

Counting the Omer

AN INQUIRY INTO THE DIVERGENT METHODS OF THE 1ST CENTURY JUDAISMS

Tim Hegg • TorahResource • 2002 • Edited 2009

Introduction

The festival of Unleavened Bread (*chag hamatzot*) is connected to the festival of Shavuot via the counting of 49 intervening days. This counting, according to Leviticus 23, commenced with the waving of a sheaf of grain by the priests:

Lev. 23:15 ‘You shall also count for yourselves from the day after the sabbath, from the day when you brought in the sheaf of the wave offering; there shall be seven complete sabbaths. 16 ‘You shall count fifty days to the day after the seventh sabbath; then you shall present a new grain offering to the LORD.

וסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם מִמַּחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת מִיּוֹם הַבִּיאָכֶם אֶת־עֹמֶר הַתְּנוּפָה שֹׁבַע שָׁבָתוֹת תְּמִימֹת תִּהְיֶינָה עַד מִמַּחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת הַשְּׁבִיעִית תִּסְפְּרוּ חֲמִשִּׁים יוֹם וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם מִנְחָה חֲדָשָׁה לַיהוָה

The Hebrew word עֹמֶר (*omer*) is here translated as “sheaf,” its primary meaning.¹ But the Torah also identifies the עֹמֶר, omer, as a dry measure, equal to one tenth of an ephah (Exodus 16:36), and thus the amount of grain necessary for the fulfillment of this mitzvah was determined to be one tenth of an ephah.

According to the Mishnah (m.Menachot 10:1), three se’ot of barley were harvested and brought to the Temple.² The grain first was parched, then ground into course flour, and put through 13 sieves. Then one tenth was given to the priest who mixed it with oil and frankincense for “a pleasing odor to the Lord” after which, it was waved before the Lord.³ If the barley was ripe in the environs of Jerusalem, it was harvested there. But if it was not ripe in Jerusalem, then it was taken from any location within the Land of Israel, but if possible from Gaggot Serifin. Furthermore, the harvesting was done even if the day of the ceremony fell on a weekly Sabbath (m.Menachot 10:3).

Mishnah *Menachot* 10 details an elaborate ceremony for the harvesting of the barley in anticipation of the omer ceremony.

Once it gets dark [that is, the 16th has come], he says to them, “Has the sun set?” They say, “Yes.” “Has the sun set?” They say, “Yes.” “[With] this sickle?” They say, “Yes.” “[With] this sickle?” They say, “Yes.” “[With] this basket?” They say, “Yes.” “[With] this basket?” They say, “Yes.” On the Sabbath, he says to them, “[Shall I reap on] this Sabbath?” They say, “Yes.” “[Shall I reap on] this Sabbath?” They say, “Yes.” “Shall I reap?” They say, “Reap.” “Shall I reap?” They say, “Reap”—three times for each and every matter. And they say to him, “Yes, yes, yes.” All of this [pomp] for what purpose? Because of the Boethusians, for they maintain, “The reaping of the [barley for] the omer is not [done] at the conclusion of the festival.”⁴

This Mishnah is no doubt included to show that the Pharisees were intent on broadcasting their

¹ Cf. *HALOT*, ad loc.

² The Mishnah contains evidence of a dispute over the amount of the barley harvested for the festival, and exactly how it was harvested. The minority opinion (represented by R. Ishmael) was that three *se’ot* were harvested if the ceremony fell on the weekly Sabbath, and five if it fell on a weekday. The Sages ruled, however, that it was three whether on a Sabbath or a weekday, and the *halachah* follows the Sages, m.Menachot 1:1.

³ The whole ceremony is described in m.Menachot 10.

⁴ m.Menachot 10:3.

chronology, not wanting anyone to confuse their reckoning with that of the Boethusians. This highlights the well-attested importance placed upon calendrical issues and their subsequent halachah.

The “Boethusians” were most likely a branch of the Sadducees, gaining their name from Simeon b. Boethus who was appointed high priest by Herod the Great in 24 BCE,⁵ following Joshua b. Phabi. His appointment as high priest by Herod was to afford him a suitable status to marry Herod’s daughter, Mariamne II.

The Boethusians, while agreeing in great measure with the Sadducees, did not share their aristocratic background nor did they support the Hasmonean dynasty. Rather they were loyal to the Herodians. In fact, it is likely that when the Gospels refer to the “Herodians” (Mark 3:16; 12:13) the reference is to the Boethusians. They were regarded by the Talmudists as cynical and materialistic, and as having hired false witnesses to delude the Pharisees regarding the new moon (*b.Rosh Hashannah* 22b). Likewise, in the Talmud the Boethusians are marked as cruel and oppressive:

“Woe is me because of the House of Boethus, woe is me because of their staves” (with which they beat the people).⁶

But in reference to the topic at hand, the Boethusians held that the waving of the sheaf should occur, not the day following the Sabbath of the festival (i.e., on the 16th) but on the first day of the week following the weekly Sabbath within the Festival week (*כָּל הַמּוֹעֵד*, *chol haMoed*). This variation in the starting point for counting the omer meant that their celebration of Shavuot was also at variance with the Pharisees, and presumably the majority of Sadducees. Since they waved the sheaf on the first day of the week, Shavuot also fell on a Sunday.

We also know that the Qumran sect differed in their calculations for counting the omer and thus the day they celebrated Shavuot. They understood the word “Sabbath” of Leviticus 23:15 to be the weekly Sabbath following the last day of Unleavened Bread (which is also a Sabbath).⁷ Thus, like the Boethusians, they began counting the omer on the first day of the week, and celebrated Shavuot on the first day of the week, but in both cases a week later than the Boethusians.⁸

These three different perspectives (Pharisees, Boethusians, sect of the Dead Sea Scrolls), then, are those known to exist in the 1st Century CE.⁹ The precise reasons for the variant views are not fully known, but it is sure that the exegesis of Leviticus 23:9-16 played a role.

Leviticus 23:9-14

The appointed times prescribed in Leviticus 23 begin with the weekly Sabbath (vv. 1-3). Then the Pesach is noted along with the Feast of Unleavened Bread (*Chag HaMatzot*) and the Feast of Weeks (*Shavuot*) calculated as the 50th day after seven full weeks. In the midst of the section on *Chag HaMat-*

⁵ Cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 15:320.

⁶ *b.Pesachim* 57a, cf. *t.Menachot* 13:21.

⁷ That it is not specifically designated by the term *שַׁבָּת* is really irrelevant, for the text surely ascribes to it the same characteristic of all other sabbath days, namely, that no common labor was allowed upon it and that a *מִקְרָא קֹדֶשׁ*, a “holy assembly,” is prescribed, Leviticus 23:7-8.

⁸ See the comments of Lawrence Schiffman, *Reclaiming the Dead Sea Scrolls* (JPS, 1994), 304. The actual Qumran text that specifies the 26th of Nisan as the day for waving the sheaf is the *Temple Scroll* 18:11-13.

⁹ J. H. Kurtz (*Offerings, Sacrifices and Worship in the Old Testament*, [T&T Clark, 1863; reprint, Hendricksen, 1998], 356-58) notes that some scholars at the turn of the century suggested that the sheaf was waved on the 15th, but this is speculative without any clear historical data for verification that such a position was actually held or practiced by the Judaism of the 1st Century CE.

zot there is the prescription for waving the sheaf, cast in the historical perspective of Israel entering into the Land.

Leviticus 23:10–14	
<p>Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 10 “Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘When you enter the land which I am going to give to you and reap its harvest, then you shall bring in the sheaf of the first fruits of your harvest to the priest. 11 ‘He shall wave the sheaf before the LORD for you to be accepted; on the day after the sabbath the priest shall wave it. 12 ‘Now on the day when you wave the sheaf, you shall offer a male lamb one year old without defect for a burnt offering to the LORD. 13 ‘Its grain offering shall then be two-tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with oil, an offering by fire to the LORD for a soothing aroma, with its drink offering, a fourth of a hin of wine. 14 ‘Until this same day, until you have brought in the offering of your God, you shall eat neither bread nor roasted grain nor new growth. It is to be a perpetual statute throughout your generations in all your dwelling places.</p>	<p>9 וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: 10 דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם כִּי־תָבֹאוּ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי נֹתֵן לָכֶם וּקְצַרְתֶּם אֶת־קְצִירָהּ וְהִבֵּאתֶם אֶת־עֹמֶר רֵאשִׁית קְצִירְכֶם אֶל־הַכֹּהֵן: 11 וְהֵנִיף אֶת־הָעֹמֶר לִפְנֵי יְהוָה לְרִצְוֹנְכֶם מִמַּחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת יִנִּיפֻנוּ הַכֹּהֵן: 12 וַעֲשִׂיתֶם בְּיוֹם הַנִּיפְכֶם אֶת־הָעֹמֶר כֶּבֶשׂ תְּמִים בֶּן־שָׁנָתוֹ לְעֹלָה לַיהוָה: 13 וּמִנְחָתוֹ שְׁנֵי עֶשְׂרֹנִים סֹלֶת בְּלוּלָה בְשֶׁמֶן אִשָּׁה לַיהוָה רֵיחַ נִיחֹחַ וְנִסְכָּה יַיִן רְבִיעֵת הַהֵינֶן: 14 וְלֶחֶם וְקָלִי וְכֶרֶמֶל לֹא תֹאכְלוּ עַד־עֵצָם הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה עַד הַבִּיאְכֶם אֶת־קָרְבַּן אֱלֹהֵיכֶם חֲקַת עוֹלָם לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם בְּכָל מִשְׁבַּתֵיכֶם: ס</p>

It can be seen, however, that this ceremony of bringing the first sheaf (עֹמֶר) to the priest as the “first fruits” was to be something not done merely on entering the Land initially, but in every subsequent harvest “throughout your generations” (v. 14). The principle reason for the bringing of the first fruit’s sheaf is that the Lord is to receive the first of the harvest, and until it is given to Him, none of the harvest can be consumed: “...until you have brought in the offering of your God, you shall eat neither bread nor roasted grain nor new growth.” Surely the understanding of this text helped mold the various *halachot* that developed in the 1st Century CE.

The first chronological notice given is in v. 11, “...on the day after the sabbath the priest shall wave it,” i.e., the sheaf of the first fruits. The phrase “the day after the sabbath” is *מִמַּחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת*, literally “from the morrow of the sabbath.” The exact same expression is found in v. 15, “You shall also count for yourselves from the day after the sabbath ...,” meaning that the day of waving the sheaf is to be the first day of counting 49 days to Shavuot.

Here is the first crucial interpretive point: how is the word “sabbath” to be understood? As noted above, the Pharisees took it to mean the first day of Unleavened Bread (i.e., the 15th of the 1st month), and thus waved the sheaf on the 16th, the day they counted as the first day of the 49 days to Shavuot. The Boethusians considered the word “sabbath” here to refer to the first weekly sabbath after the commencement of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and thus waved the sheaf on the first day of the week following that sabbath. The Qumran sect understood “sabbath” in this text to be the weekly sabbath following the last day of the Festival, exactly a week later than the Boethusians.

How is the word “sabbath” to be understood in Lev 23:15–16?

Leviticus 23:15–16	
15 ‘You shall also count for yourselves from the day after the sabbath, from the day when you brought in the sheaf of the wave offering; there shall be seven complete sabbaths. 16 ‘You shall count fifty days to the day after the seventh sabbath; then you shall present a new grain offering to the LORD.	15 וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם מִמַּחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת מִיּוֹם הַבִּיאָכֶם אֶת-עֹמֶר הַתְּנוּפָה שֶׁבַע שַׁבָּתוֹת תְּמִימֹת תִּהְיֶינָה: 16 עַד מַחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת הַשְּׁבִיעִית תִּסְפְּרוּ חֲמִשִּׁים יוֹם וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם מִנְחָה חֲדָשָׁה לַיהוָה:

The counting was to commence the day following the sabbath, and the Festival of Shavuot was to be celebrated on the day after the seventh sabbath. The apparent meaning of the text is that sabbath refers to the weekly sabbath, and that therefore the Boethusians or the Qumran sect were correct in their determination of when to wave the sheaf and begin the counting.

But the matter is not that simple. The fact that the passage is specifically directed to the time when Israel would enter the Land must be given its full weight. And its clear collation with Joshua 5 seems inescapable. It would appear that the story of Israel’s entrance into the Land is written specifically to show their obedience to the prescriptions of the Leviticus 23.

Joshua 5:10–12	
10 While the sons of Israel camped at Gilgal they observed the Passover on the evening of the fourteenth day of the month on the desert plains of Jericho. 11 On the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate some of the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. 12 The manna ceased on the day after they had eaten some of the produce of the land, so that the sons of Israel no longer had manna, but they ate some of the yield of the land of Canaan during that year.	10 וַיִּחַנוּ בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּגִלְגָל וַיַּעֲשׂוּ אֶת-הַפֶּסַח בְּאַרְבַּעַת עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ בְּעָרֵב בְּעַרְבוֹת יְרִיחוֹ: 11 וַיֹּאכְלוּ מֵעֵבֹר הָאָרֶץ מִמַּחֲרַת הַפֶּסַח מִצּוֹת וְקִלּוֹי בְּעֶצֶם הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה: 12 וַיִּשְׁבַּת הַמָּן מִמַּחֲרַת בְּאֹכְלֵם מֵעֵבֹר הָאָרֶץ וְלֹא-הָיָה עוֹד לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִן וַיֹּאכְלוּ מִתְּבוֹאֹת אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן בַּשָּׁנָה הַהִיא: ס

Israel camped at Gilgal where they fully obeyed the Lord and all males were circumcised. In this covenant ceremony they prepared themselves for the feast of the covenant, Pesach. Then, in Gilgal, on the desert plains of Jericho, they celebrated the Pesach meal as the Torah prescribes—on the 14th of the month. The following day, being a sabbath upon which no ordinary work was to be done, they rested, and thus must have entered the Land on the 16th, the “day after the Passover” (מַחֲרַת הַפֶּסַח), using the same construction as the phrase in Leviticus 23:15, “the day after the sabbath.” This use of Pesach to refer not only to the sacrificial lamb, but to the Festival as a whole, including Chag HaMatzot is already hinted at in Deuteronomy 16:1 where the expression עֲשֵׂתָ הַפֶּסַח, “do the Passover” suggests (by the use of the word “do”) more than “sacrifice the Pesach.” Since the eating of the Pesach meal always overlapped into the 15th of the month, the day following the Passover is easily seen to be the 16th.

Here is where Leviticus 23:14 becomes crucial for understanding the Pharisaic interpretation:

14 ‘Until this same day, until you have brought in the offering of your God, you shall eat neither bread nor roasted grain nor new growth. It is to be a perpetual statute throughout your generations in all your dwelling places.

Until the sheaf is waved before the Lord, that is, until the first fruits are offered, none of the new growth of that year's harvest could be eaten. The grain used for the matzot required to be eaten with the Pesach sacrifice (Exodus 12:8) was made from the previous year's harvest. In the case of the Israelites as they first entered the Land, they were prohibited from eating any of the harvest of the Land until the sheaf had been presented to the priest. Yet the text of Joshua 5 is clear: they ate from the produce of the Land the day following the Passover, that is, on the 16th of the month. This is emphasized by the phrase "on that very day" to show the clear fulfillment of the Leviticus 23 prescriptions. This being the case, it is clear that the sheaf offering was given the day after the Passover, allowing them to eat from the harvest of the Land.

The prohibitions of Leviticus 23:14 need to be scrutinized more closely. The text reads, "you shall eat neither bread (לֶחֶם) nor roasted grain (קָלִי) nor new growth (כַּרְמֶל)." The word לֶחֶם, *lechem* here does not mean "leavened bread" as opposed to מַצָּה, *matzah*, "unleavened bread." The basic meaning of *lechem* is "grain for making bread" (cf. Isaiah 29:28; 36:17). In the context of Leviticus 23:14, this is surely the meaning here as well. Roasted grain is grain that has been prepared for being crushed into flour. Harvested grain must be dried before it can be properly ground. Roasting or parching the grain achieves this dehydration and makes it suitable for grinding. The final term, כַּרְמֶל, *charmel*, which means "new grain," is used only three times in the Tanach (Leviticus 2:14; 23:14; 2Kings 4:42). Its meaning here is a reference to the harvest of the new crop. The point is thus made clear from the combination of these terms: no grain from the year's new crop could be used for food until the sheaf of the first fruits had been waved before the Lord.

Thus, the clear example of Israel as she entered the Land must have been pivotal in the Pharisaic understanding of the text. Since the Joshua narrative specifically states that the people ate unleavened cakes and parched grain from the produce of the Land, they surely must have offered the omer in advance of their eating. And the fact that the manna ceased the following day showed that God approved of their eating the produce of the Land, for the Land was now to sustain the people rather than the manna.

Equally significant was the fact that the Joshua text states that the people ate of the produce "the day after the Passover" and not "the day after the Sabbath." Granted, the Passover could have occurred on a Sabbath, and the day after would have therefore been the first day of the week. But the fact that the text explicitly states "the day after Passover" must have been decisive in the minds of the Pharisees. Their halachah therefore modeled this "day after Passover" characteristic, and they were unwilling to be persuaded away from it by the other vying interpretations.

The Term "Sabbath" in the 1st Century

But one of the obvious questions that comes to us when we recognize the Pharisaic interpretation of the "the day after the Sabbath" is how they could have understood Leviticus 23:15-16, which clearly states that Shavuot is the 50th day, to be the day "after the seventh sabbath." It would appear that the text obviously is referring to the weekly sabbath. How did the Pharisees understand this in light of their view that the "day after the sabbath" meant the day after the first day of Unleavened Bread, and not the weekly sabbath?

The answer lies in the fact that in the 1st Century the Hebrew word "sabbath" was also taken to mean "week." In this way, "after the seventh sabbath" was understood to mean "after the seventh week."

There are a number of datum to support the fact that the Hebrew word שַׁבָּת, *shabbat*, could be understood to mean "week" in the 1st Century. Such a meaning rested first and foremost upon the text of the Torah itself. And Leviticus 23:15 was crucial in this regard, for it speaks of "seven complete sabbaths" (שִׁבְעַת שַׁבְּתוֹת תְּמִימֹת). Now if this is speaking of the seventh day of the week, how is one to understand the

adjective “complete” (תְּמִימָה)? Surely this must indicate that here “sabbaths” refers to “weeks,” for only if this is the case does the adjective “complete” have meaning. One could not imagine an incomplete weekly sabbath, but one could surely understand an incomplete week, that is, a period of time less than the full seven days prescribed for a week.

The same is true of Leviticus 25:8:

You are also to count off seven sabbaths of years for yourself, seven times seven years, so that you have the time of the seven sabbaths of years, namely, forty-nine years.

Here, the term “sabbaths” must refer to a group of seven, that is, a group consisting of seven groups of seven, or 49 years. Once again, the word “shabbat” means a group of seven, parallel to its use of a group of seven days.

In fact, in the parallel text in Deuteronomy, it is weeks that are to be counted:

You shall count seven weeks for yourself; you shall begin to count seven weeks from the time you begin to put the sickle to the standing grain. Then you shall celebrate the Feast of Weeks to the LORD your God with a tribute of a freewill offering of your hand, which you shall give just as the LORD your God blesses you; (Deut. 16:9–10)

While Leviticus commands to count “sabbaths,” Deuteronomy prescribes counting “weeks” (שְׁבֻעָה שְׁבֻעָת) (תְּסַפְּרֶנָּה). This should help us see that “sabbaths” in Lev 23:15 is to be understood as “weeks.”

In the Rabbinic literature the word “sabbath” was used with the meaning “week.” For example, m.*Nedarim* 8:1:

[He who says,] “Qonam if I taste wine today,” is prohibited only to nightfall. [If he referred to] “this week,” (זוֹ שַׁבָּת) he is prohibited the entire week (בְּכָל הַשַּׁבָּת), and the Sabbath [which is coming is included] in that past week.¹⁰

In b.*Shabbat* 156a, the days of the week (“on the first day of the week” ... “on the fourth day of the week,” etc.) are all in the form בְּחַד בְּשַׁבָּא, “on the first of the sabbath,” etc.

The same is true in the Syriac. The expression in the Gospels, “first day of the week” is regularly represented in the Syriac by בְּיוֹמָא דְחַד בְּשַׁבָּת, (literally) “on the first of the sabbath.” In Luke 18:12, the phrase “I fast twice a week” is צָאֵם אָנָא תְרִין בְּשַׁבְתָּא, (literally) “I fast twice in a sabbath.”¹¹

Indeed, the koine Greek everywhere uses the word σαββάτων, *sabbaton* to designate a “week.” Like the Syriac, when the phrase “first of the week” is found, the word translated “week” is σαββάτων, *sabbatōn*. Yet even the singular is used for “week” as well, as in Luke 18:12. But the fact that classical Greek had a distinct word for “week” (ἑβδομάς, *herdamos*), a word that had its root meaning in the number “seven,” shows that the koine used in the Apostolic Scriptures was influenced by the Jewish word שַׁבָּת, *shabbat*, in its use of σαββάτων, *sabbaton* to mean “week.”¹² Indeed, throughout the Lxx the Hebrew שָׁבַע, *shevu’a*, “week” is translated by ἑβδομάς, *herdamos*, not σαββάτων, *sabbaton*. Yet this common Greek word for “week” in the Lxx never shows up in the Apostolic Scriptures. It seems clear then that the common use of “sabbath” for “week” among the Jewish communities was what influenced the similar use of σαββάτων, *sabbaton* in the Greek of the Apostolic Scriptures.

¹⁰ Other other examples see Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Talmud*, 1520.

¹¹ For further examples see William Jennings, *Lexicon to the Syriac New Testament* (Oxford, 1926), 215 and the entries of R. Payne Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary* (Eisenbrauns, 1998), 558.

¹² Cf. Lohse, “sabbaton” in *TDNT*, 7.6.

There would have been one more reason given by the Pharisees and the Sanhedrin they controlled for their interpretation of sheaf waving commandment: the Lxx explicitly supported their view. In the key text of Leviticus 23:11 the crucial expression מִמָּחֳרַת הַשַּׁבָּת, *mimacharat hashabbat*, “from the morrow of the sabbath” is translated in the Lxx as “from the morrow of the first day (of the Festival) the priest shall wave it,” (τῆ ἐπαύριον τῆς πρώτης ἀνοίσει αὐτὸ ὁ ἱερεὺς). Here the Hebrew שַׁבָּת, *shabbat*, is translated by πρῶτος, *protos*, “first,” meaning the “first day of the Festival.” The Lxx, clearly an authoritative text in the 1st Century CE, gave direct substantiation for the Pharisaic reckoning.

Thus, given the wording of the key texts in Leviticus 23, its obvious parallel in Deuteronomy 16, its narrative parallel in Joshua 5, the fact that “sabbath” was regularly used to mean “week” in the Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, and Greek of the Jewish communities in the 1st Century CE, and the witness of the Lxx, it is very understandable how the Pharisees could hold their view as in full harmony with the biblical text and the language it contained. Those who might accuse them of holding their view on strictly political grounds may not have correctly understood the basis for their position.

Did the Other Sects Actually Observe the Omer Ceremony & Shavuot on Alternate Days?

We have seen that the majority view was that of the Pharisees (since they were the majority sect among 1st Century Judaisms) and, according to the Mishnah, was the view put forward by the Sanhedrin. Since only a sub-group of the Sadducees, the Boethusians, held an alternate view, it is understandable why the Temple, controlled by the Hasmonean Sadducees, followed the Sanhedrin and the Pharisaic calendar.

But the question remains as to whether or not the Boethusians were allowed to follow their calendar, waving the sheaf on the first day of the week and thus celebrating Shavuot at a different time than the majority. Were there two ceremonies conducted in the Temple?

Günter Stemberger does not think so:

Practical observance of different calendars in the Temple, along with multiple observance of festivals, is barely conceivable, nor is there evidence for it. We could hardly imagine that the priests would have allowed themselves to be overruled by other groups in these questions that were central to them. Thus we must imagine that there were differences of opinion among the priests themselves. The subordinated group in Qumran, with its calendar, could express its opinion about an incorrect date in the calendar only by remaining distant from the cultic activity. It is likewise conceivable that other groups of priests did not follow this course, but they were in sympathy with the Qumran calendar and did support the Qumran interpretation. The polemic of the rabbinic text is directed at them or even directly at the people of Qumran.¹³

Yet Josephus remarks that the Essenes did their own sacrifices. By Essenes, we should not necessarily think he is referring to the Qumran sect alone, for he also speaks of Essenes who dwell in the cities as well:

Antiq.18.1.5. (18) The doctrine of the Essenes is this: That all things are best ascribed to God. They teach the immortality of souls, and esteem that the rewards of righteousness are to be earnestly striven for; (19) and when they send what they have dedicated to God into the temple, they do not offer sacrifices, because they have more pure lustrations of their own; on which account they are excluded from the common court of the temple, but offer their sacrifices themselves; yet is their course of life better than that of other men; and they entirely addict themselves to husbandry.

Philo's contention that the Essenes did not sacrifice living animals at all¹⁴ may be understood to mean ei-

¹³ Günter Stemberger, *Jewish Contemporaries of Jesus* (Fortress, 1995), 86.

¹⁴ *Quod Omnis Probus* XII.

ther that they did not participate in a kind of pagan sacrifice in which animals were mutilated, or that they did not sacrifice animals at the Temple but in their own quarter.

There is some evidence that sacrifices were conducted at Qumran. Cross notes that bones of animals were buried, not in a sanitary garbage dump, but as sacred objects. The bones are carefully collected and buried in jars. His conclusion (though disputed by others) is that:

Certainly the bones are the remains of the sacral feasts of the community. They raise acutely, moreover, the question as to whether the Essenes carried on a sacrificial cultus at Qumran....¹⁵

Granted, Cross takes the view that the Qumran sect were the Essenes, and this is not absolutely clear. But regardless of the correct identification of the Qumran sect, the fact remains that animal bones were buried in a sacred fashion, and these bones were the remains of animals slaughtered and eaten as a sacred meal. The possibility that they were peace offerings is clearly there.

What is more, the Qumran texts indicate that the Qumran sect interpreted the Torah as allowing sacrifices other than at the Temple as long as within the environs of Jerusalem, since Jerusalem was considered “the place” where God had decreed to put His Name. CD 3:18-4:4 reinterprets Ezekiel 44:15 as a possible warrant for sacrifices outside of the Jerusalem Temple:

CD 3:18 and said, “Surely this is our business,” God in His mysterious ways atoned for their iniquity and forgave their transgression. 19 So He built for them a faithful house in Israel, like none that had ever appeared before; and even 20 at this day, those who hold firm to it shall receive everlasting life, and all human honor is rightly theirs, as 21 God promised them by Ezekiel the prophet, saying, The priests and the Levites and the sons of 4:1 Zadok who have kept the courses of My sanctuary when the children of Israel strayed 2 from Me, they shall bring Me fat and blood (Ezekiel 44:15). “The priests”: they are the repentant of Israel, 3 who go out of the land of Judah and the Levites are those accompanying them; “and the sons of Zadok”: they are the chosen of 4 Israel, the ones called by name, who are to appear in the last days.

Here, those who “bring Me fat and blood” are the priests of Zadok (=Qumran sectarians), meaning they are the ones who have the right to offer sacrifices.

Even though some ancient literary sources suggest that sects offered sacrifices in their own manner and place, there is no clear evidence that the Jerusalem Temple accommodated festival ceremonies for the sectarians on alternate dates. It is clear that variant interpretations existed, and even were openly discussed. And it is at least possible that certain sects conducted their festival ceremonies on alternate days, albeit not with the approval of the Sanhedrin nor at the Jerusalem Temple. Is it possible that the Boethusians actually conducted ceremonies in the Temple on alternate days? Yes, it is possible, but there is no evidence they did, and one would expect that the resultant uproar would have at least been noted in the rabbinic literature¹⁶ or other historical sources such as Josephus or Philo.

How was the 1st day of the 1st month (later called Nisan) determined?

The issues associated with ancient calendars, and the Hebrew calendar in particular, are complicated and diverse. It will be my purpose here simply to overview the calendar issues with a specific goal of

¹⁵ Cross, Op. cit., 70. Kugler disagrees, cf. Ibid, p. 111.

¹⁶ For instance, in b.*Sukkah* 48b the story is told of the priest who accidentally poured the water of the water libation ceremony onto his feet, and the crowd standing about the Temple court pelted him with their etrogs! If such a minor offense caused this reaction, and is recorded in the rabbinic literature, one would have to expect that a deviation from the received calendar would surely be noted.

ascertaining the methods employed by the 1st Century Jewish community for determining the beginning of the 1st month, for this bears upon the matter of Pesach and the counting of the omer. The primary question is simply this: how was the decision made whether or not to add a thirteenth month in any given year (i.e., to intercalate the year)? As we shall see, the rabbinic literature indicates that the intercalation of the year was based upon practical rather than astrological factors. This being the case, all attempts at pinpointing the exact year of Yeshua's crucifixion by astrological calculations are doomed to failure.

The months of the Hebrew calendar as noted in the Torah are numerical, e.g., first month, second month, and so on. The month names Ziv,¹⁷ Bul,¹⁸ and Ethan¹⁹ were Canaanite months, used most likely because Solomon was in communication with the surrounding nations to obtain building materials for the Temple. The term Abib (אָבִיב) is always found with the article (הָאָבִיב)²⁰ and thus most likely should not be considered a Canaanite month name. In cognate semitic languages (Arabic, Aramaic, Canaanite) the word means "ears of corn already ripe" and came to mean "the time when the ears of corn become ripe." In the Torah it is always used with the word "month" (חֹדֶשׁ) and means "the month when the grain ripens," and particularly, when the barley ripens (since the barley is the first crop to ripen in the Land).

The month names of the post-exilic Hebrew calendar are of Babylonian origin, no doubt incorporated while Israel was in exile there. Thus, post-exilic books of the Tanach mention the months of Adar,²¹ Nisan,²² Shebat,²³ Chislev,²⁴ Elul,²⁵ Tevet,²⁶ and Sivan.²⁷ An early rabbinic source, *Megilat Ta'anit*, dated before the destruction of the Temple (70 CE), mentions all 12 of the Babylonian month names in order,²⁸ giving at least some indication that they were in use during the 1st Century. Yet in the Apostolic Writings, months are referred to numerically, not by names.

While it has long been realized that the book of 1 Enoch, along with the book of Jubilees, utilized a solar calendar (364-day year), it was only in the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls that scholars came to realize a 1st Century sect actually attempted to live by that calendar, or better, by a variation of that calendar. Uwe Glessmer has shown that, contrary to much earlier Dead Sea Scroll scholarship, the calendar(s) at Qumran can no longer be considered purely solar.

These considerations indicate that if a comprehensive heading for the concept of calendar at Qumran is to be chosen, the oft-used term "solar calendar" is certainly inappropriate and should be avoided.²⁹

Rather, Glessmer concludes:

¹⁷ 1Kings 6:1, 37.

¹⁸ 1Kings 6:38.

¹⁹ 1Kings 8:2.

²⁰ Ex 13:4; 23:15; 34:18; Deut 16:1.

²¹ Ezra 6:15; Esth 3:7,13; 8:12; 9:1,15,17,19,21.

²² Neh 2:1; Esth 3:7.

²³ Zech 1:7.

²⁴ Zech 7:1.

²⁵ Neh 6:15.

²⁶ Esth 2:16.

²⁷ Esth 8:9.

²⁸ Note the remarks of James C. Vanderkam, *Calendars in the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Routledge, 1998), 35.

²⁹ Uwe Glessmer, "Calendars in the Qumran Scrolls" in *The Dead Sea Scrolls After Fifty Years: A Comprehensive Assessment* 2 vols, Flint and Vanderkam, eds. (Brill, 1999), 2:231.

But in light of the manifold details now available to us, it has become increasingly evident that these ancient texts witness not to a monolithic, static phenomenon, but to a diverse growth and development.³⁰

In general, one of the primary motivations for the alternate calendars found at Qumran as well as in 1 Enoch and Jubilees is that the beginning of each year needed to fall on a Wednesday (יום רביעי, fourth day) because the luminaries were created on the fourth day of the creation week. A second compelling motivation was the need to avoid having Festivals on the weekly sabbath.

With the recovery of the Qumran calendars, some have suggested that the solar calendar is, in fact, the ancient biblical calendar. But this viewpoint has a significant hurdle to cross: the Hebrew words for “month” are חֹדֶשׁ, *chodesh*,³¹ and יָרַח, *y’rach*,³² and both of these words derive from their connection with the Hebrew word for “moon,” יָרֵחַ, *yareach*. The inescapable conclusion is that the ancient Hebrew calendar had its months reckoned by the moon and was not purely solar. Yet a strictly lunar calendar without reference to the four תקופות, *tekufot*, “seasons” would quickly move the festivals out of their seasons so as to make impossible the prescription of Torah that, for instance, Pesach is to be celebrated in the Spring (Deuteronomy 16:1).

Thus, the biblical calendar is solar-lunar, deriving the need for intercalation to adjust the lunar months to the solar year. The method of intercalating was, from ancient times, a source of debate, and we know that various methods did evolve.³³ That there are indications in the biblical text of a calendar by which months could be known is evident, for Jonathan knows that “tomorrow” will be the new moon:

Then Jonathan said to him, “Tomorrow is the new moon, and you will be missed because your seat will be empty. (1Sam 20:18)

Apparently the month, in this case, was not set by a physical observance of the new moon but by a pre-arranged schedule or calendar, and one which must have been intercalated.

Yet we also know that the sighting of the new moon was practiced as the means of determining both the beginning of the first month (in which Pesach occurs) and the seventh month (in which Yom Teruah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot occur).³⁴

Why were these two months important as beginning points? The seventh month, called “Tishri” after the return from exile, is the month in which the Torah describes the turn of the year (תְּקִיפַת הַשָּׁנָה):

“You shall celebrate the Feast of Weeks, that is, the first fruits of the wheat harvest, and the Feast of Ingathering at the turn of the year. (Ex 34:22)

This is parallel to the language in Exodus 23:16 which refers to the “end of the year” (בְּצֵאת הַשָּׁנָה). In this case, the Feast of Ingathering is the Festival of Sukkot, and the month in which it is celebrated is therefore the month which marks the turn of the year. It was for this reason that in ancient times the seventh month was considered to be the beginning of the year for crops, and most likely the demarcation for tithes of crops. The harvest, which marked the end of one agricultural season, is celebrated in the month of Ingathering which begins a new agricultural year.

However, the Torah calls the month of Pesach the first month because it is the beginning of the festival cycle. Thus, the sighting of the new moon for each of these months was important for the intercala-

³⁰ Ibid., 233.

³¹ Cf. Gen 29:14; Num 9:22; 11:20; 1Kings 5:7; Is 66:23.

³² Cf. Ex 2:2; Deut 21:13; 1Kings 6:3f; 8:2; Zech 11:8; Job 3:6; 7:3; 29:2; 39:2.

³³ For a good explanation of the methods of intercalation, see the article “Calendar” in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 5:43ff.

³⁴ *m.Rosh HaShannah* 1:1ff.

tion of the calendar.

A month has been defined by the Sages as the period of time between one conjunction of the moon with the sun and the next. A conjunction of the moon with the sun is when the moon is directly between the earth and the sun and is therefore invisible.³⁵ This conjunction is called מולד, *molad* in the Hebrew, from the verb ילד, “to birth.” The length of time from one conjunction to the next is 29 days, 12 hours, 44 minutes, and 3.33 seconds.³⁶ Since the solar year is 365 days, 48 minutes, and 46 seconds long, it exceeds a lunar year (of 12 months) by 11 days. The lunar year must therefore be intercalated in order to keep up with the solar year, since the celebration of the festivals is also tied to the seasons. If it were not intercalated, the festivals would “wander” through the year and eventually be out of season. The manner in which the lunar year is to be intercalated, however, is not specified in the Torah. From ancient times, however, it was the practice to add a month to the year (called Adar II after the exile) when deemed necessary, and this was eventually calculated to happen in each of seven years within a 19 year cycle.

The extant rabbinic literature recounts various discussion on and reasons for intercalating a given year. In Tosefta *Sanhedrin* 2.2, (repeated as a *baraita* in b.*Sanhedrin* 11b), which names Shimon b. Gamliel as an authority,³⁷ three factors are cited in regard to intercalating the year: 1) whether the barley was ready for harvest (in relation to Pesach and the Torah commandment to wave the sheaf of barley, cf. Lev 23:11f), 2) whether the fruit had ripened (in relation to bringing the first-fruits of the tree at Shavuot, Ex 23:16), and 3) whether the month was in the correct season, i.e., the Spring equinox had occurred.

On account of three signs do they intercalate the year, because of the [premature state of] the grain, because of the condition of the produce of the tree, and because of the lateness of the spring equinox. On account of two of these they will intercalate the year, but on account of only one of them, they will not intercalate the year. But if they declared the year to be intercalated, lo, this is deemed intercalated. If the premature state of the grain was one of them, they would rejoice. R. Shimon b. Gamliel says, “Also on account of the lateness of the spring equinox.”³⁸

Our Rabbis taught: A year may be intercalated on three grounds: on account of the premature state of the corn-crops; or that of the fruit-trees; or on account of the lateness of the Tekufah (season). Any two of these reasons can justify intercalation, but not one alone. All, however, are glad when the state of the spring-crop is one of them. Rabban Shimon b. Gamliel says: On account of [the lateness of] the Tekufah. The Schoolmen inquired: Did he mean to say that “on account of the [lateness of the] Tekufah” [being one of the two reasons], they rejoiced, or that the lateness of the Tekufah alone was adequate reason for intercalating the

³⁵ The idea that the “new moon” is in fact the full moon, which some base upon Psalm 81:3[4], is a misreading of the text and the poetic parallelism. First, some authorities (both ancient and modern) take the word rendered “full moon” in this text (כסה) as from the root כסס, “to count out” and thus translate “appointed” (KJV, “Blow up the trumpet in the new moon, in the time appointed, on our solemn feast day.”) Others take the word in question (כסה) to be equal to כסא and render it “full moon.” Still others take the word as it appears (כסה) and give it the normal meaning of “covered,” thus understanding it to refer to the moon when it is covered, i.e., not seen. Keil and Delitzsch think the text is referring to the festival of Passover, and that the blowing of the shofar is at the beginning of this month, while the festival itself is celebrated at the full moon, on the 14th-15th. Though this goes contrary to the normal interpretation of the text (which easily is seen to fit the festival of Yom Teruah or Rosh HaShannah), it certainly is a possible interpretation. Either way, however, this text does not teach that the month begins with the full moon. Taking the text as it stands, the “hidden” or “covered” moon is what is in mind.

³⁶ The hour is divided into 1,080 parts (called חלקים, *chalakim*) each of which is 3.33 seconds long. Thus, the final 44 minutes, 3.33 seconds of a day is noted as 739 *chalakim* in the rabbinic writings.

³⁷ This is almost certainly Shimon b. Gamliel II, who lived in the early half of the 2nd Century CE.

³⁸ t.*Sanhedrin* 2.2.

year? — The question remains undecided.³⁹

The unresolved question whether Shimon b. Gamliel's statement indicates that the lateness of the season was itself sufficient to intercalate the year would seem to indicate that the *halachah* was still being decided. Yet it is significant that this mishnah lists three factors that could cause a year to be intercalated, only one of which was astronomical.

The Tosefta (t.*Sanhedrin* 2.1ff), which is based upon m.*Sanhedrin* 1.2, also deals with what constitutes a legal and binding intercalation, and expands or amplifies the Mishnah's statement:

“The sanctification of the new month and the intercalation of the year are to be done by three [judges],” the words of R. Meir. And the sages say, “Before three do they begin, and before five they debate the matter, and they reach a final decision with seven [judges]. (t.*Sanhedrin* 2.1)

The Tosefta goes on to explain that when there is a positive vote of two and against the negative of one, they add two more (thus five). If three vote positive and two negative, they add two more (thus seven) and reach the final decision with seven, which is the minimum for a quorum. It further notes that where a rabbi and his disciple (father and son) are part of the *Beit Din* (panel of judges), their vote counts as one.

The Tosefta, after quoting the Mishnah, adds that the evidence of conditions in three regions are used for the intercalation: Judea, Trans-Jordan, and Galilee, and that the evidence of any two is sought. Yet if the judges intercalate the year on the basis of one region only, it is valid.

Then the Tosefta deals with additional grounds for intercalating the year, which were not mentioned in the Mishnah:

They do not intercalate the year because the [season of the] kids, lambs, or pigeons has not yet come. But in the case of all of them, they regard it as support [for intercalating] the year. But if they declared the year to be intercalated [on their basis], lo, this is deemed intercalated. R. Yannai⁴⁰ says in the name of R. Shimon b. Gamliel⁴¹ who said, “The pigeons are tender and the spring lambs thing, and it is proper in my view, so I have added thirty days to this year.” Rabban Gamliel and sages were in session on the steps of the Temple and Yohanan the scribe was before them. He said to him, “Write: ‘To our brethren, residents of Upper Galilee and residents of Lower Galilee, May your peace increase! I inform you that the time for the removal has come, to separate the tithes from the olive vats.’ ‘To our brethren, residents of the Upper South and residents of the Lower South, may your peace increase! We inform you that the time for the removal has come, to separate the tithes from the sheaves of grain.’ ‘To our brethren, residents of the Exile of Babylonia, and residents of the Exile of Media, and of all the other Exiles of Israel, may your peace increase! We inform you that the pigeons are still tender, the lambs are thin, and the spring-tide has not yet come. So it is proper in my view and in the view of my colleagues, and we have added thirty days to this year.’” (t.*Sanhedrin* 2.6)

Here we see that the tradition passed on to the post-destruction sages was that the year could be intercalated on the basis of the lateness of the Spring equinox, with further support from the frail condition of pigeons and lambs.

The Tosefta continues by describing those factors for which the year is or is not intercalated. First, the year is intercalated only by adding an additional Adar. Second, the year is intercalated by a full month, not less or more. Third, while it was best not to intercalate two years in a row, evidence is given

³⁹ b.*Sanhedrin* 11b.

⁴⁰ He was active in Eretz Israel 220–250 CE.

⁴¹ This is most likely Shimon b. Gamilel II, 135-170 CE.

that Akiva even intercalated three years in a row. Fourth, the Sh'mittah year (sabbatical year) is not intercalated nor the year following the Sh'mittah. Fifth, a year in which there is famine is not intercalated. Sixth, the year was not intercalated on the basis of ritual impurities among the people since the second Pesach was instituted for this contingency, though the Tosefta notes that R. Judah did intercalate the year because of uncleanness. This section is then concluded with the following;

They intercalate the year only when it needs it. They intercalate it because of roads, because of ovens, and because of the residents of the Exilic Communities, who have not been able to go forth from their homes. But they do not intercalate the year because of cold, snow, or the Exiles who already have made the ascent [for the pilgrimage]. But all of those factors do they treat as additional reason [for intercalating] the year. And if they intercalated the year [on these accounts], lo, it is deemed intercalated. (t.*Sanhedrin* 2.12)

Let us summarize, then, the view of the Mishnah and the additional information of the Tosefta:

1. Primary in the consideration of intercalating the year were these three things:
 - a. if the barley was ripe and ready for reaping so that the sheaf could be waved
 - b. if the fruit was mature and thus the first-fruits could be offered at Shavuot
 - c. if the Spring equinox had occurred
2. The decision was made by a panel of judges consisting of three, or five if the three were divided, or seven if the five were divided.
3. Three regions were investigated to determine if the criteria were evident for intercalating the year: Judah, Trans-Jordan, and Galilee. Similar criteria in any two would suffice for the decision, though if the decision were made on the basis of only one region, the ruling of the judges was still considered valid.
4. The intercalation of the year added a full month, Adar II, of 30 days.
5. Additional factors that could “tip the scales” in favor of intercalating the year were:
 - a. the roads (which would include bridges) were not yet repaired after the winter rains, which would have made the pilgrimage impossible, dangerous, or very difficult for the people.
 - b. the clay ovens used for making the matzah were not yet dried out from the winter rains.
 - c. the exiles had not been able to start out for their journey to Jerusalem, most likely because the winter rains had not yet ceased. However, if they exiles had already begun their journey, this would preclude intercalating the year (even if the weather turned bad), for if the year were to be intercalated after they had set out, they would make it to Jerusalem only to wait a full month before Nisan arrived. This would cause undue hardship for all.
6. The *Sh'mittah* (sabbatical) year was not intercalated nor the year following.
7. A year in which there was severe famine was not intercalated.

From these factors we may reach an obvious and necessary conclusion: one simply cannot expect to use astronomical means in an attempt to calculate which years in the pre-destruction era might “fit” various scenarios presented in the Gospels. For example, if one were to presume that the crucifixion of Yeshua occurred on the 15th of Nisan, and that this day was a Friday, it is futile to calculate in which years this might have taken place by reference to new moons. Since there is no record which years were intercalated and which were not, and since intercalation took place on other than astronomical grounds, one cannot be sure whether intercalation occurred in a year that “fits” on purely astrological grounds.⁴²

⁴² Beckwith works with all of the various criteria and offers numbers of options, but shows that these are, in fact, only options. One cannot be sure. See his *Calendar and Chronology, Jewish and Christian* (Brill, 2001), pp. 282–96. He shows

The Mishnah also includes information concerning how the new moon was determined, both for the first month (Nisan) and the seventh month (Tishri). Mishnah *Rosh HaShannah* 1.1ff goes into detail about how the witnesses who had sighted the moon were examined to determine if they were trustworthy. This detailed examination would seem to indicate that false witnesses had been encountered, perhaps in order to coerce the Sanhedrin into proclaiming a sectarian calendar. Indeed, the Talmud contains just such a report about the attempt of the Boethusians to mislead the Sanhedrin.⁴³

The method by which the sighted new moon was announced throughout the country was this: originally flares were waved from hilltop to hilltop, but apparently the Samaritans, using the same sign, caused confusion, and so messengers were sent instead.⁴⁴

In terms of how a month is reckoned, only full days are used. Thus some months have 29 days (called “defective” חֶסֶר, *chaser*) while others have 30 (called “full” מָלֵא, *malei*). The months Nisan, Sivan, Av, Tishri, Shevat and (in a leap year) Adar 1 are always full. Iyyar, Tammuz, Elul, Tevet, and Adar (Adar II in a leap year) are always defective. Cheshvan and Kislev vary. In this way the common year contains 353, 354, or 355 days and the leap year 383, 384, or 385 days. It can be seen that the postponement of the first day of the year may be necessary depending upon when the *molad*⁴⁵ falls, for if not, a year would contain one too many days.⁴⁶ The Mishnah contains a notice that there must be no less than four, and no more than eight full months in a year.⁴⁷

After the destruction of the Temple and the expulsion of the Jewish community from Jerusalem, the Sanhedrin functioned less and less in the determination of the calendar, and a more rigid and fixed calendar needed to be put into place. But in the time of the 2nd Temple it seems clear that the declaration of the calendar, and particularly its intercalation, was in the hands of the Sanhedrin. And how the sectarian groups received the rulings of the Sanhedrin is not recorded. It is possible that in some cases sectarian groups intercalated their calendar differently than the Sanhedrin, but there is no extant data to explain to us how they might have done this, or how they would have existed within the larger society with a calendar that was in every way at odds with the ruling authority.

If we may trust the notice of *b.Sanhedrin* 11b, then before 70 CE the first and seventh month were declared by the Sanhedrin based upon the sighting of the moon, and the adjustments necessary for the calendar’s intercalation on the basis of other factors as noted above. Since the Gospel accounts make it clear that Yeshua celebrates His final Pesach in Jerusalem at the same time that the chief priests and elders were celebrating the festival (cf. Matt 26:1–5; Mk 14:1–2) as well as when the Passover lambs were being sacrificed in the Temple (Mk 14:12; Lk 22:7), we should presume that the calendar declarations of the Sanhedrin were followed both by Yeshua and His disciples. Likewise, it is inconceivable that Paul would declare himself a Pharisee (Acts 23:6) and adopt a non-Pharisaic calendar. After all, one of the primary issues separating the sects of the 1st Century was the calendar. We should therefore also presume that Paul followed the Pharisaic calendar. Of course, there is always the possibility that the Sanhedrin itself was divided (there are calendrical issues noted in the Talmud that are left unresolved)

here that in some instances, it appears that the new year (i.e., Nisan) was announced before the Spring equinox occurred, though this may have been in the case where the equinox would have occurred within sixteen days of the announcement, cf. *t.Sanhedrin* 2.7.

⁴³ *b.Rosh HaShannah* 22b.

⁴⁴ *m.Rosh HaShannah* 2:3.

⁴⁵ The Hebrew word מוֹלֵד means “birth-time,” and was used to describe the exact time when the new moon (either actually sighted or mathematically calculated) appeared.

⁴⁶ There were, of course, three other reasons for postponing the beginning of the year. For an explanation of these, see *Encyclopedia Judaica* 5:44.

⁴⁷ *m.Arachin* 2:2.

and that therefore the Temple accommodated those of varying opinions. But as noted above, there is no clear evidence for this. Indeed, all extant evidence points to the fact that the Temple authorities followed the majority calendar in terms of sacrificing the Pesach lambs on the day determined by the Sanhedrin.

We know that the Qumran society declared its own calendar which they believed to be the ancient biblical calendar. In their lunar calendar (how they achieved intercalation is not known), since the month always began on the fourth day of the week (Wednesday), the 15th of the month was also a Wednesday. This meant that Pesach was celebrated on the eve of the third day of the week (Tuesday) and the first day of Unleavened Bread (the 15th) always fell on the fourth day of the week (Wednesday). But whether or not the month in which these days occurred coincided with the Jerusalem calendar cannot be known. It is possible that the Qumran Passover was as far away as a month in relation to the Temple calendar. Furthermore, it is conceivable that the two calendars could, in some years, be only a day apart in the calculation of Pesach, while in other years could have been more than a month apart. But the point I wish to emphasize here is simply that the methods for declaring the beginning of the first month may have varied, and with it the celebrations of Pesach and Shavuot.

Summary

The point of this short paper is to explore the biblical injunction for counting the omer, as well as the traditional understandings of how this was to be followed. From the brief survey of the calendar issues in the 1st Century CE, it can be surmised that:

1. At least three different sects understood the chronology of the omer counting differently: a) the majority of the Jewish community, and perhaps particularly those in Judea, near Jerusalem, considered the phrase “the morrow after the Sabbath” to be the day following the opening sabbath of Chag HaMatzot, that is, the 16th of Nisan; b) a sub-group of the Sadducees, the Boethusians, took the Leviticus text to mean “the morrow after the (weekly) Sabbath,” and thus commenced their counting on the day following the first weekly Sabbath within the festival week. c) the Qumran sect apparently understood the Sabbath in question to be the final day of Chag HaMatzot, and thus began their counting on the first day of the week following the completed festival.
2. All of these views are possible given the meaning of the word “Sabbath” in the Leviticus text. The majority view, however, has the strength of giving full credence to the prohibition of eating any of the new growth until the sheaf had been waived. Since the waving of the sheaf was an offering in the Temple, the priests were obliged to eat from it. When this is collated with the historical narrative of Israel entering the Land, waving the sheaf on the day following the Passover seems most warranted. Furthermore, that the Gospel narratives portray Yeshua and His disciples as celebrating the Pesach at the same time as did the chief priests and elders further strengthens the idea that He would have followed the majority calendar, though there remains the possibility that even the Sanhedrin itself was somewhat divided on calendrical issues.
3. But while there is not enough evidence to be entirely dogmatic, the preponderance of evidence points to the fact that a) even though members of the Sanhedrin were divided on calendrical issues (for the Sanhedrin included both Pharisees and Sadducees), the majority ruled, and as far as can be determined, the Pharisees were the majority party. Therefore, the *halachah* determined by this ruling body was most often that of the Pharisees; b) Paul, the Apostle of Yeshua, declared himself a Pharisee even after his confession of Yeshua as the Messiah. To make such

a declaration means that he followed the Pharisaic calendar and doubtlessly taught others to do the same. This would lend strong support to the position that the calendar followed by the early Messianic communities was the Pharisaic calendar.

4. While it is possible that some of the early Messianic communities followed the Sadducean calendar and thus began counting the omer on the day following the weekly Sabbath rather than the day following the Festival Sabbath, there is no clear evidence to prove that such occurred. Yet if such a possibility must be allowed, we must be willing to allow variation in our own Messianic movement without causing dissension. In our own communities, the method of counting the omer determined by the leadership should be followed by the community without making the issue a point of contention or division.
5. The motivations, however, for following one calendar or another must be scrutinized. Those who are motivated by wanting to have the resurrection of Yeshua coincide with the waving of the sheaf as first fruits should reconsider this point of view along the following lines:
 - a. The Boethusian and Qumran calendar which take this viewpoint did not do so to emphasize resurrection. Indeed, as far as we know the Boethusians did not believe in the resurrection. And apparently the Qumranians were more concerned about the month beginning on the fourth day of the week than they were that the waving of the sheaf be on Sunday or the first day of the week.
 - b. The parallel between first fruits and resurrection exists regardless of which day one calculates the beginning of counting the omer. The whole notion that events must happen simultaneously in order to be seen as valid fulfillment simply cannot be sustained from a biblical standpoint. As an example, Yeshua surely fulfills the picture of Yom Kippur and the sacrifice made on that day, but the timing of His death is not remotely close to the observance of Yom Kippur. The first fruits themselves, when understood within the overall festival, point to the fulfillment in Yeshua's resurrection, not necessarily that He rose on the same day that the sheaf was waved. For the lesson of first fruits is that more is to come: as the first of the harvest is brought to the Lord, the hope is that a great abundance is to follow. This is parallel to Yeshua's resurrection, and as the first fruits from the dead the point is that many more will follow. Like barley first brought in from the new crop, so Yeshua is the first to raise from the dead of His own accord. As such, He guarantees the full harvest of all who are His. This is the connection to the first fruits, and it does not require simultaneous events.
 - c. Because the chronology of the death, burial, and resurrection of Yeshua is so fraught with difficulties, it is impossible to be dogmatic on the exact day of the crucifixion and thus the exact day of His resurrection. It is likewise not entirely certain that the notice regarding Jonah's time in the belly of the fish, and its apparent parallel to Yeshua's time in the tomb (Matt 12:40; Lk 11:29–30), requires a 72 hour internment.⁴⁸ What we do know is that by the time the women came to the tomb in the early hours of the morning on the first day of the week, Yeshua was already alive (Matt 28:1f; Mk 16:2; Lk 24:1). The exact hour of His resurrection, however, cannot be determined.

⁴⁸ See the comments in my commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, 2.463–94.