see it differently? The Pharisees reasoning is that the fifty days must count to some event. Looking at the calendar, counting fifty days from Nisan 16 takes us to Sivan 6, the sixth day of the third month. The children of Israel arrived at Mt. Sinai on the first day of the third month.

Exodus 19:1 NKJV 1 In the third month after the children of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, **on the same day**, they came to the Wilderness of Sinai.

The phrase “on the same day” indicates that it was on the first day of the month. We follow the days after and can conclude that God spoke the ten words we call the Ten Commandments on either Sivan 6 or 7. The uncertainty here comes when we look at the final three days before God’s declaration of the ten words. Moses brought God’s instructions to get ready for the third day when He would appear to them.

Exodus 19:14-15 NKJV 14 So Moses went down from the mountain to the people and sanctified the people, and they washed their clothes. 15 And he said to the people, "Be ready for the third day; do not come near your wives."

The question is which day was the third day? Was it from the day Moses told them to prepare or was it from the next day, the day they began to prepare? Depending on the answer, the day God spoke to the children of Israel would be either the sixth or seventh day of the month.

The Pharisees put the count to the fiftieth day with the appearance of God. If the count after the day of Firstfruits could vary, then the count would frequently end at a day other than when God spoke the Ten Words. If the count always began on Nisan 16, the day after the Sabbath of the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, then it ended at Sivan 6 which must be the day God spoke the Ten Words.

The Essenes choice of the Sabbath on the last day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread would always miss the day that God spoke the Ten Words from Mt. Sinai. The Sadducees choice would line up with either the sixth or the seventh occasionally, but not always. So, which one is the correct choice? The plain meaning of the text strongly supports that the Day of Firstfruits had to be the day after the weekly Sabbath. The pattern of events and the pattern of God's word supports that the Sabbath must be the first day of Unleavened Bread.

Every once in a while these two points of view align with each other. Using a calendar regression program, we can examine where dates fell in the past. In the year 30 C.E., the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread fell on a Friday. The Sabbath of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, Nisan 16, fell on the weekly Sabbath making it a double Sabbath! The Day of Firstfruits was the same day according to both the Pharisees and the Sadducees!

Yeshua rose from the grave on Nisan 17, the first day of the week and the Day of Firstfruits! The day that both the Pharisees and the Sadducees lifted a sheaf of barley to wave before the LORD as an offering of Firstfruits!

Counting fifty days takes us to Sivan 6, the day God spoke the Ten Words as His voice sounded in the thunderings and lightnings touched those who gathered at the base of Mt. Sinai. It takes us to the Feast of Shavuot when one hundred twenty of Yeshua's disciples are gathered in the temple as the celebration of the feast began. This is the day when the Holy Spirit came in the mighty roar of wind and tongues of fire touched the heads of the one hundred twenty disciples filling them with the Holy Spirit as they sang praises to God!

So, which day is the Feast of Shavuot? We choose to celebrate it according to the plain meaning of the text, the day after the weekly Sabbath knowing that, in God's timing, it will align with the day God spoke the Ten Words on those special times when God fulfills His Appointed Times.