**Shavuot and Pentecost**

Michelle Arnold 6/5/2019

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Every Pentecost, we listen to the story of the descent of the Holy Spirit upon those who were gathered together in the upper room where the Passover had occurred fifty days before. The first reading for the Feast of Pentecost focuses on the moment of the Holy Spirit’s arrival:

When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together. And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven staying in Jerusalem. At this sound, they gathered in a large crowd, but they were confused because each one heard them speaking in his own language (Acts 2:1-6).

When the disciples of Christ gathered in that room, they weren’t there to celebrate what we know today as the Christian holiday of Pentecost. It did not yet exist. Although Christ promised the disciples that the Holy Spirit would come upon them (Acts 1:8), he did not say when that would happen—and they were warned not to seek after divine timelines (see Acts 1:7).

The disciples were there in that upper room because Christ directed them to remain in Jerusalem (Acts 1:4) and because they were anticipating the arrival of an already established Jewish holiday that fell ten days after Christ’s ascension into heaven. We know this because also gathered in Jerusalem for that holiday were crowds of “devout Jews from every nation under heaven.”

**Gathering in Jerusalem**

There are three festivals in Judaism for which the Jewish people were expected to make a pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem: Sukkot, the fall harvest festival that also commemorated the forty years that Israel journeyed in the wilderness; Passover, the commemoration of Israel’s exodus from Egypt and their newfound freedom from slavery; and Shavuot, the spring harvest festival, which falls fifty days after Passover and commemorates the giving of the Law to Moses at Mount Sinai.

Jews living in the diaspora were expected to gather in Jerusalem on those holidays for liturgies performed by the priests at the Temple. When the Temple was destroyed in A.D. 70, the obligation for pilgrimage was no longer binding on Jews, but the holidays continued to be observed in the diaspora, and Jews to this day celebrate them.

Shavuot, which means *weeks* in Hebrew, was called “Pentecost” at the time St. Luke wrote the book of Acts. *Pentecost* was an ancient Greek word that means “fiftieth day”—the end of the fifty days between Passover and Shavuot. When the disciples were waiting for “the time for Pentecost [to be] fulfilled,” they were waiting for the fiftieth day after the Passover. That time, in fact, was marked with a ritual counting each day between the second day of the Passover until the day before Shavuot began (see sidebar page xx, “The Counting of the Omer”).

Modern Jews no longer typically use the word *Pentecost* for Shavuot, given the Christian association the word has, but there remain interesting correlations between Shavuot and its Christian counterpart.

**The story of Ruth**

A primary ritual of the modern celebration of Shavuot is the reading of the book of Ruth from the Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible). While there is no explicit mention of Shavuot in the Book of Ruth, traditional reasons why Ruth is read on this holiday include her story being set mainly during the harvest of the barley and wheat (see Ruth 2:23) and because Ruth is an ancestor of King David, who was believed to have been born and to have died on Shavuot.

One of the major themes of the book of Ruth is the commitment of a Moabite woman, Ruth, to follow the one true God of Israel (see Ruth 1:16), and her subsequent acceptance into the Jewish people—first by her mother-in-law, Naomi (see Ruth 1:18) and then by her late husband’s kinsman, Boaz, who marries her (see Ruth 4:10). Even as the wheat is being harvested, a Gentile woman is being “gathered in” to the chosen people of God. She would, in turn, become the great-grandmother of Israel’s greatest king and the ancestor of its Messiah.

This is implied in the text by the fact that the Messiah had long been foretold to be the preeminent Son of David. (The book of Ruth was written long after the events in the story, which can be seen by the genealogy of David given at the end.) St. Matthew would make the connection explicit in his genealogy of Jesus of Nazareth (see Matthew 1:5).

To this day, Shavuot is associated with conversion. In many Jewish communities, conversions of non-Jews to Judaism are scheduled for Shavuot in recognition of Ruth’s commitment to the Jewish people.

In the Book of Acts, the Holy Spirit descends on a holiday on which Jews have made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem from “every nation under heaven.” The gospel is first proclaimed to the Jewish people and then, by extension, to all people of all nations represented in Jerusalem on that first Pentecost after the Resurrection. As St. Peter says to the crowds that day, “the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him” (Acts 2:39). From Jerusalem, the apostles and disciples would take the message of Christ to “all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

**Shavuot and the first fruits**

Although the agricultural aspect of Shavuot concerns mainly the spring harvest, it also marks the beginning of the birth of new fruits of the land, and those the fruits were brought to the Temple at Shavuot. The book of Deuteronomy names these first fruits, called *bikkurim* in Hebrew:

For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper. And you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land he has given you (Deut. 8:7–10).

Seven “fruits of the land” are identified here as gifts from God to the people of Israel, which were promised in abundance as a reward for their settling in the land God has given them: wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and dates (which are associated with honey).

For Christians, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, first given to Christians in baptism and strengthened in confirmation—especially, at confirmation, to prepare the Christian to share the gospel (see the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1285)—brings gifts and fruits of the Spirit. The *Catechism*lists seven gifts and twelve fruits of the Holy Spirit:

The seven gifts of the Holy Spirit are wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord. They belong in their fullness to Christ, Son of David. They complete and perfect the virtues of those who receive them. They make the faithful docile in readily obeying divine inspirations. . . . The fruits of the Spirit are perfections that the Holy Spirit forms in us as the first fruits of eternal glory. The tradition of the Church lists twelve of them: charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control, chastity (CCC 1831-1832).

**The giving of the law**

Besides being a spring harvest festival, Shavuot commemorates the giving of the Torah to the Israelites after their exodus from Egypt.

You may recall that when Moses came down from Mount Sinai into the camp of the Israelites, he did not find the people waiting for his return. Rather, they had given up on him and on God and had created for themselves a new god: a golden calf. God was furious and wanted to wipe them out, but Moses interceded. Moses himself was enraged and exacted punishment on the people:

When Moses saw that the people had broken loose (for Aaron had let them break loose, to their shame among their enemies), then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said, “Who is on the Lord’s side? Come to me.” And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together to him. And he said to them, “Thus says the Lord God of Israel, ‘Put every man his sword on his side, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbor.’” And the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses; and there fell of the people that day about three thousand men (Exod. 32:25–28).

During a class on Shavuot that I took a few years ago at a local synagogue, the speaker told the story of the giving of the Law and quoted this passage from Scripture. I have to admit that my mind had been wandering a bit while he spoke, but at the mention of the 3,000, I snapped to attention. There was something about that detail that struck me as important. After class, I confirmed it. There was also mention of 3,000 at the first Christian Pentecost:

Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brethren, what shall we do?” And Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him.” And he testified with many other words and exhorted them, saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.” So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls (Acts 2:37-41).

Three thousand were killed at the first Pentecost at Mount Sinai; at the New Pentecost, following the definitive Passover of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, 3,000 were not only restored but in a real sense were brought back to life (see Romans 6:4).

**The restoration of the kingdom**

Christians today often smile at the first disciples’ lack of understanding. They always seemed to ask the wrong question at the wrong time, and their questions sometimes seemed self-serving.

For example, right before Christ’s ascension into heaven, the disciples ask him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). Twentieth-century Catholic apologist Frank Sheed, in his book *To Know Christ Jesus*, calls this question proof of the disciples’ “old obsession,” and says, “They needed the Holy Spirit”—presumably to understand that creating an earthly kingdom was not what Christ had in mind.

In context, though, the disciples’ question was a fair one. Shavuot was approaching (they had been counting the days), a holiday on which tradition had it that King David, ancestor to the Messiah, had been born and had died. Did it not stand to reason that Jesus of Nazareth, who had proven himself to be the Messiah they awaited, might now establish his kingdom? After all, had not Christ been talking to them throughout these forty days precisely about the kingdom of God (see Acts 1:3)? Perhaps the Son of David, who had been raised to new life on the Passover, would inaugurate his kingdom on David’s holiday.

But Frank Sheed’s observation is mostly correct. The disciples did need the Holy Spirit in order to finally understand that, on this particular Shavuot, Christ would not be inaugurating an earthly kingdom. Instead, he would give them the Holy Spirit, through whom they would begin the work of building his Church, the kingdom of God on Earth.