

Book Two of the Passover Trilogy



A FEAST OF WEEKS

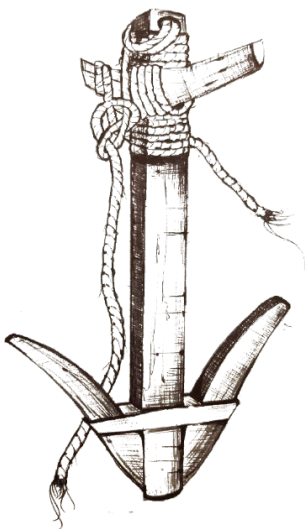
Priscilla's Pentecost

Dr. Lon A. Wiksell & Ryan Wiksell

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Lon A. Wiksell, D. Min. & Ryan Wiksell

For Haddon, Simeon, Asher, Anya & Teodora

*May the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob
keep you and bless you. And may you love
him with all your heart, soul, and strength.*

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INTRODUCTION

A Feast of Weeks: Priscilla's Pentecost is the second book of the Passover Trilogy, by Dr. Lon Wiksell and Ryan Wiksell. In the first book, *The Last Seder of James*, John the Apostle comes to Jerusalem to share a Passover Seder with James, the brother of Jesus, in prison on the night before James is martyred. Although it is only hinted at in the first book, one of John's traveling companions, and the chronicler of that story, is a legendary teacher of the first-century church named Priscilla.

This book follows the story of Priscilla as she and her fellow believers cope with James' execution, and count the fifty days from Passover to Pentecost. The narrative begins on the first day of Passover and proceeds for seven weeks (referred to in Jewish tradition as the Counting of the Omer.) During these weeks, Priscilla recounts eventful journeys by land and by sea, the results of a devastating series of earthquakes, an encounter with a slippery heretic, and a miraculous work of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost. In the process she and her companions wrestle with important questions—concerning motherhood and barrenness, Jewish and Christian identity, the delay of Jesus' promised return, and what it really means to be his hands and feet here on earth.

This introduction provides basic background information about the premise of the story, the characters, the setting and the Jewish traditions of the Counting of the Omer and Shavu'ot (also known as Pentecost). The story itself comes next, presented in the format of a fifty-day personal memoir, divided into seven weeks. As such, the action develops, unfiltered, before Priscilla's own eyes, and the reader experiences it all in the present tense.

After the Story section comes the Teaching. This begins with a series of lessons about the characters in the Story, as well as the historical and biblical significance of the Counting of the Omer and Shavu'ot (Pentecost) traditions, first to Judaism, and then to Christianity. All information provided after this is for reference, including a glossary of Hebrew terms, a brief selection of relevant Scripture passages, author bios and a list of resources for further learning.

A Feast of Weeks presents a unique arrangement of both fictional and non-fiction material, which does not follow the pattern of other books to which the reader may be accustomed. Thus, there is no one “right” way to read it. Instead, the authors invite each reader to enjoy this book his or her own way.

The Passover Trilogy

Of the seven biblical festivals outlined in Leviticus chapter 23, three of them carried expectations of pilgrimage. As commanded in Deuteronomy 16:16, all Jews who were able to travel to Jerusalem did so for the festivals of Passover, Shavu'ot (Pentecost) and *Sukkot* (Tabernacles). These three are referred to as the Pilgrimage Festivals, and form the basis of the trilogy.

The first book, *The Last Seder of James*, is focused on the festival of Passover. This, the second book, is about Pentecost, and the Counting of the Omer leading up to it. The third book, entitled *The Fall*, will feature the Feast of Tabernacles, as well as Simchat Torah which follows.

Although the first book is the only one to feature Passover explicitly, the themes of Passover (such as Creation, Exile, Deliverance, Covenant, and Redemption) define the trilogy as a whole. The three-part narrative thus proposes that all the Jewish festivals are built upon the foundation laid by Passover. This is how the three books came to be known as the Passover Trilogy.

The Story

This book picks up where *The Last Seder of James* leaves off. The first chapter, entitled “Passover”, is a retelling of the finale of the first book, told through Priscilla’s eyes. As the story progresses, Priscilla travels back to Ephesus with John and company, encounters a persuasive heretic, and wrestles with personal disappointments. In time, she joins the Ephesian church in coping with a mass in-migration of refugees seeking relief from natural disasters.

A tradition of the Jewish people (outlined in Leviticus 23:15-16) is to count the fifty days after Passover, culminating in Shavu’ot (the Feast of Weeks), also known as Pentecost. This practice, called the Counting of the Omer, frames the story of the book, as Priscilla keeps a daily journal of the events in her life throughout this seven-week period.

As in the Counting of the Omer itself, this story points forward to a narrative climax on the day of Pentecost.

The Characters

In the development of character, every effort is made by the authors to adhere first to the words of Scripture, and second to the lessons of history and archaeology, such as they’re known. Although the reader may discover some minor departures from the latter, any deviations at all from the former are unintentional and open to correction in future editions.

Ultimately, these characters are developed far beyond the limits of both Scripture and History. This will naturally occur in any work of historical fiction, but there is a deeper purpose. It is the authors’ desire to help the reader identify with these characters as people just like us. When reading Scripture, it is all too easy to view the characters as “wholly other”, almost alien beings. In reality, they walked through their lives from one day to the next just as we do, working hard, loving their families, making mistakes and trying to find meaning in the world.

The more we, as students of Scripture, can learn to see its characters through this lens, the more we stand to benefit from the reading. Below is a brief introduction to the main characters found in the story. For more detailed profiles, turn to page 147.

Priscilla

Although Priscilla is only mentioned six times in Scripture, a few biographical facts are clear. She was a tentmaker, a preeminent teacher of the first-century church (and namely of Apollos), the wife and ministry partner of Aquila, and a trusted associate of the Apostle Paul.

For the sake of this story, one assumption is made about her life and work: that Priscilla was the author of the biblical epistle to the Hebrews. Although this is by no means certain, it is grounded in credible literary and archaeological research. This, of course, expands the potential trove of background data for Priscilla's story. It gives her a voice, a legacy and a core teaching. It also fleshes out her biographical profile as an authoritative figure in the church of Rome, even long after she and Priscilla relocate to Corinth, and eventually to Ephesus.

More detail about the letter to the Hebrews, and questions of its authorship, can be found on page 157.

Even when the case for the authorship of Hebrews is granted, many questions remain. Was Priscilla born Jewish, converted Jewish, or simply a well-read Gentile? Where and when was she born? Was she a first-person witness to the ministry of Jesus? These and other questions are explored in her detailed profile on page 147.

Aquila

Aquila is never mentioned in the Bible apart from Priscilla. Therefore, everything we know about Priscilla from Scripture must also be true of Aquila. The only exceptions are (a) his secondary position, which may imply that he was the less influential member of the couple, and (b) his confirmed Jewish ethnicity and origination from Pontus, in northeast Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey).

As a result, the authors have made a number of imaginative presumptions about Aquila—namely in regard to his travels, his leadership and his marriage—which are explained on page 150.

John the Apostle

John son of Zebedee (John the Apostle, John the Beloved, John the Evangelist) was one of the twelve disciples appointed by Jesus. Among the twelve were the sons of Zebedee—John and his older brother James—whom Jesus called “Sons of Thunder”. This John should not be confused with John the Baptist (John the Baptizer, John the Immerser) who was Jesus’ cousin.

The plot of this story depends, in part, on the past role of John in caring for Jesus’ mother Mary. Many have concluded that he relocated from Israel to Ephesus early in his ministry, and brought Mary with him, eventually building her a house on Mt. Koressos, immediately south of the city. John ministers both locally and abroad, as the Spirit leads him. As such, he does not hold a distinct office within any given local church, and wields his outsized influence lightly.

John authored five books of the New Testament: the Gospel of John, the three epistles commonly known as I John, II John and III John, and the book of Revelation. For more about the book of II John, see page 158.

Nicolas / Nicolaitans

The character of Nicolas is built on a series of reliable assumptions, grounded in the mention of a group called the “Nicolaitans” in the second chapter of the book of Revelation. Further description of his character can be found on page 152.

Other Characters

A number of supporting characters in the story are drawn directly from Scripture, such as Apostles Peter and Paul, Gaius, Apollos, Diotrophes and Demetrius. Brief profiles are provided for each, beginning on page 153.

The Setting (Time and Place)

The year AD 62 was a pivotal one in the early community of Believers in Jesus. Some scholars believe it is the year that the letters to the Ephesians and the Hebrews were written. And, as the first book in the trilogy, *The Last Seder of James*, depicts, James the brother of Jesus was martyred at Passover that same year.

History tells us that James' death was the opening salvo in an eight-year period of upheaval in this region of the Roman Empire. Ananus ben Ananus, the high priest who oversaw the execution, was deposed due to the resulting public outcry, and the office of high priest would remain unstable for the remainder of its existence. At that time, Ananus's own son (appropriately named Jesus) began predicting the impending destruction of the Temple. Just two years later, Rome was crippled by a wildfire, which Caesar Nero blamed on the Christians in the city. Before the dust settled, thousands of Christians were executed, including the Apostle Peter. Paul was executed in Rome just a few years after that. In the year 66, a riot in Caesarea sparked a 4-year war between Rome and Judea. In a dizzying series of military episodes, the advantage shifted back and forth until AD 70, when the city of Jerusalem and its Temple were utterly destroyed. These events will be featured in the third book of the trilogy, titled *The Fall*.

A Feast of Weeks is a journey narrative, and as such features a wide variety of geographic settings. Priscilla begins in Jerusalem, and subsequently travels along the Jordan River and through the region of Galilee. She then embarks from the city of Ptolemais across the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas, to her home in Ephesus.

The story of Priscilla is comprised largely of fictional events in the city of Ephesus. These events are based, to an extent, on the true historical record of the region, and have been modified for the sake of character and plot development.

To read more about the historical context of the story, see page 154.

Counting of the Omer

The Spring Festivals celebrated by Jews and outlined in Leviticus 23 are strongly rooted in harvest cycles. Passover, in mid-Spring, marks the barley harvest, and begins the countdown to the wheat harvest. In Leviticus 23:15, God commands “Then you are to count from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the Omer of the wave offering, seven complete Sabbaths. Until the day after the seventh Sabbath you are to count fifty days, and then present a new grain offering to ADONAI.”

This new grain offering marks the festival of Shavu’ot, or Pentecost. Thus, for thousands of years Jewish people have counted fifty days from Passover to Pentecost, which is referred to as the Counting of the Omer.

In the story, Priscilla not only observes this practice, but uses the Omer to mark the individual chapters in her story. Read more about this tradition on page 168.

Pentecost and Shavu’ot

As the second book of the Passover Trilogy, *A Feast of Weeks* is focused on the Jewish festival of Shavu’ot, or Pentecost. This is one of the seven holidays prescribed in Leviticus 23 for Israel to observe in perpetuity. At its root, Shavu’ot is a celebration of the wheat harvest, which comes seven weeks after the barley harvest, represented by the festivals of Passover and First Fruits.

By the Second Temple period, Jews had come to identify Shavu’ot with the establishment of God’s Covenant¹ on Mt. Sinai. Tradition holds that the Children of Israel arrived at Sinai on the fiftieth day after their Exodus from Egypt, thus adding a new layer of meaning to the festival. With this, what had begun as an agricultural observance became something much richer.

¹ Exodus 24:3

This association—between Shavu’ot and the Covenant—set the stage for the Great Outpouring of the Holy Spirit, as told in Acts chapter two. The parallels between the two events are nothing less than astonishing, and will be explored in detail in the Teaching section after the story (page 169 and following.)

Suffice it to say that those who understand Pentecost in both the Torah and in Acts can scarcely doubt that the two are tightly linked. What’s more, the very fulfillment of the original festival can be clearly seen in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, from the first century to the present day.

Although Priscilla’s story takes place thirty-two years after the Great Outpouring (or the first Christian Pentecost, estimated to have occurred in AD 30) it serves to echo this milestone in the fictional events set forth in first-century Ephesus. While we, as Believers, should not expect the Acts of the Apostles to repeat themselves in our time, we should nevertheless look to the Holy Spirit to move in transformative ways in our own lives.

In other words, Pentecost is more than a past event, and more than an annual festival. Pentecost is an unbroken reality for all who trust in the Spirit of God to renew their hearts—and reshape the world—day by day.

Hebrew Terms

In this edition, Hebrew terminology is kept to a minimum. Wherever Hebrew is important to the Story or the Teaching, footnotes are provided for definitions or other background information. Pronunciation guides and further explanations can be found in the Hebrew Terms section on page 182.

PASSOVER
AD 62

Saturday, the 15th day of Nisan,² East Jerusalem

“I am James!”

The introduction came from the top of the wall, across the Outer Court, barely cutting through the roar of the Passover crowd. I aggressively shushed Milos, in the middle of telling another one of his stories. Everyone around us quieted as well, and turned their faces to the east.

“...brother of Jesus the Nazarene!” the words poured forth from a backlit figure with sharp shoulders and a ragged robe whipping in the wind. It was our James—who’d been imprisoned in the Antonia Fortress for a week, and held in custody for over a month now. James is the whole reason we came here from Ephesus, when John received word that he was in trouble. But now my mind was racing with questions. What did his appearance at the top of the wall mean? That our mission had succeeded, or failed? And where was John?

“You know this name!” he bellowed, referring to Jesus. He pointed his finger at the crowd and moved it slowly from right to left as he addressed his audience. “Many have undertaken to spread falsehoods about him throughout Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth. I am here to dispel these falsehoods.” James spoke boldly, but woodenly, as if the words were not his own.

John should be here, I thought again. Wasn’t he supposed to have been with James, in his prison cell last night? I hoped against hope that he hadn’t been apprehended as well. I wondered if maybe I should go look for him at the fortress after this. But my worries about John were causing me to miss what James was saying.

“You all know that this Jesus was crucified at Golgotha. Some of you stood witness!” *This can’t be happening*. We had come here to rescue James, not to attend his funeral. James continued preaching, and I

² *Nisan* is the first month of the biblical Hebrew calendar (Exodus 12:2)

watched the priests on the wall as their faces went from stern, to nervous, to furious. I heard a group of Pharisee rabbis gathered at the column next to ours. “Go up! Go on up!” they shouted at each other, urging someone—anyone—to ascend the stairs to the wall and put a stop this display.

“I tell you this!” James continued. “Jesus is seated in the heavens at the right hand of ADONAI—our Passover Lamb forever!” *There it is. The sentence that will get him killed. Oh, James!* I cried inwardly, grinding my teeth to keep my composure. I watched in desperation as a handful of the rabbis I overheard a moment before were now gang-rushing James, along the top of the highest wall on the Temple Mount.

My Abba was a Pharisee, and a rabbi. But the Pharisee rabbis at the Temple this morning were not like my Abba. I heard them shouting feverishly, trying to drown James out, while also ordering the Roman guards to shove him off the wall. *It isn’t right! Somebody stop them. John!*

The silver-and-red clad soldiers glanced questioningly at Ananus, the high priest, who grimaced and nodded. In an instant they hoisted James’ armpits up onto their armored shoulders and marched him away from the crowd as he continued shouting. He closed his eyes just as they heaved him over the opposite ledge, to the valley floor below. He didn’t scream or cry out. He didn’t make a sound. No one did.

Until, that is, another group of Pharisees (which had been watching him from just below his perch on the eastern wall) began shouting and storming out the eastern gate just a moment later. “Stone him!” they cried, “Stone him! Stone him!” again and again. *Did he not die on impact? ADONAI have mercy. I wanted to cry out and tear my robes, but I was frozen in place, my heart forgetting to beat.*

Once the rioters had left the Temple, everyone who remained was stunned. Nobody moved or spoke. James was precious to the city of Jerusalem, and not only to the Believers in Jesus. Everyone I talked to had a story of James helping them, or helping someone they knew, or advocating for the oppressed, or mourning with the bereaved. What

could possess anyone to harm such a man?

We should say something, I thought. *People will listen*. My brothers and sisters were beginning to stare at me. Simon. Jude. Susanna. Thea. They wanted me to do it. But my head was a hive of wild bees, my tongue swollen and seized up like a rusted ship's rudder. I couldn't think. I couldn't speak. Perhaps it's still no excuse. But it was as if I saw it all happening from a distance. We hadn't arrived soon enough to save him. *ADONAI, give me something to stand on! I'm drowning here.*

Just then, another sound of shouting came from the southern colonnade. It was rhythmic and song-like. A psalm? The sound spread, from the south to the east to our own ears on the western edge. Then the words became clear. "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they were shouting.

Hosanna? I couldn't believe it. Who started this? All of us Believers were gathered by the western columns, and it didn't come from us. "Hosanna to the Son of David! Save us, Son of David!" Over and over, the cry for salvation grew from a murmur to a shout to a deafening roar.

I closed my eyes and remembered Jesus' triumphant entry to the City, thirty-two years ago. I remembered the giant palm leaves, robes and tunics paving the road. "Hosanna to the Son of David!" we all exclaimed as the King of Creation paraded by on a sad little donkey. "Save us, Son of David!" We were all in a state of euphoria, believing that this was the moment promised to King David so many centuries ago—that a messiah had come to take up his throne, restoring glory and sovereignty to our people once more.

But it didn't take long for us to change our tune. Less than a week later, those once-faithful enthusiasts were shouting "Crucify him! Crucify him!" and everyone who wasn't calling for his execution had disappeared entirely. The women were all who remained. I was there, too, but at the fringe. Behind Martha and Salome, behind the Marys. Present but terrified.

I snapped back to the present when a raindrop hit my nose. Within moments the sprinkle became a downpour. I heard goats bleating

desperately for shelter, and doves flapping violently in their cages.

“Hosanna to the Son of David! Save us, Son of David!” The cries continued, even as the crowd crushed together to fit under the porticoes at the perimeter of the Outer Court. *He’s done it*, I exclaimed to myself. *His message broke through*. And through my fear, through my despair, a ray of James’ own fiery joy shot through. I shouted Hosanna with the crowd as our souls melded together. On and on and on it went, until finally a piercing shofar³ blast silenced the crowd.

The third hour had come. My family huddled around me, our faces streaked with the mingled tears of tragedy and triumph. But now their eyes were all asking one question—the same as mine. *Where is John?*

³ Shofar: Trumpet fashioned from a ram’s horn

WEEK I

Omer 1 | Sunday

Jerusalem is in total chaos right now. It's the first day of the week—during Passover—so the feast of Firstfruits is in full swing.

I'm sitting in a corner on the ground floor, in the House of Zadok near the Essene Gate. My pen alternates incessantly between writing this, and translating letters for James and Jude. I'm trying to focus on just one or the other—or anything at all—but strangers keep bursting through the door asking for lodging. A divan, a mat, a clean space on the floor—anything. It's not my house, so I can't help them. There are already more people staying here than I can count. (Sorry, that's a figure of speech. I counted eighty-three.)

What a fascinating house this is. It used to be the main community house for the Essenes⁴ in Jerusalem, which is why it's situated just inside the Essene Gate, and adjacent to the southern wall. It even has a private entrance for the old *mikvot*⁵ just outside the wall. The door was sealed up years ago, but it was probably used by Jesus and the disciples the night of their last meal together. I doubt their Essene hosts would have allowed them into the Upper Room unless they'd used the Essene *mikveh* first.

What's more incredible is that the Essenes allowed them in at all—I gather Jesus made a big impression on them. So they welcomed him with open arms, even when it meant permitting his cadre of non-Essenes to use their rooms. Today it serves as a refuge for Jesus' surviving brothers and sisters—Simon, Jude, *et cetera*—and their extended families.

Yesterday, I wrote about the incident at the Temple. We found John, eventually. He was standing in the valley, soaked to the marrow, just looking up at the Temple. Once we got him into some dry clothes, he insisted we go straight to the Arimathean's tomb, so we could see to

⁴ Essenes: A Jewish sect which arose in the first century BC and continued till approximately AD 68.

⁵ Mikveh: A ritual bath for ceremonial purification. Plural: *mikvot*

James' remains. But since it was the Sabbath all we could do was sit in mourning until sundown. Then some of the women and I unwrapped his shroud, applied our myrrh and aloes to his body, and bound it up with strips of white cloth, almost like a swaddle. Before we finished I lifted his body into my lap, with everyone watching. For one sweet moment he felt like a newborn in my arms. An image flashed before me of Mary rocking her little James gently, with those same arms that held our swaddled Savior. Suddenly I sensed that everyone was watching me, and that I was sobbing again, so I put him down. That is to say, I put *his body* down.

After committing James to his tomb with a prayer of mourning, we shuffled back to the House of Zadok to eat some matzah⁶ with Milos, Demetrius and the others. The dinner hall was packed with Believers and ablaze with emotion—shock, grief, praise, and utter disbelief.

What an awful thing—I can't believe James is gone. But oh, the way he went. It happened more than a day ago, and my head is still spinning from that scene—the sermon on the Temple wall, the shofar blasts, the shouts of *hosanna!* that lasted an hour—it felt like the Great Pentecost all over again, but this time in the midst of a horrific execution.

Jude came to where I was sitting, and set some matzah was in front of me, but I couldn't eat. James' execution still felt like a punch to the stomach, and it was affecting John even more. I traveled here with him; I heard how he talked. He honestly believed he would be able to rescue James from death. This is not the first apostle we've lost. It's not even the first *James* we've lost. John's older brother James—also one of the Twelve, and a fellow Son of Thunder—was beheaded by Herod Agrippa eighteen years ago. *Eighteen years? Has it really been so long?*

It's enough to dismantle a weaker faith, if I'm honest. And I've seen some unfortunate souls go that way. Jesus said this generation would not pass away before he returned! What generation, exactly? How many do we have to lose before we see him again? How much oppression do we

⁶ Matzah: Unleavened bread, especially that which is eaten at Passover

have to undergo? *How long, ADONAI? How long?*

After dinner John and I had a long talk, and he told me about his conversation with James in the prison cell. He went into great detail about it, so I recorded as much as I could. Perhaps we can share the story with the church when we return to Ephesus.

We also prayed—a lot. It was very late when we parted, so I'm exhausted today. (As you can see, my penmanship is horrid right now.) John prayed in the Spirit during most of the first watch, and when he opened his eyes, he told me something shocking.

"Priscilla," he said, and paused for a long time. "Something new is upon us. A new work of the Spirit."

"I feel it too," I replied. And I did feel it.

"He didn't show me what it is. All I heard was 'I am doing a new thing. Watch and see.'"

"Just watch?" I asked.

"And write. You, my sister—write what you witness."

"You want *me* to do it?"

"God wants you to do it."

I was stuck. I've done more than my share of writing, for a woman. But nothing like this. I had so many questions.

"So— should I write about you? Should I follow you around?"

"It's not about me, Priscilla." I furrowed my brow. Was he just being humble? John smiled faintly. "Don't avoid me, but don't make it about me. Count the days, and tell *your* story."

"My story? Why me?" Such a thing had never crossed my mind. I could tell my father's story, peace be upon him. I could tell my husband's story. Or the story of John, or Paul—even Apollos. They all have fascinating stories I would love to tell. But me?

"It's not only about you, of course." John added. "It's about Aquila, about your family in Capernaum, about your students, and your brothers

and sisters in Ephesus. All of you.”

“Who would even read that?” I blurted out. I’m afraid I sounded cynical, but John didn’t flinch.

“I would read it. The church at Ephesus, the church at Rome. Perhaps many others. I’ve seen your writings before—the stories you tell of Orpah, of Melchizedek, even your father’s story. But you also have a story of your own.”

John stood up for the first time in hours, then grabbed his feet one at a time, pulling them up behind his back to stretch his knees. “And if you don’t think you have a story yet, very soon you will.”

“The Spirit showed you that?”

“Yes.”

I shook my head in disbelief. A moment later a broad smile came like a reflex. I couldn’t help it. What a rush it is, to be told that I am more than a scribe, more than a teacher. I am the protagonist of my own story.

Then, without warning I felt a sudden wave of doubt, and a flood of tears. *Who am I, really?* I pleaded. *Who am I but the plain-faced daughter of a Galilean rabbi, and the barren wife of a Jewish tentmaker?* I felt like Moses, being chosen against all apparent reason. I could ask God to make someone else do it, but I already know how that would turn out. Especially if I start comparing myself to Moses.

John remained still, his eyes closed. At length, he spoke again. “Today is the first day of the Counting of the Omer. These fifty days will be unlike any before them, culminating in a great wind of the Spirit. Open your eyes, Priscilla. See his work, and show it to the nations.”

“Oh, John. I want to, but—” My mind struggled for words. (Aquila could tell you how rare this is.) I fidgeted for a moment before finding myself again. “I mean to say—yes. I will. I’ll start in the morning.”

Omer 2 | Monday

My name is Priscilla, which means *noble*. My parents named me Avrah, but my husband gave me the name Prisca (which is the proper form of the name) when we moved to Rome, just after getting married. He thought I looked beautiful and stately like the senators' wives, and back then he told me all the time. Now he jokes about how the name Prisca can also mean *ancient*, which is sad but true.

When my husband first moved to Rome—before we met—he changed his name to Aquila, which means *eagle*. His parents named him Abdiel, but he didn't want to sound so Jewish amongst the Roman dignitaries (even though he was there to advocate for the Jewish people.) The eagle is the symbol of the Roman empire, so he thought Aquila was a good choice. I always liked the sound of it, too. But I don't think Abba would have approved.

We lived in Rome eighteen years, but not anymore—not since Claudius expelled all the Jews thirteen years ago. (He didn't have the good sense to exempt Jews like us, with dignified Latin names.) For a while we lived in Corinth, and then moved to Ephesus, where we live now. We like it well enough. It's a big city like Rome, and there's a large community of Believers to gather with.

But right now I'm in Jerusalem, as you know. Last time I was here, it was for Passover and Pentecost, thirty-two years ago. At the time I thought the City couldn't hold another soul. I kept waiting for the walls to burst outward at any moment. But the City proved me wrong. There are more people here now than ever. It invades your sight, your hearing, your every thought. Even the smell is overwhelming.

I keep asking myself why I don't just leave. But I always know the answer. Because this is *Jerusalem*. It's the middle of everywhere. For the first time in decades I get to be in the most glorious city in the world, at the most glorious time of the year. That's why everyone else is here, too.

Omer 3 | Tuesday

I've probably thought about my last time here every day since then. Every day for thirty-two years is 11,680 days. That's a lot of days to reminisce. But everyone else I know, who saw Jesus crucified and raised again, is the same way. You never forget, even if you want to.

But how else could it be? To watch the Son of Man suffer death so that, by the grace of God, he might taste death for everyone! And we got to see it with our own eyes. Who could ever escape death if they neglect such an awesome salvation? How *could* we forget?

It doesn't seem like 11,680 days ago. I remember it better than the ship I arrived on last week. (Did it have one sail, or two? Never mind.) But when it comes to Jesus, all I have to do is close my eyes and I'm back there again, at the Cross. At the Empty Tomb.

All of us women, who had been following Jesus—we were horrified and transfixed. We couldn't look away no matter how much we wanted to. His body was bruised and bloodied to the point he no longer looked human. When we slaughtered our lambs for Passover, we did it humanely. But what they did to Jesus was not humane. Not at all.

We just stood there wringing our hands, afraid to get too close. But the men had fled the scene completely—all of them except John, who stood at the periphery as if he could bolt at any moment. It was just unspeakably awful; words have failed me ever since.

But that was the beginning, not the end. At the feast of First Fruits we remember that there is so much more. Jesus may have died as our Passover Lamb, but he has risen as our Great Shepherd. So much that was shrouded in mystery has now become clear as polished silver. That our Savior was both the High Priest and the Perfect Sacrifice. That we had the Lamb of God *with us*! And just as at Passover we are crucified with him, at First Fruits we are raised with him in glory. *Hallelujah, Hallelujah!*

Omer 4 | Wednesday

My favorite thing about this house is the murals over the doors, with names of angels and archangels to identify each room. Naturally there's a Michael room and a Gabriel room, as well as a few others that surprised me: Sidriel, Kepharel, Nuriel... who are *they*? I have no idea. The Essenes were really into angels.

I say "were" because the Essenes don't really exist anymore. They formed after the Maccabean revolt to return the Temple and the Priesthood to a state of purity reminiscent of the time of Solomon and his high priest Zadok. (That's why they claimed to be "Sons of Zadok".)

They secluded themselves from all of society, refused to marry, procreate or do business with the outside world. They followed the Torah like a science, immersed themselves multiple times per day, and put all their hope in a soon-coming Messiah. So when that Messiah showed up, and fulfilled the entire Temple system in one fell swoop, the Essenes joined up, almost to a man.

So now the entire Essene quarter—or should I say Essene *corner*—of the city is full of Believers. And the House of Zadok, with the voices of Jesus and the apostles echoing from the walls, sits at the epicenter. So much is different now—most believers get married (God help us!) and a few of us know how to run a business. But there are also some things that never change. As before, life is fully communal. Everyone shares everything; the words *mine* and *yours* are never uttered. And for some reason everyone here is still really into angels.

John surprised me this afternoon. I'm not happy.

"Do you want to stay here, in the city?" he walked up and asked me, as if we were already in the middle of a conversation.

"What do you mean? Where else would I be? It's only the fourth day of Passover." The city was still so thronged that even the daily business of

the crowd outside was deafening. We almost had to shout at each other to be heard, which made it seem like we were arguing.

“I’m going back to Ephesus.”

“What? Why?”

“The Spirit is calling me back. I don’t know why. Do you want to stay here, or come with me?”

I love John. *The Elder*, they call him. With my whole spiritual being I love having him as a brother. But he’s been keeping me off-balance lately, and he won’t let me recover. I sighed loudly enough to make my frustration obvious. Of course I wanted to stay. But how was I supposed to write this account he says God wants if he’s in Ephesus and I’m here?

“Well, where is this new work happening—Ephesus or Jerusalem?”

“It’s your story, dear lady. I suppose your story will happen wherever you are.” I dropped my face into my hands, and stayed that way for a moment or two. When I looked up, he was gone.

The sun is high in the sky above us now, and we’re headed down the hill to Jericho. (Yes, I went with John. I don’t really know why.) We each got a donkey for the journey, which sounds more comfortable than walking, but the slope to Jericho is so steep that I’ve been tempted to get off this beast half a dozen times. It’s a wonder I can even write. My kingdom for a scribe!

The closest and soonest boat to Ephesus departs from Ptolemais, which is a long road trip from Jerusalem. But the good news is that it will take us through Capernaum—my hometown. We can stay with my mother (who I still call Ima) and my sister Hadassah there. Hopefully we can stay two nights instead of one—I haven’t seen them in 1,151 days. (Aquila always rolls his eyes at me when I count time in days instead of years. I’ll try again.) I haven’t seen them in *over three years*.

We write back and forth all the time, but I’m very excited to see them and hug them again. It’s almost enough to make up for leaving Jerusalem

in the middle of Passover.

Omer 5 | Thursday

We camped beside the Jordan last night. The site could have been better but the tents were top-notch. (I wonder who made them?) Before finding a place to settle in, we passed through Gilgal. We might have stopped there, but John seemed a little stressed about the length of the road to Ptolemais, and wanted to cover more ground before nightfall. Gilgal is where our ancestors crossed into the Promised Land. It's also where John the Baptizer preached and baptized people (including me) in the Jordan, a lifetime ago.

We went during the final year of the Baptizer's life. Of course we didn't know that at the time. Abba had just died, and Ima and Hadassah visited the Jordan with a group of women from Capernaum, on our way to Jerusalem for Passover.

I'll admit, it was awkward at first, approaching a man in the water. I was eighteen years old, and—according to Ima and her friends—overdue for marriage. So I'd never been touched by a man who wasn't a relative, and wasn't sure what to make of this scene in the Jordan at first. I was nervous, and he could tell. He didn't touch me—he didn't touch anyone in the river, actually—and he motioned for me to stop before I came too close to him.

"My sister!" He shouted so the crowd could hear. His voice was gritty and thick, like a bear. He looked me in the eye and offered a warm, easy grin. "What is your name?" he bellowed.

"I am Avrah, daughter of Joash!" I shouted back, louder than necessary.

"Avrah..." He switched voices, adopting a thoughtful murmur. "Yes, your name is Avrah. Mother of a multitude..." he translated, trailing off. "And so it shall be." Suddenly he resumed his shouting voice. "Bless

ADONAI! Many will call you Mother!”

I startled at the pronouncement, and looked back at my own mother to see her beaming with pride. Apparently, the Baptizer gave another blessing after that but I didn’t hear it—I just stood motionless in the river like a dumb stick fallen from a tree. If he hadn’t motioned for me to cross my arms, hold my nose and lower myself into the water, who knows how long I would have stayed frozen there?

I don’t talk about this memory much. As I wrote before, I have no children. Not only that, I’m fifty-two years old. (At least I’ve grayed slowly. A strand here, a strand there—I could probably pass for forty-seven.) I don’t know why I still cling to this hope. I’m older than every new mother I’ve ever known. On the other hand, I’m still much younger than Elizabeth was when she gave birth to the Baptizer himself. And younger than Sarah when she had Isaac. I sometimes think of Hannah and her prayer of thanksgiving for the upside-down ways God: “Those who were full hire themselves for bread, but those who are starving are hungry no more. She who was barren has borne seven children, but she who has had many sons pines away.”⁷

Where was I? Oh yes. After we were all immersed, Ima, Hadassah and I were soaked and dripping in our double-tunic outfits, like a flock of goats caught in a downpour. But we were grinning and chatting happily about our moment with the great prophet John. We had turned to head up the bank into town when a sound like thunder came from the sky above the river. I say it was “like” thunder, but it was different. It was a ripping sound, like the sound of a thousand angels tearing their robes at once. A light was shining down on John so brightly he’d become invisible. Then I heard a voice coming from the light, but deep like the ocean. The voice was chanting slowly, “*Hen beni ratzetah nafshi.*” Behold my Son, in whom my soul delights.⁸

⁷ 1 Samuel 2:5

⁸ See Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1

I remember how my mind raced when I heard it. The voice had recited the second Psalm, but with the words of Isaiah added, calling him Beloved.

“Who was that for?” I blurted out to anyone who could hear me.

“ADONAI is declaring John the Messiah!” Hadassah exclaimed, clapping her hands together in front of her face.

“No, no, my daughters. It is not for John.” Ima was so wise. She couldn’t see or hear any more than we could, but she knew better than us. She still does, even in her failing years.

“But John is the rightful high priest!” I insisted. “He is a Nazirite, born miraculously of Zechariah the priest. Why not John?”

“He said it himself, Avrah. Didn’t you hear? ‘Among you stands one you do not know coming after me, whose sandals I’m not worthy to untie.’⁹ That heavenly voice was for someone else. Someone who had *come to John* for immersion.”

“Why would the Messiah come to John to be immersed? That’s backwards!” I insisted.

“I don’t know, Avrah. I suppose we’ll find out.”

We’re far from Jerusalem now, but Passover continues. So before bedding down tonight we recited the Hillel psalms, much like we did at our Seder four days ago. One in particular always stands out to me:

*From the rising of the sun to its going down
The name of ADONAI is to be praised
ADONAI is high above all nations
His glory is above the heavens
He settles the barren woman in her home
as a joyful mother of children. Hallelujah.*¹⁰

⁹ Luke 3:16

¹⁰ Psalm 113:3,4,9. The Hillel Psalms (113-118) are traditionally sung at Passover.

Who is this psalm for, exactly? Certainly not for me. Yes, my hope is in ADONAI, maker of heaven and earth, but I'll admit I'm not always sure what to expect. Or when to expect it. Maybe tomorrow...

Omer 6 | Friday

The weather was cooler today, and it was downright chilly when we broke camp before dawn this morning. The goal is to arrive in Capernaum by the ninth hour, so we have to find a way to get these donkeys to pick up the pace. We have no way of sending word ahead of us, so heaven forbid we should arrive at sundown, just as the Sabbath is beginning!

By sunrise we were crossing the Jezreel tributary and passing into the region of Galilee. I'm still shaking my head as to why I would leave Jerusalem at such a time as this. At least I'll get to see Aquila again soon—I miss his hugs. And his toothy grin. And his big, fluffy beard.

But first, John agreed to stop for two or three days in Capernaum, where my mother and sisters live, with their families. I was really slow to leave, but now these stubborn donkeys can't go fast enough.

Halfway up the western lakeshore we passed through Tiberias—a brand-new city when I was a girl—then Magdala. Back when I was little and Michal wasn't born yet, the rabbi at Magdala died, so Abba spent a year teaching at their synagogue every week. He had to walk there from Capernaum the afternoon of the sixth day and come back the following evening, since it was too far to walk on the seventh day. He missed a lot of *Erev Shabbat*¹¹ meals that way; Ima blessed ADONAI when it was over.

It was already the ninth hour when we left Gennesaret behind us and rounded the corner of the lake and turned east, toward Capernaum. We *should be there by now*. The sun was still high in the west, and it was

¹¹ *Erev Shabbat* means “Sabbath eve”, which takes place Friday evening.

casting our shadows ahead of us on the road. The donkeys didn't care for it, so we had to keep pulling them back on course.

Our house is built into the western wall of the city, so Hadassah spotted us while we were still a hundred paces off. I could hear her squeal from the window, and a moment later she was on the road with Ima in tow.

"Avrah!" she shouted, waving frantically as if I hadn't seen her.

"Hadassah!" I shouted back, laughing and waving both arms around like a lunatic. We spend so much time apart that every time we're reunited it's like we're eight and six again. "Ima! We're coming as fast as we can!" *These stupid donkeys only have two speeds: slow and stuck.*

Demetrius saw that I was fed up with my noble steed, so he shot me a boyish grin and reached out to take the reins. I did a little hop, and rushed off to greet my ecstatic family. By this time more of them had emerged from the gate: Lemuel (Hadassah's son who runs a shop in Sepphoris), Michal (my youngest sister) and four of her six kids: Ana, Samuel, Manasseh and Joash. The reunion made for quite a ruckus out there on the dusty lakeside road. The sheep nearby were beginning to stare.

"Where's Aquila?" Ima asked. Questions were getting lobbed at me from every side.

"Still in Ephesus."

"Who's that behind you?" Ana asked coquettishly.

"That's Milos. He's got seven fingers." He smiled, and flashed them proudly.

"How long are you staying?" Hadassah asked.

"Three days." I blurted out. John shot me a glance. "Two days," I corrected. "And three nights."

"What's your donkey's name?" Joash asked.

"My little man!" I exclaimed. Joash was only three last time I visited, and now he's starting to look like a miniature version of his late grandfather—my father—who is also his namesake. Maybe that's why

he's my favorite. "Look how you've grown!" I shouted in his face. He just squinted at me.

"You named your donkey Little Man?"

"No, Joash!" we both giggled, and I tousled his hair. "Don't be silly. His name is Go Go Go. At least that's what I've been calling him." Now everyone was laughing.

Two days is not going to be long enough.

What a delight to be sharing an *Erev Shabbat* meal with my family again. Ima works with such solemnity as she retrieves the candles and candlesticks from the cabinet and places them on the table. She invited me to light them and say the blessing, but I wouldn't miss her blessings for the world.

With her hands shaking ever so slightly, Ima held the oil lamp up to each candle, covered her face with her hands and chanted those familiar words, "Blessed are you, ADONAI our God, King of the Universe, who have sanctified us with your commandments and allowed us to kindle the Sabbath lights."

Omer 7 | Saturday

What starts with candles, ends with candles. I normally don't mind a little writing on Sabbath, but in my Ima's house I try to work as little as possible from sundown to sundown. Now the children are sleeping, and I'm watching the *Havdalah*¹² candles burning down, signaling the end of Sabbath and the beginning of a week full of hope and possibilities.

I do my best to observe all God's commandments, including the

¹² Havdalah is the Jewish ritual that marks the end of every Sabbath. One of the primary steps in the process is the lighting of a special braided candle.

command to rest on the Seventh Day. But I'm not good at it. I keep remembering that God's very first mandate to humankind was issued to the very first humans: "Be fruitful and multiply." They may have broken the command not to eat the fruit, but they had no trouble at all being *fruitful*. Now the earth is full of their descendants. It's true—I have no descendants myself. But in spite of this (and perhaps *because* of this) I pride myself in the fruitfulness of my work.

Maybe that's why I have such a hard time putting the pen down when the Sabbath candles come out. And why I'm so eager to pick it up again when the *Havdalah* candle is lit.

WEEK II

Omer 8 | Sunday

Almost every time I look over at John today, he's smiling and shaking his head. I don't think he's accustomed to big noisy families. It's not like we're neglecting him; my family is very aware of John the Elder—John the Apostle—and they have loads of questions for him too. But he grew up with no sisters and just one brother, and he tells me his home life was always orderly and calm. That might surprise you, since Jesus nicknamed the two brothers "Sons of Thunder". I've seen John in a state of passion—righteous rage, even—but normally he's cool as a winter fig. Even under pressure. Especially under pressure.

I'm writing this after dinner, and as I look up I see my niece Ana out in the courtyard having a lively conversation with Milos. She's only fourteen; I hope she realizes she'll probably never see him again after tomorrow. But right now he appears to be telling her the story of how he lost his left middle finger, and almost bled to death in the street before John saved his life. She's spellbound one moment, and giggling shamelessly the next.

"I feel sorry for people like you, Ana, with all those extra fingers," I hear him joking, like always. "Because I have the *perfect number*." (You know, because seven is the number of perfection.) It's not a funny joke, but she laughed anyway. I'm starting to think they would actually be cute together. Oh well.

Omer 9 | Monday

Hadassah and I are both night-owls, which is fortunate. Otherwise we'd find no time to catch up, with all these kids around. After the little ones went to bed, Ima, Michal, Hadassah and I sat around for a couple hours talking about family, the house church, the marketplace, Ephesus, Aquila—all the important stuff. I told them about John and James, and

they insisted I read some of my account out loud to them, which was a little embarrassing.

At first, all four of us were engaged in conversation, but eventually it happened like it always does. Hadassah and I started venturing off the topics normal women talk about, and into the realm of *midrash*.¹³ Ima stuck around to listen quietly, like usual. She can't really keep up, especially at her age, but I think our exchanges remind her of Abba.

When Hadassah and I were coming up, Abba always talked about the misfortune of a rabbi to have no sons. "If I'm not going to have any sons," he announced defiantly, "I'll teach my daughters like sons!" Actually I think he taught us harder than sons. After all, if a woman is going to get any respect as a religious thinker, she's got to be able to outsmart the men by a long shot.

So Hadassah latched on to my recitation of James' last Seder,¹⁴ and started asking impossible questions. Fortunately, that's my favorite kind. "Did James bear false witness by agreeing to the Priests' plea deal?" she demanded.

"Does every person deserve true witness?" I countered.

"Well, what kind of person deserves to be deceived?" she shot back. (You can tell you're in a good debate when it's nothing but questions back and forth.)

"What about the person whose very identity is false?" I proposed. Hadassah frowned at me, then smiled. That was my queue to press forward. "The Temple priesthood has become a Hellenistic charade—a puppet regime. As a result all priests are guilty of misrepresentation and collusion with pagan authorities. What *true* testimony can be given to a

¹³ Midrash is a uniquely Jewish practice, mostly among rabbis, of interpreting Scripture through creative dialogue. Its purpose, according to scholar Wilda C. Gafney, is to "reimagine dominant narratival readings while crafting new ones to stand alongside—not replace—former readings."

¹⁴ A Seder is a liturgical meal for the celebration of Passover. See the first book in the Trilogy, *The Last Seder of James*, to learn more.

false judge?”

Hadassah smirked. “You still believe John the Baptizer was God’s true high priest, don’t you?”

“Don’t *you*?”

“Perhaps...” she said slowly. “Either way, there’s no doubt left about the identity of the ultimate High Priest—”

“—in the order of Melchizedek.”

“Yes!” We both laughed joyously, before remembering all the sleeping souls around us. I grabbed her ears and kissed her forehead. She rubbed my arms and flashed me her happiest smile.

Abba taught his daughters to find great joy in *midrash*, which would make us popular with rabbis if we were men. But we’re not, so we have to keep it to ourselves if we want to have any friends at all.

Omer 10 | Tuesday

Our road is now a crow’s-fly from Capernaum to Ptolemais. Around lunchtime Milos got tired of talking about Ana. After a few hours’ break, he resumed his questions, but about me this time. “So, what happened to your father?” he asked tentatively. There was a sweet empathy in his voice—poor Milos. He’s had it worse off than I ever did.

“He was a lot older than Ima,” I replied. “When I was fourteen he started slowing down pretty badly. He was tired all the time, and complained about headaches a lot. Before that, he’d always served his people with such energy, and taught Hadassah and me the same way. So really, the Abba I knew died three years before his body gave out.”

Milos stayed silent. His brow was heavy, as he stared at the road ahead of us. The sea had just become visible, like a string of pearls draped over the distant hills. Just beyond those hills, Ptolemais hugged the shore.

“And you were seventeen?”

“Almost eighteen. He nearly died on my birthday, just after Purim.”¹⁵

“Isn’t that the same year you met Jesus?”

“Yes. I don’t know if a part of me was looking for a man to cling to—I have no brothers, as you know—but it happened almost simultaneously. I met the Baptizer just months after we buried Abba. And I was there when Jesus was baptized, although I didn’t figure out what was going on until later.”

“John told me you were one of the Seventy.”

“Oh he did, did he?” I twisted around in my seat to wink at John, but he was gazing absently to his left. Milos kept asking questions, but I don’t remember the rest of it. My mind had already shifted into the trip ahead; I don’t look forward to sea journeys, and I don’t want to leave here anyway. Maybe I should just turn around. Every time I visit Capernaum I leave a piece of me behind. This time it was my soul.

I hear my old home crying out for me now, calling me Avrah.

Omer 11 | Wednesday

This morning we enjoyed a short, refreshing walk to the Sea. After an hour we had crested the final range of hills, and Ptolemais came into view. The air felt cool and salty as a maritime breeze kissed our cheeks and filled our nostrils. Two hours later we walked through the city gates of Ptolemais, and learned that our ship was still out at sea.

By lunchtime the vessel finally arrived, and the sailors started hurriedly unloading bags and crates into large carts on the dock. They must have been way behind schedule—the captain was barking at them to move faster. I’ve been on these ships before—the crew is always cranky when there’s no time for them to spend on shore. It ruins the mood.

¹⁵ Purim, or the Feast of Esther, is an extra-Levitical Jewish holiday to commemorate the defeat of Haman, recorded in the book of Esther.

Omer 12 | Thursday

Our ship embarked yesterday, several hours late but without incident. Despite their grumbling, the crew appears to be working hard to make up for lost time. I wonder what the big hurry is. It's certainly not on my account.

The sun came out late in the afternoon, so I found a comfortable place on the deck to sit and soak it in. For an hour or so I just watched the crew moving back and forth, hoisting sails, adjusting them this way and that. They moved together smoothly, like a graceful animal with thirty-eight arms and thirty-eight legs. But they weren't happy about it. They were speaking Cypriot, so I didn't know what they were saying. But grumbling sounds like grumbling in every language.

One sailor seemed especially aggravated. He was a muscle-bound titan with a big dent in his jaw and an uneven gait. When he spoke, his words came out like the growl of a crocodile. Once I saw the captain give him an order, and the sailor just glared at him. Apparently his mates call him Poseidon, and I can understand why.

Omer 13 | Friday

It's hard to read or write on a ship—almost as hard as on the back of a donkey. The ship is less erratic, but more nauseating. So after a few minutes I have to put the work down. With little else to do, I continued watching the movements of the waves and the crew, while John and Milos were napping down below. I've never been much of a napper, but with the warm sun on my face and the rhythmic sounds of the sea, I actually drifted off for a moment myself. That is, until I heard a warm but husky voice from above my head.

"You must be Priscilla."

"Yes!" I shook my head quickly, trying to remember where I was.

“That’s me. Do I know you?”

“That was my hope. My name is Deacon Nicolas.”

“Oh! I see. Deacon of...”

“Jerusalem.”

“Oh! Of course! You gave a prayer at James’ burial. It was beautiful. Unforgettable, really.”

“That’s me—and thank you. I was glad to contribute, but I regret that we did not have a chance to exchange greetings.”

“Indeed. Well—shalom!” I reached out my hand. “it’s a pleasure to finally meet you in person.”

“Shalom to you, Priscilla. The pleasure is all mine.” His eyes sparkled as he reached out for my hand to plant a kiss on my knuckles. “Your name is a good one. Word has reached my family in Pergamum about your teaching. You are the mentor of the great Apollos, are you not?”

I winced a bit. I’d never heard Apollos referred to as “the great” or myself identified as his mentor. “Yes, I suppose so. We knew him in Rome, and in Corinth, and he eventually came to join us in Ephesus. By that time he’d become a powerful orator, but he still had some gaps in his teaching. I was able to fill in those gaps.¹⁶ With the help of my husband Aquila, that is.”

“Your *husband*, of course! The handsome Aquila.” He made me blush. *What is it about this man?*

“I regret that I have interrupted your basking,” he said abruptly. “Please continue, my dear Priscilla.”

He made me want to speak with a flourish. “Not at all, Deacon Nicolas. No doubt we’ll encounter each other again soon.”

I resumed my place in the sun and tried to remember what I’d heard about Nicolas, Deacon of Jerusalem. He was one of the seven original deacons, I knew that much. But as to personal details, I was drawing a blank. After pondering this awhile, I saw him again, across the stern from

¹⁶ See Acts 18:24-26

where I was sitting. He was standing alone with the sailor they call Poseidon. The sailor was nodding his head calmly as Nicolas talked. After exchanging a few words back and forth, Poseidon gave him a big, toothy grin. Then they put a left hand on each other's shoulders and with their right they shared a Roman handshake.

Bless ADONAI, I thought. That sailor was starting to frighten me. Perhaps Nicolas has cheered him up. *What is it about this man?*

Omer 14 | Saturday

Another Sabbath is behind us. This time, however, I'm afraid to say we got no rest at all. From morning till dusk we were bombarded with apocalyptic winds, and raindrops the size of grapes. It's nighttime now, but the sky was actually darker *before* sundown. Only in the last hour have I been able to see the hand in front of my face again.

It was not the worst storm I've ever endured, but for most of the day we were terrified the ship would capsize. Rather than push through it, our captain (whose name is Briarus) dropped anchor and prayed to his gods that it would hold. Many times I heard him shout against the wind "Our only hope is in that anchor!" How true that is.

After all, we children of Abraham have a double hope—in the never-changing promise of God, and in the oath that confirmed it. When the storms of life overwhelm us, we reach out for anything to steady ourselves, but the sea floor is too deep. So the anchor goes where we never could, and gives us hope.

THE TEACHING

The Festivals

To be a Christian, by definition, is to be a “little Christ”. To be like Jesus. This is what Jesus means when he calls us to be disciples, and to make disciples. A genuine Christians is a person who strives to walk, talk, think and act just like Jesus would, if he were in our shoes.

The New Testament is the divinely inspired guide for all those who aspire to discipleship. The Gospels tell us the story of Jesus’ ministry, death, resurrection and ascension. The Acts of the Apostles recounts the story of Pentecost and the early years of the Church. And the Epistles explain in greater detail what these stories mean for us, and how to make the kinds of choices in our lives that Jesus might make.

However, the New Testament is only a portion of what God has given us to understand the life of a disciple. After all, Jesus didn’t have any of it. He read and studied and lived by the Hebrew Scriptures—the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Writings.⁵⁸ The writers of the New Testament were all, or nearly all, Jewish like Jesus. And if there is any doubt about the importance of the Old Testament in understanding the New, note that the latter quotes the former over 800 times. If one were to include indirect quotations and allusions the number would be in the thousands. In short, the entire New Testament is drawn from the concepts, prophecies and history of the Old.

One major example of the patterns of the Old Testament providing a framework for the New is that of the Jewish Festivals, especially the seven Levitical Festivals outlined in Leviticus 23.

⁵⁸ Or, in Hebrew: *Torah, Nevi'im, Ketuvim*, the abbreviation of which produces the name of the Jewish equivalent to the Old Testament: *The Tanakh*.

The festivals provide a yearly life cycle which also affects the way practitioners live on a daily basis. It is a way of living that reminds us never to forget our salvation and the goodness of God. As the Lord instructs us in Deuteronomy 6:10-12: “When the Lord your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers ... then when you eat and are satisfied, *be careful that you do not forget the Lord*, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.”

When we are grounded in our historical Biblical roots, not only by our knowledge but also but our pattern of living and as a way of life it helps to preserve us so that we do not forget. In celebrating Resurrection Sunday it takes us back to the resurrection of Jesus but we must not stop there, for the resurrection is rooted in Passover. We must continue back to the foundation of Resurrection Sunday which is our Abrahamic roots and the covenant God made with him. As Paul says “Abraham is the father of all that believe.”⁵⁹ We must not forget our historical roots lest we drift astray.

The Seven Levitical Festivals

The Lord said to Moses, “Speak to the Israelites and say to them ‘These are my appointed feasts, the appointed feasts of the Lord, which you are to proclaim as sacred assemblies.’”⁶⁰

The Seven Levitical Festivals are found in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy but Leviticus 23 serves well as a primary source. As verse four proclaims, “These are the Lord’s appointed feasts, the sacred assemblies you are to proclaim at their times.” They do not belong to any group of humans, or to humanity in general. Instead, they belong to God. And we are called to enter into them as we proclaim them to the world.

Even some who are conversant with the Jewish calendar may be unfamiliar with a few of the festivals listed below. This is because the

⁵⁹ Romans 4:11

⁶⁰ Leviticus 23:1-2

Passover is conventionally viewed and celebrated as a single eight-day festival, but in the Torah it is outlined as three distinct times: Passover (one day), Unleavened Bread (the following seven days), and First Fruits (one day, within the seven days of Unleavened Bread). Furthermore, some of the more popular holidays, such as Hanukkah and Purim, were instituted after the Torah was written.

Below is a brief overview of the original Seven Levitical Festivals. Further detail on Passover and the Feast of Weeks (Shavu'ot) is provided in a later section.

Passover (Pesach) and the New Year

“The Lord’s Passover begins at twilight on the fourteenth day of the first month.” ⁶¹

The biblical new year starts in the spring as commanded by God in Exodus 12:2, “This month is to be for you the first month ... of your year.” None of the months had names at this point. (Today Judaism calls the first month Nisan.) Passover⁶² begins on the fifteenth day of the first month.

The importance of this cannot be overstated. In Joshua, the Lord had the Israelites enter the Promised Land at the start of the new year. In fact the first thing that the Israelites did once in the land, after crossing the Jordan and setting up the twelve standing stones, was to celebrate the Passover. ⁶³

Passover was also important to Mary and Joseph, the parents of Jesus. Luke 2:41 records that, “Every year [Jesus’] parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover.” It was only a requirement that Joseph go but since both of his parents went it would be reasonable to assume that they took

⁶¹ Leviticus 23:5

⁶² *Pesach* in Hebrew which means “to spring, jump or pass over” something.

⁶³ Joshua 4:19-5:15

the children and travelled with many friends and relatives.⁶⁴ Jesus probably celebrated Passover in Jerusalem all of his adult life and many of his childhood years. He also stated that he eagerly desired⁶⁵ to celebrate the Passover with his disciples.⁶⁶

Aside from the Gospels, allusions to Passover are found all throughout the New Testament. The book of Revelation, for example, contains many references to the Exodus-Passover event when referring to the Song of Moses and in referring to Jesus as the Lamb.

Unleavened Bread (Matzah)

“On the fifteenth day of that month the Lord’s Feast of Unleavened Bread begins; for seven days you must eat bread made without yeast.”⁶⁷

The feast of unleavened bread begins on the day after Passover and lasts for seven days – from the evening of the sixteenth day until the evening of the twenty-second day. Biblically, Passover and Unleavened Bread are two separate festivals but are commonly called the eight days of Passover in Judaism today.

The time of Unleavened Bread is fairly self-explanatory, as it is focused on the avoidance of leaven, or yeast, in the household. This is the reason for the ritual eating of *matzah*, or unleavened bread. Multiple references to this in the New Testament use yeast as a metaphor for sin. This is especially significant when Jesus compares the *matzah* to his own body, which is “broken” for us. Just as there was no yeast in the bread, there was no sin in his body.

First Fruits (Yom HaBikkurim)

“Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘When you enter the land I am going to give you and you reap its harvest, bring to the priest a sheaf

⁶⁴ Joachim, Jeremias, Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus

⁶⁵ Luke 22:15

⁶⁶ Luke 22:7-22, Matthew 26:17-30, Mark 14:12-26, John 13:1-30

⁶⁷ Leviticus 23:6

of the first grain you harvest. He is to wave the sheaf before the Lord so it will be accepted on your behalf; the priest is to wave it on the day after the Sabbath.”⁶⁸

The feast of First Fruits begins the day after the Passover Sabbath. The Pharisees, and later Rabbinic Judaism, interpreted this to mean the day after Passover (the first day of Unleavened Bread), but the Sadducees and others believed it occurred on the day after the regular Sabbath during or after Passover. The latter interpretation causes First Fruits to always fall on the Sunday within the eight days of Passover/Unleavened bread.

This is important because Sunday, or the first day of the week, signifies new beginnings and relates to the number eight as a number of dedication. As we will see further down, this interpretation also causes Shavu’ot to always fall on a Sunday.

Feast of Weeks (Shavu’ot / Pentecost)

“From the day after the Sabbath the day you brought the sheaf of the wave offering, count off seven full weeks. Count off fifty days up to the day after the seventh Sabbath and then present an offering of new grain to the Lord.”⁶⁹

After the festival of First Fruits comes the counting of the fifty days, called the Counting of the Omer (explained in more detail in a later section) which leads up to the festival of Shavu’ot. This festival is also known as the “latter first fruits” because the fruit of the wheat harvest was brought in and waved before the Lord in worship and thanksgiving. Barney Kasdan, a Messianic Jewish Rabbi, writes in his excellent book, *God’s Appointed Times*: “Shavu’ot is designated as a time of thanksgiving for the early harvest. God’s faithfulness in providing the early wheat harvest increases hopefulness for an abundant fall harvest (at Sukkot).”⁷⁰

Also known as Pentecost, this festival is related to the giving of the

⁶⁸ Leviticus 23:10-11

⁶⁹ Leviticus 23:15-16

⁷⁰ Kasdan, 52.

law to Moses at Mt. Sinai in the third month.⁷¹ It takes place in the third month of the Jewish calendar, which is known as Sivan and starts in late May or early June. Since Shavu'ot, or Pentecost, is the primary focus of this book, it is described in much greater detail in other sections.

Feast of Trumpets (Rosh Hashanah / Yom Teruah)

“On the first day of the seventh month you are to have a day of rest, a sacred assembly commemorated with trumpet blasts. Do no regular work but present an offering made to the Lord by fire.”⁷²

The Feast of Trumpets celebrates the Jewish civil new year and should not be confused with the biblical new year that starts in the Spring. Scripture is brief on the subject, but establishes the Feast of Trumpets as a time of regathering, initiating the ten days of preparation for the Day of Atonement. The trumpet blasts are considered the “wake-up call; an alarm to call us to our appointed time.”⁷³

Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur)

“The tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. Hold a sacred assembly and deny yourselves, and present an offering made to the Lord by fire. Do no work on that day, because it is the Day of Atonement, when atonement is made for you before the Lord your God. Anyone who does not deny himself on that day must be cut off from his people. I will destroy from among his people anyone who does any work on that day. You shall do no work at all. This is to be a lasting ordinance for the generations to come, wherever you live. It is a sabbath of rest for you, and you must deny yourselves. From the evening of the ninth day of the month until the following evening you are to observe your sabbath.”⁷⁴

⁷¹ Exodus 19:1

⁷² Leviticus 23:23-25

⁷³ Kasdan, 65.

⁷⁴ Leviticus 23:26-32

The Day of Atonement is considered the holiest day of the year with all thirty-four verses of Leviticus chapter sixteen being devoted to the explicit way in which it was to be observed. This was the day when the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies to make “atonement for himself, his household and the whole community of Israel.” ⁷⁵

Kasdan writes: “Yom Kippur is considered the logical extension of what was started at Rosh Hashanah. In fact, the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur take on their own holy significance. They’re called the Yomim Nora’im, The Days of Awe. Traditional Jews, as well as many non-traditional Jews, spend these days looking inward, seeing how their inner life might be more pleasing to God. Personal relationships are evaluated; forgiveness and restitution are offered where needed. Reconciliation is attempted.” ⁷⁶

Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot)

“The Lord said to Moses, ‘Say to the Israelites: “On the fifteenth day of the seventh month the Lord’s Feast of Tabernacles begins, and it lasts for seven days. The first day is a sacred assembly; do no regular work. For seven days present offerings made to the Lord by fire, and on the eighth day hold a sacred assembly and present an offering made to the Lord by fire. It is the closing assembly; do no regular work.”’” ⁷⁷

The Feast Tabernacles is the last of the festivals and as such sums up all of the previous six. The festival year that began with Passover is now concluded with Sukkot. It is very special because it is the *seventh* festival, it begins in the *seventh* month, and lasts for *seven* days. It is a time for thanksgiving and celebration—a time, as Nehemiah said, to “enjoy choice food and sweet drink, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the

⁷⁵ Leviticus 16:17

⁷⁶ Kasdan, 79

⁷⁷ Leviticus 23:33-36

Lord is your strength.”⁷⁸ The Feast of Tabernacles also has a strong future aspect. Zechariah foretells a day when all nations will stream to Jerusalem to celebrate the Festival, and Revelation chapter 19 reveals its ultimate fulfillment in the Marriage Supper of the Lamb.

Past, Present and Future

All the festivals have a past, a present and a future aspect to them. They were given in the past as outworkings of the covenant relationship between God and Israel. They are a present reality in our yearly community life cycle as well as our daily lives. and they all will have a future fulfillment in the Kingdom of God.

Dan Juster, a Messianic Jewish Rabbi and noted scholar writes: “I have come to see all the feasts as having great future prophetic reference awaiting fulfillment. Hence each feast has historic reference to God’s salvation to ancient Israel, to the meaning of fulfillment in Yeshua [Jesus] who brings out the deepest meaning of the feast, to agricultural significance in celebrating God as the provider, and reference to the last days and the millennial age to come.”⁷⁹

The Spirit and the Festivals

This book demonstrates the centrality of Shavu’ot / Pentecost to the plan of God, and specifically to the great outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem after Jesus’ ascension. But Shavu’ot is not the only festival which reveals the character of the Spirit of God. Like the Holy Spirit (as revealed at the Great Outpouring) the Seven Levitical Festivals are (1) Experiential, (2) Integrated, (3) Communal and (4) Evangelistic.

Experiential. The festivals are not services but feast days to be lived. These commands are to be an integral part of the community life of Israel, as well as individual and family life. They are to be impressed

⁷⁸ Nehemiah 8:10

⁷⁹ Juster, *Jewish Roots*, viii

(taught) to the children, to be passed down throughout the generations. It is the responsibility of parents to observe and teach these truths. Likewise, baptism in the Holy Spirit is evidenced by the *experience* of speaking in tongues and praising God.

Integrated. The festivals are integrated because the observance of each festival is not a performance or entertainment oriented that is put on by a leader and choir. Likewise, the work of the Holy Spirit comes to the entire group at once, and not through the leadership of an individual.

Communal. The festivals are communal because all of the family and community observe them. Likewise, the Great Outpouring was a communal event that drew no lines of separation between different groups of people. To the contrary, it eliminated the dividing lines, much like the curtain in the Agora, in Priscilla's story.

Evangelistic. The festivals are evangelistic because of the opportunity to invite the foreigner and alien to participate in them. Likewise, the Holy Spirit worked in the hearts of the crowd on the day of Pentecost, and about three thousand of them became Believers.

Passover and the Pilgrimage Festivals

Of the seven feasts, three of them, Passover, Shavu'ot (Pentecost) and Sukkot (Tabernacles) are called Pilgrimage Festivals because they required all the men in the land of Israel to appear before the Lord.⁸⁰ The Pilgrimage Festivals form the basis for this trilogy, as the three books feature these three festivals, respectively. In this section, they are discussed through the lens of Passover, as the primary festival.

The first appointed time is Passover, which first defined Israel as a nation in Exodus chapter 12. The command to celebrate Passover and begin the New Year with this observance was the first command given to the children of Israel. Thus their calling, mission and identity are bound

⁸⁰ Exodus 23:17, 34:23, Deuteronomy 16:16

up in Passover and the Passover-Exodus event.

Passover is the primary festival because it initiates the festival season and lends significance to all seven festivals. Further, it is an essential component of the three Pilgrimage Festivals. The Passover-Shavu'ot relationship is particularly strong because it is connected by the Counting of the Omer (the 50 days) and the journey from Exodus to Mt. Sinai. Thus Shavu'ot is called the *atzeret*, or “conclusion” of Passover. The journey that began in Egypt in the first month of the year brought the Israelites to Mt. Sinai in the third month.

This same relationship exists between Passover and Sukkot (The Feast of Tabernacles). In essence Sukkot draws its identity from Passover as well as from Shavu'ot, and fulfills and completes both of them. The three Pilgrimage Festivals are thus integral to one another and could be compared to the triune nature and revelation of the Godhead: the Son (Passover), the Spirit (Pentecost) and the Father (Tabernacles).

The centrality of Passover to the three Pilgrimage Festivals, the seven Levitical festivals, and indeed, to the redemptive master story of God in both the Old and New Testaments, is the rationale for naming this series The Passover Trilogy. While the second book is primarily about Pentecost, and the third book is primarily about the Feast of Tabernacles, these are rooted in, and surrounded by, the redemptive master-themes of Passover.

Counting of the Omer

As described in the Introduction, Passover marks the barley harvest in mid-Spring, and begins the countdown to the wheat harvest in late Spring. In Leviticus 23:15, God commands “Then you are to count from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the Omer [a unit of measure] of the wave offering, seven complete Sabbaths. Until the day after the seventh Sabbath you are to count fifty days, and then present a new grain offering to ADONAI.”

This new grain offering marks the festival of Shavu'ot, or Pentecost. Thus, for thousands of years Jewish people have counted fifty days from Passover to Pentecost, which is referred to as the Counting of the Omer.

Shavu'ot (Feast of Weeks)

As explained in the Introduction, Shavu'ot is one of the seven holidays prescribed in Leviticus 23 for Israel to observe in perpetuity. At its root, Shavu'ot is a celebration of the wheat harvest, which comes seven weeks, or fifty days, after the barley harvest, represented by the festivals of Passover and First Fruits.

While Passover⁸¹ calls forth the children of Israel from bondage in Egypt, Shavu'ot⁸² is the time when Israel was called as a nation into a covenantal relationship with God, through the giving of the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Shavu'ot/Pentecost then provided the way of fulfilling that calling by bringing the righteousness and justice of the Kingdom of God to the earth (to all nations).

It was supposed that the Children of Israel had arrived at Sinai on the fiftieth day after their Exodus from Egypt, thus adding a new layer of meaning to the festival. With this, what had begun as an agricultural observance became something much richer and deeper. This association—between Shavu'ot and the giving of the Law—set the stage for the Great Outpouring of the Holy Spirit among Jewish followers of Jesus, as told in the second chapter of the book of Acts.

Of the three pilgrimage festivals, Shavu'ot may receive the least attention, as it tends to be overshadowed by Passover and Sukkot (Tabernacles). Its one-day observance is brief in comparison to the eight days of Passover/Unleavened Bread and the seven/eight days of Sukkot. And, whereas Passover is celebrated with a grand Seder (meal) and Sukkot with the building of a sukkah (tent or booth), Shavu'ot's lack of

⁸¹ Exodus 12

⁸² Exodus 19:1

memorable liturgy or communal activity can make it seem forgettable. However, the significance of Shavu'ot in the establishment of a national covenant is central to the plan of God, in fulfilling the covenantal promises he made to Abraham and, by extension, to every nation.⁸³

This theme of Mission, starting with the promise and blessing of Abraham and reaching around the world, is reflected clearly in Psalm 67, which is a core element of the celebration of Shavu'ot. The key phrase is in verse 2, “that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all the nations.” What began as an agricultural harvest-festival blossoms in this way into an eschatological harvest of souls from every corner of the world.

Thus, while Shavu'ot is not the most well-known of Jewish holidays, it continues to occupy an important place on the Hebrew calendar. It is viewed by many Jews as the culmination of Passover, just as the receiving of the Torah on Mount Sinai was the culmination of the Exodus from Egypt.

This is why Jewish people celebrate Shavu'ot with activities and liturgies that commemorate the inception of the Law of Moses, and why it is a popular time for confirmation and rededication to Jewish practice and the study of that Law. It is also common to eat dairy foods and other sweet foods, and to read the book of Ruth as a congregation.

When is Shavu'ot?

There are two perspectives on the timing of Shavu'ot. One perspective begins the Counting of the Omer on the second day of Passover. This causes Shavu'ot to always fall on the sixth day of Sivan, which is the third month, regardless of what day of the week it is. As explained above, this is exactly fifty days (or seven weeks plus one day) after Passover, which falls on the fifteenth day of Nisan.

Another perspective begins the Counting of the Omer on the first Sabbath during Passover, causing Shavu'ot to always fall on a Sunday,

⁸³ See *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, “The Covenant at Sinai”, 102.

regardless of the date. This is the perspective which was more or less adopted by Church tradition, since Pentecost always falls on a Sunday.

Due to the lunisolar nature of the Jewish calendar, compared to the strictly solar Gregorian calendar, Shavu'ot and Pentecost are sometimes perfectly aligned, and sometimes up to four weeks apart. Regardless of the perspective to which one prescribes, Shavu'ot will always fall somewhere between mid-May and mid-June.

Pentecost

The Christian Church celebrates Pentecost with a heavy emphasis on the specific event which took place in Jerusalem on Shavu'ot, fifty days after the crucifixion of Jesus (approx. AD 30). Geza Vermes captures the significance of this moment for the disciples: “within a short time the terrified small group of the original followers of Jesus, still hiding from public gaze, all at once underwent a powerful mystical experience in Jerusalem on the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost). Filled with the promised Holy Spirit, the pusillanimous men were suddenly metamorphosed into ecstatic spiritual warriors.”⁸⁴

The Holy Spirit and the Great Outpouring

The coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (referred to here as the Great Outpouring) is powerfully linked to the redemptive mission, plan and purpose of God, from Abraham to Jesus to us. Before delving into the significance of the event, a brief discussion of its locale may be in order.

Luke, the writer of Acts, mentions at the beginning of chapter two that the disciples were “all together in one place.” Where was that place? Tradition refers to it as “the upper room” but this is not drawn explicitly from Scripture. While a detailed argument may be better suited elsewhere, suffice it to say that a convergence of evidence points to the

⁸⁴ Geza Vermes, *The Resurrection*, 149

Temple itself as the most likely location for the Great Outpouring. More specifically, the disciples may have gathered in an upstairs room adjacent to the Court of the Gentiles, where it is plausible that thousands of witnesses would be present.

Since the disciples in Jerusalem were, by and large, Jewish, the Temple is the only natural place for them to be at 9 in the morning, on the day of Shavu'ot. This is also the place where thousands of baptisms would naturally occur, at the Temple's ritual baths, or *mikvehs*.

Lest this question seem trivial, another look at Acts 2:2 may be in order, wherein the Spirit is described as filling "the whole house." It may indeed be a blessing for the Spirit to visit every room of a private residence (as western Christians often imagine it) but how much greater is it for the Spirit to be poured out on the Temple? Note that the Temple is often referred to in Scripture simply as "the House" and that tens of thousands of people routinely gathered there for Festival celebrations.

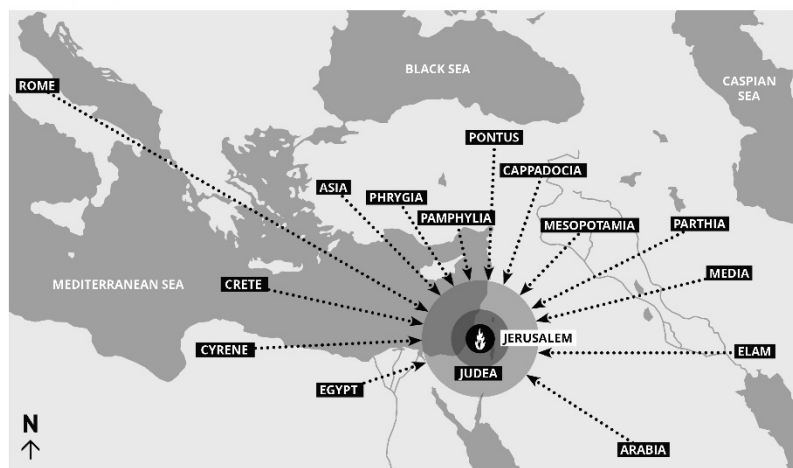
The scene of the Great Outpouring, described in the second chapter of Acts, centers around the baptism (or outpouring) of the Holy Spirit on the Jesus' disciples, and the welcome many new ones into the family of Believers. This purpose is especially fitting at such a time as Shavu'ot, when "there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven ... Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs." ⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Acts 2:5, 9-11

This is essentially a description of the entire Jewish diaspora, stretching from Rome in the west to modern-day Iran in the east. (See map – permission pending)

THE NATIONS OF PENTECOST ACTS 2:9-11

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What could have motivated the Jewish people in the Diaspora to travel such a distance to be present in Jerusalem for Shavu'ot? The journey, usually by foot, would have been long and difficult. Rome was over 1,400 miles as the crow flies, and many of the other places mentioned were over 600 miles away, so it would have taken a lot of time and money. Consequently, many travelers would have come for Passover and stayed through to Shavu'ot / Pentecost.

Acts 2:6 notes that these visitors each heard the disciples speak in their own language. It would have only been natural for the 3,000 devout Jews who were baptized that day to be share this message on their return journeys, and finally, in their home towns.⁸⁶ Thus, it was the diaspora Jews who took the good news message of the resurrected Jesus and the

⁸⁶ Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life*, 46

fullness of the Spirit to the whole world. The initial message of the Gospel went forth even before the Apostles set out, and before Paul was even a disciple! There is no doubt that this was a sovereign work of God.

While there is some divergence amongst various Christian traditions regarding the interpretation of the concept of Holy Spirit Baptism, most agree that it was the promised gift of Jesus for the purpose of empowering the disciples for ministry.

With that, the series of events that had begun in the Temple over thirty years prior, when the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah were now complete. And, reaching further back, the desire of Moses' heart was fulfilled, when he wished that "all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them."⁸⁷

Pentecost Today

Pentecostal Christians, who get their name from the festival, often observe this time with a special emphasis on revivalism, and the individual experience of receiving the Holy Spirit. This is most regularly accompanied by the practice of speaking in tongues, or glossolalia/xenolalia, as depicted in Acts 2:4-11. Other expressions may include prophecy and divine healing. This is also true of some churches that identify as Charismatic.

Many western Christians who do not practice in this way still maintain vibrant traditions at Pentecost, especially those in the liturgical and sacramental denominations (Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, etc.)

While these expressions are far too diverse to enumerate here, some of the common ones include the wearing the color red (representing the tongues of fire above the disciples' heads) the symbol of the dove, for the Holy Spirit (as in Jesus' baptism in Matthew 3:16, Mark 1:10 and Luke 3:22) and the singing of hymns which focus on the Trinity and the Holy

⁸⁷ Geza Vermes, *The Resurrection*, 149 (includes quotation from Numbers 11:29)

Spirit.

While some traditions mark Pentecost as the “birthday of the Church”, this perspective is of limited value. When one considers the festival’s foundation in Shavu’ot, and the Church’s rootedness in the covenants of Abraham, Moses and David, one must conclude that the “Church” (the Yahwistic community of believers in a divine messiah—whether past, present or future) stretches back much further than the year AD 30. Whether it began with Moses, or Abraham, or even Adam, however, is a question for another book.

When is Pentecost?

Much like Shavu’ot, Pentecost is tied in the western church calendar to the better-known festival which precedes it. Easter Sunday is the first day of the 50-day period called “Eastertide” (clearly intended to mirror the Jewish Counting of the Omer.) The 50th day of this period, then, is celebrated as Pentecost Sunday.

The earliest date on which Pentecost can occur on the Gregorian calendar is May 10. The latest is June 13.

12 Parallels between Shavu’ot and Pentecost

No doubt can remain that the Great Outpouring of the Holy Spirit occurred at the Jewish festival of Shavu’ot. But why? After Jesus ascended to heaven on the 40th day, why not send the Spirit right then? Why wait 10 more days? If we truly believe that God has a plan and a purpose then we must believe that it was not just a coincidence but there was some significance to the coming of the Spirit on Shavu’ot.

David Stern, translator of the *Complete Jewish Bible*, provides some historical background to Shavu’ot that helps to answer these questions. He writes in his Jewish New Testament Commentary: “[Because] it was

God's intention to bring the Jewish New Covenant ⁸⁸ to the Jewish people in a Jewish way, he made maximal use of the Jewish festivals to convey new truths in ways that emphasized their connection with old truths. ⁸⁹

The new truths revealed in Passover and Shavu'ot were indeed connected to the old truths which would be explicitly shown by using God's appointed times as revealed to Moses over a thousand years prior. The revelation of the Holy Spirit was given within the revelation of the Feast of Weeks, as well as within the framework of all seven of the Levitical Festivals.

Thus, the association between Shavu'ot and the giving of the Law set the stage for the Great Outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, as told in the second chapter of the book of Acts. The parallels between the two events are nothing less than astonishing, and those who understand the festival in both the Torah and in Acts can scarcely doubt that the two are tightly linked.

So here are the parallels we see between the two Holy Days, starting with the four elements of classical metaphysics: Earth, Wind, Fire and Water. These will be followed by a fifth element (or quintessence) which ties them together. After that, we'll look at some additional parallels that add meaning to the juxtaposition.

1) Earth

Shavu'ot, in its original form, is a festival celebrating the wheat harvest. Jewish people were expected to come to the Temple from every nation to make wave offerings of two loaves of bread. Since the quality of this produce was seen as a foreshadowing of the coming fall harvest, Shavu'ot was a time to declare hope and trust in the fullness of God's blessing. The two loaves served as a symbol of this.

Later (during the Second Temple period and beyond) the emphasis

⁸⁸ Jeremiah 31:30-33

⁸⁹ Stern, Jewish New Testament Commentary

shifted from a celebration of the harvest, to a commemoration of the giving of the Torah. Because Shavu'ot takes place seven weeks after Passover, it aligns in the Exodus story with the arrival of the nation of Israel at Mount Sinai. And because of what happened there, the mountain is revered as a holy place. As sacred earth. And when God arrived, that earth shook violently. (Exodus 19:18)

When the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Shavu'ot (Pentecost) after Yeshua's ascension, it happened at another elevated piece of sacred earth: the Temple Mount. Even though the Temple curtain had been torn in two just 50 days prior, God still chose this very specific place to begin his multi-lingual, multi-ethnic Messiah movement. And the result of the Spirit's arrival on that day? A great harvest of souls, as we'll explore below.

2) Wind (and Weather)

In both stories, of Mount Sinai in Exodus and the day of Pentecost in Acts, the weather played a major role. "In the morning of the third day, there was thunder and lightning, a thick cloud on the mountain, and the blast of an exceedingly loud shofar. All the people in the camp trembled." (Exodus 19:16) On the day of Pentecost, Luke writes that "suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting." (Acts 2:2) Like a thunderclap in a horror movie, extreme weather is used to get the audience's attention. Something greater than us is happening here.

This sound of a violent wind or violent breath is often thought of as the evidence of the coming of the Holy Spirit (which, in Hebrew is *Ruach HaKodesh*). However, when a greater understanding of the meaning of *Ruach* may reveal that this was not simply evidence of the Spirit, but indeed the Spirit himself.

Ruach, which here is translated "Spirit", is the Hebrew word meaning "wind" or "breath". It is God's life-giving, sustaining energy which was explicitly active in the creation of the universe, and again in the creation

of humankind. As in creation, the *Ruach* comes at Pentecost to animate that which is inert, and to harmonize that which is chaotic.

3) Fire

“Now the entire Mount Sinai was in smoke, because ADONAI had descended upon it in fire. The smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace.” (Exodus 19:18) Fire often serves as a sign of God’s dramatic arrival, sometimes in judgment and sometimes in revelation.

The parallel with Pentecost is obvious, but the similarity makes the difference even more dramatic. At Mount Sinai, God arrived in a single massive inferno, like the eruption of a volcano that envelops the summit in smoke. At Pentecost, the fire was just as significant, but far gentler, and with a different message. Before, the point was to draw everyone’s attention to the Almighty Creator, and his monolithic message to the new nation about to be birthed. But now, individual tongues of fire meant that individual children of God were being anointed with the divine authority to carry God’s message to the nations.

4) Water

Water is a symbol of cleansing and purification, for obvious reasons. In preparation for God’s revelation at Sinai, he has Moses “sanctify” the people, and instructs them to wash their clothes, in water of course. (Imagine how dirty they would be after walking fifty days through the desert.) So at Sinai the cleansing was a preparation for the people to receive the Torah from God, but at Pentecost, water came after the fact.

After the tongues of fire descended on the group of believers, and they spoke in many languages, Peter preached to the crowd.⁹⁰ When they responded with open hearts, he instructed them to “Repent, and let each of you be baptized [in water] in the name of Messiah Yeshua for the removal of your sins.” (Acts 2:38)

⁹⁰ If Pentecost is the reflection of Shavu’ot, it is here that Peter becomes the reflection of Moses.

5) Word (the Quintessence)

The four elements were the foundation of classical metaphysics for centuries before Aristotle introduced a fifth element (or “quintessence”, which he called “aether”) to serve as a source and a culmination of the first four. If believers were looking for a symbol that gives rise to all other symbols, surely it would be the Word. It is by the Word of God that light and the universe came to be, and by the Word that is Yeshua that all those created in his image might be rescued from darkness.

Despite the theatrics surrounding Mount Sinai, the ultimate purpose of the encounter was to receive a Word from God. What sets this apart from all other prophetic words, is that God etched them into stone with his own finger. (Exodus 31:18) What would you give to see a sample of God’s penmanship?

The Word was also at the very center of the day of Pentecost. Although this time, like with the fire, it served a very different purpose. Instead of a single epic message spoken through a single prophet, it was divided into every language, to speak of the mighty deeds of God to every tribe who had traveled to worship at the Temple. Although they came from every corner of the globe, the people were all there for one reason: to commemorate the giving of the Torah. With that in mind, which “mighty deeds” might the believers have proclaimed in those diverse tongues?

Other Parallels

6) Culmination. Although Passover is the most significant holiday in the Jewish calendar, it is just the beginning of a journey that leads to Shavu’ot, and the giving of the Torah. And just as Holy Week is at the heart of the Church calendar, it culminates in Pentecost, which gives birth to a new global community of Believers.

7) Counting to 50. Shavu’ot is the Hebrew word for “weeks” referring to the seven weeks after Passover, leading up to the Feast of Shavu’ot, which was the next day. This is called the Counting of the Omer.

Pentecost is the Greek word for “50th” to indicate the final day of the “50 days of Easter”. (It’s worth noting that “Eastertide” technically begins on the evening before Easter day, which is another reflection of its origins in the Jewish calendar.)

8) Sunday. According to the Sadducees, the Counting of the Omer begins after the first Sabbath day of Passover. That means that the 50th day of the count will always fall on the first day of the week, or Sunday. Likewise, Pentecost is always exactly seven weeks after Easter, meaning that it falls on a Sunday every year as well. And since the first day of the week is symbolic of new beginnings...

9) New Religion. Many scholars view Mount Sinai as the birthplace of Judaism, and Pentecost as the birthplace of Christianity. Both occur on the first day of the week, a time for new beginnings.

10) Law. Shavu’ot commemorates God writing the Law (Torah) on stone, and Pentecost is the time when the Spirit of God wrote that Law on our hearts.

God used the great outpouring at Pentecost both to reflect the momentous scene where the Law is given, and to unravel the effects of sin, which is something the Law can never do. That’s why we see some of these parallels affirming the Shavu’ot tradition, and other parallels appearing to fulfill it, wrap it up, and/or start something new.

11) Trumpet. “[There was] the blast of an exceedingly loud *shofar*⁹¹ ... When the sound of the shofar grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him with a thunderous sound.” (Exodus 19:16,19)

At Mount Sinai, the shofar (ram’s horn, or trumpet) began at “exceedingly loud” volume and then got louder and louder. I believe “ear-splitting” would be an appropriate adjective here. The Israelites were to make no mistake that this was God was speaking, and not Moses.

At Pentecost, Luke makes it clear that the outpouring takes place at precisely 9 in the morning. (or the “third hour”) Whenever Scripture is

⁹¹ *Shofar*: Trumpet or Ram’s horn

specific about the time of day, there's always a reason. What is the reason in this case? Because the morning Temple sacrifice occurred every day at the third hour, accompanied by the sound of a *shofar*.

12) 3,000 People. Exodus 32:28 recounts, "So the sons of Levi did as Moses said, and that day from among the people there fell about 3,000 men." Acts 2:41 recounts, "So those who received his message were baptized, and that day about 3,000 souls were added."

Both of these verses start with the word "so", meaning they are a result of what came before. Because the followers of Moses were unfaithful and put their trust in an idol, about 3,000 people died. And because the followers of Yeshua were faithful and trusted God for "power from on high", they received that power, and 3,000 people were saved.

Conclusion

Although Priscilla's story takes place thirty-two years after the Great Outpouring (or the first Christian Pentecost, estimated to have occurred in AD 30) it serves to echo this milestone in the fictional events set forth in first-century Ephesus.

While we, as Believers, should not expect the Acts of the Apostles to repeat themselves in our own time, we should nevertheless look to the Holy Spirit to move in transformative ways in our own lives.

In other words, Shavu'ot / Pentecost is more than a past event, and more than an annual festival. Rather, it is an unbroken reality for all who trust the Spirit of God to renew their hearts day by day.