

COUNTING THE OMER

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A Daily Devotional Toward Shavuot

William Mark Huey



Counting the Omer

A DAILY DEVOTIONAL TOWARD SHAVUOT

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edited by J.K. McKee

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Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them,
“When you enter the land which I am going to give to you and reap its harvest, then you shall bring in the sheaf of the first fruits of your harvest to the priest. He shall wave the sheaf before the LORD for you to be accepted; on the day after the sabbath the priest shall wave it. Now on the day when you wave the sheaf, you shall offer a male lamb one year old without defect for a burnt offering to the LORD. Its grain offering shall then be two-tenths *of an ephah* of fine flour mixed with oil, an offering by fire to the LORD *for* a soothing aroma, with its drink offering, a fourth of a hin of wine. Until this same day, until you have brought in the offering of your God, you shall eat neither bread nor roasted grain nor new growth. It is to be a perpetual statute throughout your generations in all your dwelling places. 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.”

Leviticus 23:10-15

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Abbreviation Chart and Special Terms

Special terms unique to this publication that may be used have been provided in this chart:

Apostolic Scriptures/Writings: the New Testament

ATS: ArtScroll Tanach (1996)

b. Babylonian Talmud (*Talmud Bavli*)

BDAG: *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich)

BDB: *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*

CHALOT: *Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*

CJB: Complete Jewish Bible (1998)

EDB: *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*

ESV: English Standard Version (2001)

EXP: *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*

Grk: Greek

HALOT: *Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Koehler and Baumgartner)

HCSB: Holman Christian Standard Bible (2004)

Heb: Hebrew

KJV: King James Version

LXE: *Septuagint with Apocrypha* by Sir L.C.L. Brenton (1851)

LXX: Septuagint

LS: *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Liddell & Scott)

m. Mishnah

NASU: New American Standard Update (1995)

NEB: New English Bible (1970)

NIV: New International Version (1984)

NJPS: Tanakh, A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures (1999)

NLT: New Living Translation (1996)

NRSV: New Revised Standard Version (1989)

RSV: Revised Standard Version (1952)

t. Tosefta

Tanakh: the Old Testament

TNIV: Today’s New International Version (2005)

TWOT: *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*

YLT: Young’s Literal Translation (1862/1898)

Introduction

An interesting experience happened to me on my spiritual journey between Passover and the Feast of Weeks in 2004 which actually inspired this volume. At that time, in my capacity as director of Outreach Israel Ministries, we were responsible for certain elements of a unified effort, by several independent Messianic ministries, to co-host a celebration of the festival of *Shavuot* (Pentecost) in Orlando, Florida. With the stated theme of “Unity in Spirit and Truth,” our collective efforts, among many goals, were devoted to displaying to much of the beleaguered Messianic community—at least for *a brief moment*—that Spirit-led followers of Yeshua the Messiah could actually work, worship, and minister together while commemorating the Feast of Weeks. In Biblical times, *Shavuot* was originally given to be one of the three times of ingathering at Jerusalem:

“Three times a year you shall celebrate a feast to Me. You shall observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread; for seven days you are to eat unleavened bread, as I commanded you, at the appointed time in the month Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt. And none shall appear before Me empty-handed. **Also you shall observe the Feast of the Harvest of the first fruits of your labors from what you sow in the field;** also the Feast of the Ingathering at the end of the year when you gather in *the fruit of* your labors from the field. Three times a year all your males shall appear before the Lord GOD” (Exodus 23:14-17; cf. Leviticus 23:11-16).

The important feature of *Shavuot* is to convoke and declare allegiance and dedication to God. Our primary objective in 2004 was to focus on the Holy One of Israel, and since most do not have the financial ability to convene in Jerusalem, we simply wanted to assemble as one and declare our love and obedience to the Lord, allowing His Spirit to minister. As a result, almost all who attended our convocation were treated to an awesome display of how events and gatherings focused on the Messiah Yeshua and His work for us, can be a spiritual blessing beyond description.

With the *Shavuot* gathering as a backdrop, one of my responsibilities was to encourage various Messianic Believers to consider coming to Orlando and attend, so that they might receive of His blessings. As we began to enter into the Spring 2004 appointed times, my attention was drawn to a piece of the Torah’s instruction that is to focus God’s people on the arrival of *Shavuot* after they commemorate the Passover:

“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 [*omer ha'tenufah*, הַתְּנוּפָה הָעֹמֶר]; 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).

As I pondered this command, and reflected on my own personal negligence at the time to really understand how to follow it, I had a private conviction to “Count the Omer,” a process known in Hebrew as *sefriat ha'omer* (סְפִירַת הָעֹמֶר). In Ancient Israel during the

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Passover season, “from the day when you bring the Omer of the waving—seven weeks” (Leviticus 23:15, ATS) were to be counted to *Shavuot* or the Feast of Weeks. For today’s Messianic Believers, who recognize Yeshua’s prophetic fulfillment of the Passover by His atoning sacrifice for our sins and resurrection as firstfruits, and the significance of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (as well as the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai)—I concluded that there must be an edifying way that individuals desiring to press into the Holy One could employ, making the season of Counting the Omer something special.

In my attempt to be obedient to Count the Omer, I did some examination to determine just what the Torah’s instructions meant, and if there were any existing, systematic method(s) for doing it. Certainly, I reasoned, the Jewish community which has faithfully observed the appointed times for millennia, was bound to have developed some useful methods or exercises to follow for Counting the Omer. The *siddur* or traditional prayer book certainly contains a customary blessing that is to be recited as one focuses on the holiness of this time, followed by a day-to-day number counting:¹

*Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu
melekh ha’olam, asher kidshanu
b’mitzvotav v’tzivanu al sefriat
ha’omer.*

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ
הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו
וְצִוָּנוּ עַל סְפִירַת הָעֹמֶר

Praised are You Lord our God, who
rules the universe, instilling in us the
holiness of commandments by
commanding us to count the *omer*.

Psalms 67 and 128 are among some of the traditional texts considered, especially as Psalm 67 was likely recited when sacrifices had originally been offered in the Temple. I am a Believer who often needs to follow a consistent regimen of an outlined plan or order, to focus my spiritual attention throughout the year (one of the main reasons why I so appreciate the annual Torah cycle), and I was most curious whether or not there was something available for me to employ during my Counting of the Omer in 2004. In my cursory search for outlines or programs, I found a variety of useful activities based off of the Scriptures.

The systematic way of Counting the Omer which really bore witness to me involved a number of Psalms, each of which was intended to focus on an aspect of God’s holiness, His provision for His people, His goodness, His mercy and grace, His justice, etc. In ancient times when the Temple and the altar were operational, the Levitical priests exclaimed psalms and hymns that were to extol the adoration and worship of the LORD God of Israel throughout the year, but especially during the fifty days of Counting the Omer. Reviewing this list of Psalms and considering this systematic plan for enhancing the command to Count the Omer, I found that the readings were a logical way to not only enhance my own spiritual pursuits, but also to especially encourage other Messianic Believers to Count the Omer themselves (for the list, see **Psalm Readings for Counting the Omer** in the

¹ Jules Harlow, ed., *Siddur Sim Shalom for Shabbat and Festivals* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 2007), pp 55-60; cf. Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, eds., *Complete ArtScroll Siddur, Nusach Sefard* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1985), pp 312-317.

“Counting the Omer” chapter following). I thought it a useful exercise to incorporate the list into a series of daily reflections which would be sent to our ministry’s e-mail update teaching subscribers.

(I was actually given this plan for Counting the Omer from an acquaintance of mine, and even though I have not been able to find out who originally put it together, I have no doubt that this person will be given great blessings by the Holy One throughout eternity!)ⁱⁱ

What I intended to do was very simple: to assist people Counting the Omer by providing a review of some contemplative Psalms. Psalm 67 was read or recited each day as the morning oblation would have been offered in the Temple, so each update reproduced Psalm 67 at its beginning. When you read this Psalm, it outlines and establishes the setting for the sacrifices presented at the altar, and to a certain extent, sets the tone for the order of worship:

“For the choir director; with stringed instruments. A Psalm. A Song. God be gracious to us and bless us, and cause His face to shine upon us—Selah. That Your way may be known on the earth, Your salvation among all nations. Let the peoples praise You, O God; let all the peoples praise You. Let the nations be glad and sing for joy; for You will judge the peoples with uprightness and guide the nations on the earth. Selah. Let the peoples praise You, O God; let all the peoples praise You. The earth has yielded its produce; God, our God, blesses us. God blesses us, that all the ends of the earth may fear Him” (Psalm 67).

As I read this Psalm, I could picture in my mind’s eye the actual sacrificial ceremonies that had once taken place on the Temple Mount. Since it was composed for the choir director, with stringed instruments, and referred to as both a “psalm” and a “song,”ⁱⁱⁱ I could envision various priests gathered near the altar with their different instruments, offering up praise to God in conjunction with the sacrifices. Then I could hear the officiating priest declare what appears to be an abbreviated rendition of the Aaronic Benediction (Deuteronomy 6:4-9), followed by a pause, *selah* (שְׁלֵחַ), for reflection. Next, another stanza proclaims the sovereignty of God over the Earth, His offer of salvation to the nations, and the joy this brings to those who know Him. This is followed by another pause to soak in these declarations. Finally, the priest places the daily offering on the altar, and he beseeches the Holy One for His blessings.

What can a simple ceremony like this teach followers of the Messiah of Israel?

As you will discover when you begin your reading of this devotional, as I was writing my initial exhortations to encourage our ministry friends to simply consider participating in their own Omer Count, I found myself being spiritually exercised by this daily procedure. At first, it was actually not my intention to write a (long/er) daily devotional, but just send out a brief update really only reproducing the Psalm quotations to read. However, by Day

ⁱⁱ Richard Booker, *Celebrating Jesus in the Biblical Feasts* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 2009), pp 188-189 offers the same outline that we follow for Counting the Omer, with Psalm 119 employed for Days #1-22. After this our plans diverge, as he recommends Acts chs. 1-28 for the remaining twenty-eight days, a chapter of the Book of Acts each day, and we will employ other Psalm passages.

ⁱⁱⁱ Heb. *mizmor shir* (מִזְמוֹר שִׁיר).

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#2, I was personally receiving so many meaningful thoughts by reflecting on these selections, that I began to put my thoughts to writing. By Day #3, I was personally committed to writing a daily commentary, to continue encouraging Messianic Believers who were perhaps also Counting the Omer for the very first time.

Throughout this devotional you will read my thoughts on how various Psalm selections moved me in my pursuit of following the Torah admonition to Count the Omer. At times, I noticed that the daily Omer Count enhanced my weekly study of the Torah portions, seeing thematic parallels or concepts which would be further illuminated by the various Psalms. In time, I concluded that the Holy Spirit was rewarding me for my obedience to focus my time and thoughts on these wonderful passages from the Holy Writ.

My prayer is that all of you who read through this devotional—but more importantly, who choose to remember the command to Count the Omer—will likewise be encouraged by the indwelling power of the Ruach HaKodesh (Holy Spirit), teaching you in the ways of holiness and righteousness. As we all draw closer to our Creator through diligent obedience to Him, may He be glorified!

Until the restoration of all things...

William Mark Huey

Counting the Omer

Mark Huey with J.K. McKee

What is Counting the Omer, a process known in Hebrew as *sefiyat ha'omer* (הַעֲמֵר הַכֹּפֵּרֶת)? An *omer* (עֹמֶר) is actually a measure of weight seen in the Tanakh Scriptures (Old Testament), the equivalent of about 2.3 quarts or 2.2 liters in modern units.ⁱ In the waving of the sheaf/*omer* ceremony during the season of Passover, the priest was to take this *omer* amount from the firstfruits of the barley harvest, presenting it before the Lord. Following the waving of the sheaf/*omer*, a fifty-day period would commence, counting toward the Feast of Weeks or *Shavuot* (שָׁבֻעוֹת).ⁱⁱ *Shavuot* is often known by its Greek-derived name “Pentecost,” as *Pentēkostē* (πεντηκοστή) means “fiftieth.” The principal instructions regarding how *Shavuot* or Pentecost is to be observed are seen in Leviticus 23 and Deuteronomy 16:

“Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘When you enter the land which I am going to give to you and reap its harvest, then you shall bring in the sheaf of the first fruits of your harvest to the priest. He shall wave the sheaf before the LORD for you to be accepted; on the day after the sabbath the priest shall wave it. Now on the day when you wave the sheaf, you shall offer a male lamb one year old without defect for a burnt offering to the LORD. Its grain offering shall then be two-tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with oil, an offering by fire to the LORD for a soothing aroma, with its drink offering, a fourth of a hin of wine. Until this same day, until you have brought in the offering of your God, you shall eat neither bread nor roasted grain nor new growth. It is to be a perpetual statute throughout your generations in all your dwelling places. 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 23:10-16).

“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. Then you shall celebrate the Feast of Weeks to the LORD your God with a tribute of a freewill offering of your hand, which you shall give just as the LORD your God blesses you; and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God, you and your son and your daughter and your male and female servants and the Levite who is in your

ⁱ Michael M. Homan, “Weights and Measures,” in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1374.

ⁱⁱ Pronounced as *Shavuot* in the Ashkenazic Jewish tradition.

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town, and the stranger and the orphan and the widow who are in your midst, in the place where the LORD your God chooses to establish His name” (Deuteronomy 16:9-11).

Before you read through my daily devotionals for the fifty-day Counting of the Omer, an overview of the subject is in order. Within the Torah, it is stated that the Counting of the Omer is to begin during the Festival of Unleavened Bread (Leviticus 23:6-8); it is to specifically start “on the day after the sabbath” (Leviticus 23:11).ⁱⁱⁱ For many Bible readers, when to start the Counting of the Omer is a closed issue: there is a weekly Sabbath or *Shabbat* (שַׁבָּת) that occurs during the Festival of Unleavened Bread, meaning that the start of the Omer Count begins and ends on a Sunday, the day after the Sabbath. This means that *Shavuot* will always fall on a Sunday. Does this not align with the admonition to count “seven complete sabbaths” (Leviticus 23:15)?^{iv} It should not really matter that Deuteronomy 16:6 uses different terminology, saying that the Counting of the Omer involves “seven weeks.”^v

If you have been a part of the Messianic community for any period of time, then you have probably heard the expression, “two Jews, three opinions.” While to many people, the instructions on how to Count the Omer may seem pretty straightforward, within Jewish history they have been interpreted differently. Different sects of Second Temple Judaism, in which Messiah Yeshua conducted His ministry, had their own views on the Torah commandments for when to Count the Omer. Of the two main Jewish groups of the First Century C.E., the Sadducees interpreted the “day after the sabbath” in Leviticus 23:11 to be the weekly Sabbath during Unleavened bread, **but** the Pharisees interpreted “the day after the sabbath” to actually be the High Sabbath which begins the Festival of Unleavened Bread. The Saddusaical Omer Count would always be observed from a Sunday to a Sunday, but the Pharisaical Omer Count would begin on the 16th of Aviv/Nisan and end on the 6th of Sivan, fluxuating on any day of the week year-by-year. Jeffrey H. Tigay summarizes in his commentary on Deuteronomy,

“According to Leviticus 23:11, the counting begins with an offering of the first sheaf of the harvest ‘on the day after the Sabbath.’ From the context this seems to refer to the Sunday after the first sheaf is cut, whenever that should occur, some time during or after the Feast of Unleavened Bread. In Second Temple times it was assumed that ‘on the day after the Sabbath’ does not refer to an exact date. There was controversy among various Jewish sects as to whether a Sabbath within the Feast of Unleavened Bread was meant or one following it. The Pharisees held that ‘the day after the Sabbath’ does not mean a Sunday at all, but the day after a Sabbath-like holiday, namely the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. This became the basis of the halakhic ruling that the first sheaf is brought, and the counting begins, on the second day of the feast, the sixteenth of Nisan, and that the Feast of Weeks falls on the sixth of Sivan (May-June).”^{vi}

ⁱⁱⁱ Heb. *m'mochorat ha'Shabbat* (מִמְּחֹרַת הַשַּׁבָּת).

^{iv} Heb. *sheva Shabbatot temimot* (שֵׁבַע שַׁבְּתוֹת תְּמִימוֹת).

^v Heb. *sheva shavuot* (שֵׁבַע שָׁבוּעוֹת).

^{vi} Jeffrey H. Tigay, *JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 157.

Within Jewish history, schisms and divisions between different sects and groups widely occurred on the basis of what religious calendar was employed. The differences of interpreting “the day after the sabbath” (Leviticus 23:11) were one of the main areas where the Sadducees and Pharisees, who both composed the religious council known as the Sanhedrin, were divided. The Sadducees largely made up the Temple priesthood and Jewish aristocracy, and the Pharisees composed many of the Rabbis, teachers, and scribes that the people as a whole looked to for spiritual leadership. A third group, the Essenes or Qumran community (who gave us the Dead Sea Scrolls), interpreted “the day after the sabbath” to be the last weekly Sabbath during the week of Unleavened Bread, meaning that they would keep *Shavuot* a week after the Sadducees. When the Temple was destroyed in 70 C.E. the Sadducees disbanded, the Essenes faded away, but the Pharisees continued on, giving rise to Rabbinical and Talmudic Judaism. Within today’s Jewish community (Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform), the theological descendants and offshoots of the Pharisees, *Shavuot* is remembered on the 6th of Sivan.

What all positions regarding the Counting of the Omer agree upon for certain **is that the Counting of the Omer lasts fifty days**. Whenever you begin the seven weeks to *Shavuot*, you will count forty-nine days and then the day of *Shavuot*.

Surveying today’s broad Messianic community, which largely includes Messianic Judaism, and both the One Law and Two-House sub-movements, there is no agreed-upon way over when to Count the Omer to *Shavuot*. It is safe to say that most of Messianic Judaism follows the same Pharisaical reckoning as does the Synagogue, but in the independent Messianic movement—of which our ministry largely finds itself a part—one encounters a great deal of variance. Just as divisions within Judaism have often been focused around calendar disputes, so can the method of Counting the Omer divide Messianic Believers during the season of Passover to Pentecost. Sadly, there has often not been a great deal of maturity or forbearance present regarding this issue, and people are frequently perplexed over factionalism that can manifest—especially during a season when Messiah followers should especially be coming together!

Why the Debate on How to Count the Omer?

Our ministry strongly feels that the Messianic movement does not need any more reasons than it already has to be internally divided or factionalized. Given the many things that our broad faith community has endured since the *Shavuot* 2004 gathering Outreach Israel helped put together, “Unity in Spirit and Truth,” there has sadly been a great deal of disunity and misinformation circulate among Messianic Believers. There have been significant waves of theological and spiritual error hit the Messianic world, requiring Outreach Israel Ministries and TNN Online to take a very proactive, apologetic stance on many issues. This has certainly helped refine our vision and purpose for the long term future, and circumstances have forced us to conduct many studies and inquiries into topics that we may not have otherwise done.^{vii}

In past years, as our ministry has faithfully been able to teach on the Spring festivals of the Lord, Count the Omer, encourage people to use this season to draw closer to Him, and be involved with various *Shavuot* gatherings and celebrations—we have **never allowed** differences of interpretation over *when* to start the Omer Count to divide Believers. While

^{vii} Consult the author’s article “Refining Our Vision,” appearing in the July 2007 issue of Outreach Israel News.