

Thoughts on Shavuot

Exodus 19:1-20:22; Numbers 28:26-31; Ezekiel 1:1-28; 3:12; Acts 2:1-47

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Shavuot, the Torah, & the Arabbon of the Ruach

In Exodus 19:1 we read:

In the third month after the sons of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on this very day they came into the wilderness of Sinai.

What is curious about the wording of this verse is the phrase “on this very day” (בַּיּוֹם הַזֶּה, *bayom hazeh*), which seeks to mark a specific day, yet without describing exactly which day is being referenced. Since the only other calendar reference in the verse is “in the third month,” the ancient commentaries of the rabbis consistently interpreted the meaning of this phrase to be that Israel came to the wilderness of Sinai on Rosh Chodesh Sivan, or the first day of the third month. If this interpretation is correct, then the Torah was given to Moses upon the mountain on the sixth day of the third month, that is, on the Festival day of Shavuot.

It was on this basis that the ancient rabbis derived the following chronology:

- Sivan 1 - Sunday (*Yom Rishon*, יוֹם רִשְׁאוֹן), 45th omer
[according to R. Yosi, which is the accepted view, cf. b.*Shabbat* 86a]
Israel reaches the wilderness of Sinai and camped facing the mountain.
No word from God came on this day because of the people’s fatigue. (Ex 19:1-2)
- Sivan 2 - Monday (*Yom Sheini*, יוֹם שֵׁנִי), 46th omer
Moses addresses Israel, introducing the concept of the Torah to them and helping them understand what will be required if they accept the Torah. Moses ascends to the lower part of the mountain twice on this day. (Ex 19:3-9)
- Sivan 3 - Tuesday (*Yom Sh’lishi*, יוֹם שְׁלִישִׁי), 47th omer
Moses ascends to the lower part of the mountain, speaks with God, Who gives him the commandments regarding the sanctification of the people and the restriction that neither they nor any animal should touch the mountain. They were to consecrate themselves today, tomorrow, and be ready for the appearance of God on the following day, i.e., the third day. Moses ascends the mountain only once on this day. (Ex 19:10-15)
- Sivan 4 - Wednesday (*Yom R’vi’i*, יוֹם רְבִיעִי), 48th omer
The people continue their sanctification/consecration in anticipation of the giving of the Torah on the next day.
- Sivan 5 - Thursday (*Yom Chamishi*, יוֹם חֲמִישִׁי), 49th omer
In the morning the people heard a loud blast of the Shofar, came to the foot of the mountain, and saw the mountain all in smoke as it quaked at the descent of God upon it. The Shofar blasts grew louder and louder, then Moses spoke to God and He answered him with thunder. God once again instructed Moses to warn the people about coming upon the mountain. He instructs Moses to return to the people, warn them about breaking through into the cloud on the mountain, and then to return again with Aaron.

- Sivan 6 - Friday (*Yom Shishi*, יוֹם שִׁשִׁי), 50th day, *erev Shabbat*

The chronology is a bit uncertain. Some of the Sages say that Moses built the altar (Ex 24:4) on the 5th of Sivan while others reckon it to be built on the 6th (m.*Shabbat* 24.4; cf. Rashi). Exodus 24:4 seems to indicate that Moses arose early in the morning, which seems to be on the day after God’s initial appearance in the cloud of smoke (Sivan 5). The biblical narrative seems to put the events of Ex 24 on the day following the events of Ex 19:25. If this is correct, it was on Sivan 6 that Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and the 70 elders went up to the mountain (they returned to the people after Moses and Joshua went on alone), and Moses and Joshua continued on (Joshua apparently did not go the full distance with Moses, who alone entered the presence of the God, cf. 24:2) to receive the stone tablets upon which the Ten Words were written by the “finger of God.” Sivan 6 is Shavuot.

From this chronological understanding of the Exodus text, the long tradition has been that the initial giving of the Torah to Moses (and thus to Israel) occurred on Shavuot (cf. b.*Pesachim* 68b).

Some of the Sages also envisioned the Torah as a Ketubbah or “marriage contract” between God and Israel. Jeremiah 31:31–32, which announces the future establishment of the “new covenant” with Israel, may hint at this:

Behold, days are coming,” declares Adonai, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares Adonai.

Here, God portrays the Torah as a marriage covenant between Himself and Israel. Since the Sinai covenant was a written document, it is easy to see how it could be envisioned as a *ketubbah*, the marriage contract between a man and the father of his bride.

With this background in view, it is most interesting that God chose the Festival of Shavuot to be the time when He, in accordance with Yeshua’s promise (cf. Lk 24:49; Acts 1:4), would send forth His Spirit to empower His disciples to evangelize the nations, thus gathering together the elect from all the peoples to join the remnant of Israel in the salvation procured by Yeshua. It was by the power of the Ruach HaKodesh that promise made to Abraham (“in you all the families/nations of the earth shall be blessed”) would be fulfilled—that the light of the Torah would reach even the most remote parts of the world (cf. Is 42:4; Acts 1:8).

Not only did the outpouring of the Spirit on that Shavuot link the work of the Spirit with the giving of the Torah and God’s purpose to bring the elect of the nations to hear and receive its revelation, it also linked the presence of the Spirit with the concept of a covenant of marriage between God and His chosen people. In Ephesians 1:13–14, Paul teaches that the indwelling Spirit is Himself a “guarantee” of the believer’s final redemption:

In Him [Messiah], you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God’s own possession, to the praise of His glory.

Note that Paul uses two metaphors in regard to the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. First, he states that the believer “is sealed” (*sphragizō*, σφραγίζω) in Messiah by the “Holy Spirit of promise.” This metaphor is most likely taken from the sealing of a document in ancient times, which gave it full authenticity because the document was guarded against being changed

or modified (e.g., b.*BavaBatra* 160b). Thus, the promise of our final and complete redemption is secured by the gift of the Spirit Himself, as Paul states later in Ephesians: “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (Eph 4:30). Like the *Ketubbah* (marriage contract), which was a legal document securing the future marriage of the bride and groom, so the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer is a sure guarantee that the believer has come into a covenant relationship with God through His Messiah, Yeshua, a covenant that will, in the future, be fully realized.

Indeed, the second metaphor employed by Paul in our Ephesians text specifically utilizes the metaphor of betrothal to describe the relationship between the believer and Yeshua. He describes the Holy Spirit as the “pledge of our inheritance.” The Greek word translated “pledge” is *arrabōn* (ἀρραβών), which is itself a transliteration of the Hebrew or Aramaic word עֲרָבוֹן (*arabon*) meaning “pledge” or “security” (cf. Gen 38:17ff; Job 17:3). We find the term used generally to mean a “down payment” or “security,” but it is also used in connection with the bride-price promised in a *ketubbah* or marriage contract (cp. b.*BavaBatra* 173b). Since in this same epistle Paul makes it clear that marriage itself is a revelation of Messiah’s relationship with His bride, called the ekklesia (cf. Eph 5:25–32), it may well be that his use of *arrabōn* in Eph 1:14 has the *ketubbah* in mind. If this is so, then the Holy Spirit Himself is metaphorically the bride price pledged to the ekklesia as the sealed and secure guarantee of our final and complete redemption.

Paul uses the same language in 2Cor 1:20–22.

For as many as are the promises of God, in Him [Messiah] they are yes; therefore also through Him is our Amen to the glory of God through us. Now He who establishes us with you in Messiah and anointed us is God, who also sealed us and gave us the Spirit in our hearts as a pledge (*arrabōn*).

This brings the picture full-circle. Even as the Torah, given to Israel at Sinai on Shavuot, could be viewed as His *ketubbah* written to secure the inevitable wedding of Himself to His bride, so the Ruach, poured out at Shavuot and given to every believer in Yeshua, is Himself the bride-price Who guarantees the eventual eschatological wedding, bringing to full consummation the eternal marriage of Yeshua with His chosen bride.

Given this possible understanding, we are astounded at the very large bride-price given by the Groom to secure the marriage of His betrothed people. For the bride-price is nothing less than Himself! Even as Yeshua gave His own life to purchase His wife (cf. 1Pet 1:18–19), so the Spirit is given to every believer as the “dowry.” He pledges Himself as the bride price stated in the *ketubbah*!

As we celebrate Shavuot this year, may the love of God expressed in the great price He has paid for us as His bride, encourage and strengthen our faith in Him as we await His coming. And may we, enlivened by the indwelling Spirit, be stirred up in our efforts to live out the message of the Gospel, drawing others to Him and to the eternal life which He has promised to all who receive Him by faith.