

Shavuot! As I've written before, of all the Biblical feasts, I find this one the most intriguing. The wave sheaf is cut down and waved immediately after Passover. Then, 50 days – or seven weeks - are counted (hence, 'Pentecost' – 50 - in Greek) and 'Shavuot' (Hebrew for 'weeks') is observed. So as a festival, it does not have its 'own' date affixed to it, but relies on the counting of days after the Wave Sheaf was offered. It is therefore directly linked to Passover and cannot be reckoned otherwise.

This feast actually has three names in Scripture: 'Harvest' (it's the time of the barley and wheat harvest), 'Weeks' (Pentecost) and 'Firstfruits' (Ex 20:16, Lev 23:10, Deut 16:10, Deut 16:16).

In this article, I'd like to look at this feast in the light of its title, 'Firstfruits', and the work of the Holy Spirit as He relates directly to this feast because I have often wondered, 'Why did the Holy Spirit come specifically at the feast of Pentecost (Acts 2) instead of one of the other festivals? What is the significance of this particular feast, in this regard?

In Hebrew, 'firstfruits' is 'bikkurim' (בִּכּוּרִים) and it comes from the same Hebrew root word as 'birthright' or 'firstborn' (בְּכוֹרָה or בכור). Normally, the birthright belongs to the firstborn son, hence the 'shared' terminology. This is known as 'primogeniture'. Israel is the 'firstborn-son', as Moses declared to Pharaoh (Ex. 4: 22), to whom belongs the birthright.

It is interesting to trace the birthright of the Messiah, through the various generations of the nation of Israel. It is also fascinating to

study the respective birthrights *within* the tribes of Israel.

It is clear in Scripture that Isaac inherited the birthright as the 'firstborn' son of Abraham. Even though Ishmael had been born before him, he was not the son of Sarah. Isaac is called 'thine only son' by God (Gen 22:2), and was Abraham's promised 'heir' (Gen 15:4). Jacob, contrary to popular bias, did not 'trick' or 'steal' the birthright from Esau but had to employ means to secure that which was rightfully his according to God's decree (Gen 25:23, 31-33). Later, Esau continued to show disregard for the birthright, and the blessing which belongs to it, by thinking that he could ask for the blessing after he'd sold out.

Theoretically, the birthright from Jacob should have passed on to Reuben, Jacob's firstborn. But as we see from Scripture, it passed over him and others until it was given to Joseph (I Chron 5: 1,2). Judah became the chief ruler, but the birthright was Joseph's. When it came time for Jacob to bless Joseph's sons, he conferred the birthright to Ephraim, *guiding his hands wittingly!*

There are many other births in the family life of Israel that we could study, but suffice to say in each we find the Spirit of God at work, along with a link to the harvest season. Jacob's wives contended with each other in the matter of bearing sons at the time of the wheat harvest (Gen 30:14). We also remember that the entire story of Ruth took place at the time of the barley and wheat harvest, when her faith as a Gentile led to the preservation of the lineage of the Messiah, in the tribe of Judah and the line of David (see the book of Ruth).



Indeed, scripture reveals the direct work of the Holy Spirit in the birth of Jesus, the firstborn son of Mary (Matt 1:20, 25; Luke 1:35).

The Holy Spirit, as we know, fell at Shavuot/Pentecost, as Jewish people from at least 16 other language groups were gathered in Jerusalem, and there was a mighty 'harvest' of 3000 souls to the Lord (Acts 2)! James, writing to the '12 tribes scattered abroad', declared that 'of His own will begat He us with the word of truth, that we should BE a kind of firstfruits of his creatures' (Ja 1:18).

The writer to the Hebrews, encouraging them to remain steadfast in their new faith in Yeshua wrote, 'But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, To the general assembly and *church of the firstborn*...and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel'. (Heb 12:22-24)

In his letter to the Romans, Paul painstakingly sets out the relationship between the Jewish nation and the gentiles by repeating the phrase 'to the Jew first' (Rom. 1:16; 2:9, 10). In short, as Firstborn Son, the birthright belongs to Israel – with its blessings as well as its responsibilities, obligations and calling. This does not exclude gentiles from being included in the commonwealth of Israel when we put our faith in Jesus (Eph. 2:11-13), but the birthright distinguishes Israel's position in God's order and plan. Let's also remember that Israel's inheritance includes the physical, promised Land (Ps 105:8-11, among many others) that God covenanted and swore to give them.

The Holy Spirit is directly involved in the work of Salvation of both Jew and Gentile. Again in the letter to the Romans, Paul explains that Gentile believers have been given the 'Spirit of Adoption', whereby we cry out 'Abba, Father' (Rom 8:15). In the very next chapter, though, Paul emphatically states that '*to them (the Jewish people) pertaineth the sonship*' (Rom 9: 4,5). The very motif of the Olive and Olive tree represent the Holy Spirit in Scripture, which is why Paul employs it to clarify his message in Rom. 11: 17-21.

One wonders if the decline that we see in churches today is a result not only of arrogance, but brazen anti-semitism. In an area of the UK which strongly upheld prophetic Biblical truth and where Jewish mission actually began - in the 19th Century - a recent Church document has been produced, part of which states:

"To Christians in the 21st century, promises about the land of Israel shouldn't be intended to be taken literally, or as applying to a defined geographical territory; they are a way of speaking about how to live under God so that justice and peace reign, the weak and poor are protected, the stranger is included, and all have a share in the community and a contribution to make to it. The 'promised land' in the Bible is not a place, so much as a metaphor of how things ought to be among the people of God. This 'promised land' can be found – or built – anywhere." (From '*The Inheritance of Abraham*', Church of Scotland General Assembly report.) The head of the ecclesiastical council behind this document which questions the Jewish people's claim to the land, and who has strong ties to the BDS movement, is now the moderator of the Church of Scotland.

God's Law requires that 'all the firstborn of thy sons thou shalt redeem' (Ex 34:20), and to reiterate, Israel is God's Firstborn Son. In honouring His own law, He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities and will save them (Ps 130:8 and Rom 11:26,27)! The ceremony in Judaism of the Redemption of the Firstborn, known as 'Pidyon Ha Ben', involves the use of special silver coins. As Peter wrote to the Jewish believers scattered in the Diaspora, 'forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.' (I Pet 18, 19).

The letter to the Romans is a clear and relevant message to the Church today. Paul's warning to the church not to become arrogant is a very serious one (Rom 11:21). The central theme and message of Pentecost is the birthright and place in God's order and plan of the nation of Israel. Of priority in

bringing the Gospel is the Jewish people. May you know the Lord's blessing as you bless His People (Gen 12:3). Chrissy Rodgers