Many people, making even the smallest of donations, enable RBC Ministries to reach others with the life-changing wisdom of the Bible. We are not funded or endowed by any group or denomination.
If observant Jewish people are right, the ancient festival cycle of Israel is of timeless importance in remembering God's provisions for the past, present, and future of His people.

If those who believe in Jesus are right, this same festival cycle is more than a timeless treasure of Israel. The biblical holidays of God are also a pattern of shadows fulfilled in a Messiah who has already come in the first phase of a two-part plan to save His people and rule the world.

In the following pages, RBC staff writer Kevin Williams gives us the first of a two-part study on the “Holidays Of God.” With years of experience in messianic congregations, Kevin shows us the profound relationship between the annual cycle of Jewish holidays, and their amazing prophetic significance for people of all nations.

Martin R. De Haan II
The Holidays of God

Spring Feasts:

1. Passover (*Pesach*)
2. Unleavened Bread (*Chag HaMatzot*)
3. Firstfruits (*HaBikkurim*)
4. Pentecost (*Shavuot*)

Fall Feasts:

5. Trumpets (*Rosh Hashanah*)
6. Atonement (*Yom Kippur*)
7. Tabernacles (*Sukkot*)
The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: ‘The feasts of the Lord, which you shall proclaim to be holy convocations, these are My feasts’” (Lev. 23:1-2).

With these words, the Lord of Israel established an annual cycle of holidays still honored in Jewish communities all over the world. Whether these communities are Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform; whether they are Russian, Yemenite, or American, these feasts form a common thread in global Jewish culture.

In the Hebrew language, the word for “My feasts” can be phonetically spelled mo-a-deem’. It is a word that is best translated in English as “appointed times” or “appointed feasts.” This additional emphasis reflects the importance the God of the Bible attached to these days.

This series of holidays has significance reaching far beyond the nation and culture of Israel.

These appointed times of the Lord are important for many reasons. To begin with, they are part of a national system of “time-outs.” Together, they provide weekly, monthly, and yearly occasions to rest from the routines and common work of daily life. The Provider of Israel designed these “time-outs” and appointed times for rest, reflection, and worship. They are sacred...
convocations that call the people of God together not only in the grandeur and majesty of the temple, but also in the quiet shelter and simplicity of every home of the land. Together, these appointed times form a system of remembrance. The appointed times of the Lord give every household, whether rich or poor, an occasion to recount the awesome power and love of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

It's important for us to understand, however, that this cycle of holidays is not just about Jewish culture. Even though they are linked to the agricultural cycle of

occasions are used to retell stories of Jewish life and origins, these holidays provide a panorama of history that has strong implications for all the families of the earth. Seen individually and together, these feasts paint a compelling picture of the past, present, and future work of a Messiah who is the source of life and hope and peace for all the nations of the world.

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On the fourteenth day of the first month at twilight is the Lord’s Passover. And on the fifteenth day of the same month is the Feast of Unleavened Bread to the Lord; seven days you must eat unleavened bread (Lev. 23:5-6).

The holiday of Passover is celebrated on the 14th of the Jewish month of Nisan. Ever since its beginning, Passover, or Pesach as it is called in Hebrew, has been celebrated on the full moon of a month that literally means “their flight.” Even though Nisan usually corresponds with March/April on the Roman calendar, and even though modern Jewish communities celebrate their New Year on the first day of the seventh month (Oct.-Nov.), Nisan is the first month of the “appointed feasts of the Lord.”

The 14th of the month of “their flight” looks back to the origin of the first Passover and to the birth of the nation of Israel. Ever since Israel’s exodus from Egypt in about 1450 BC, the God of the Bible has asked His people to use this day to remember how He delivered their ancestors from the idols and slave-yards of Egypt.

Passover’s intent has been honored. On the 14th of Nisan, observant Jewish fathers tell their children how the God of their fathers delivered their ancestors from economic bondage and spiritual darkness. It is
at the feast of Passover that Jewish parents still describe how God used 10 plagues to break the stubborn grip of the Pharaoh. The plagues began with the “killing of the Nile River,” which was worshiped by the Egyptians as a source of life. The plagues ended only after God took the life of every firstborn son of Egypt.¹

On the evening of that first Passover, the Lord visited Egypt as an angel of death. According to the Scriptures, the Lord took the life of every firstborn—people and livestock included—except where He found blood on the doorway. Only where there was blood on the doorway did He “pass over” and spare the life of the firstborn in that home.²

To understand the killing of the paschal (Passover) lamb, it’s important to know that in Egyptian society the lamb, or ram (a male sheep), represented a pagan god of the Egyptians named Amon (also spelled Amun, Amen, or Ammon). Amon, whose name means “hidden one,”³

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The story of Israel’s rescue from Egypt is a picture not only of the past but of a future rescue as well.

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collect its blood—the biblical sign of life—and with a hyssop brush paint the lamb’s blood on the lintel and door posts of their houses.²

That final decisive plague came during the full moon of Nisan 14. Moses, the leader of the Jewish people, had instructed every Israelite home to sacrifice a lamb,
was considered the king of the gods and the source of all life on heaven and earth. According to the Egyptian zodiac, Nisan was the chief month of this god, and the 15th of that month during the full moon was believed to be the apex of Amon’s powers.

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To the Egyptians, the killing of a lamb was a desecration of their religion! The Passover sacrifice was a direct challenge to their gods. To the Jewish people, the same sacrifice fulfilled a promise of the Almighty: “Against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment: I am the Lord.”

On the celebrated day of Amon, and at the alleged peak of his powers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob not only overcame Pharaoh, but desecrated the worship of Amon and gave the Egyptian people reason to believe in the God of Israel.

After 40 years, the

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Jewish people carried these memories into a homeland that came to be known as the nation of Israel. Here the children of the Exodus began to celebrate the annual feast of Passover in remembrance of what God had done for them in Egypt. Centuries later, when Israel’s King Solomon built a temple in Jerusalem, they traveled great distances to observe their Pesach together in Jerusalem. This was the practice of Jewish people until the Roman destruction of the temple complex in AD 70.

After the destruction of the temple, Jewish people had to remember Passover in a different way. Without the temple, there could be no lamb sacrifice. The Law said the sacrifice could be made only by qualified priests serving at the altar and place of God’s choosing. As a result, for nearly 2,000 years lamb has not been served in Jewish homes during the Passover meal. Instead, the rabbis and sages declared that unleavened bread, “matzah” bread, would be the appropriate substitute. Eating the matzah would be equal to eating the lamb.

People who believe that Jesus is the promised Messiah have embraced the spiritual significance of the holidays of God.

The destruction of the temple altered the way all the holidays were celebrated. Without a temple, and without an authorized priesthood,
many of the activities central to holiday observance could not be practiced.

At this point we can see why people who believe that Jesus is the promised Messiah of Israel have embraced the spiritual significance of the holidays of God. About 40 years before the destruction of the temple, Jesus not only claimed to be the Messiah (Jn. 4:25-26) but also that He had come to fulfill the meaning of the Passover sacrifice. At a Passover Seder, which later became known by His followers as “the table of Communion,” Jesus held up the elements of wine and matzah and applied them to Himself. During the meal He broke unleavened bread with His disciples, and then held that broken matzah in His hands, saying, “This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me” (Lk. 22:19). Then after the meal He held up a cup of wine and with the same force of personal application to Himself, said, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you” (v.20). They were claims that were outrageous and blasphemous if they were not true. But they were true, and they help to explain why the feast of Passover would go through such a profound transition in the years ahead.

For those who find compelling reasons to accept Jesus’ claims, the Communion elements are treasured reminders of His broken body and shed blood. Fulfilled in Jesus, the Passover celebration then did more than remember just the birth of a nation. This annual feast also anticipated Messiah’s ultimate deliverance of an international body of
people who are willing to trust in His sacrificial death for their spiritual protection.

For those Jewish people who have not yet believed in Jesus, the broken matzah, or unleavened bread, continues to be a part of the Passover meal; yet it is shrouded in mystery. This mystery, a puzzle on which the Jewish sages cannot reach consensus, need not be a mystery to those who believe in Jesus as the Messiah.

One element of mystery is found in a Passover tradition involving the “afikomen.” On every Passover table there is a cloth bag called a “matzah tosh.” The bag is either square or round and lies flat on the table. Within the matzah tosh are three pieces of matzah bread, each separated in its own pocket. In this way they are hidden from view, but the celebrants know they are there. During the Seder, the middle matzah is removed from its place, broken in half, and one portion is wrapped in a linen cloth. This wrapped piece of matzah is called the “afikomen.” Afikomen is not a Hebrew word, but a Greek word that means “the coming one.” The afikomen is removed from the table and hidden. Later in the meal, it becomes a children’s game to search for the hidden afikomen. The child who finds it brings it back to the table where “Papa” must ransom it back. Once it is paid for, the afikomen is unwrapped and shared by all as the last food eaten—so its flavor will stay on the

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tongue and its memory stay in the mind the rest of the evening.

The rabbis cannot agree on the significance of this unusual observance, or its origins. Some believe the three pieces of matzah in the matzah tosh represent three crowns of learning. Others believe it represents the three patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Still others believe it symbolizes the three types of people in Israel: the priests, the Levites, and the commoners. Yet through the eyes of the Gospels we see another explanation. Jewish and Gentile people who believe in Jesus have often seen in the afikomen a striking picture of the triunity of Deity. In the three folds of the matzah tosh there is a picture of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That the middle matzah—represented by the Son, our Messiah—is broken, wrapped in linen, hidden, and ransomed (the price paid), and then brought back for the family to accept and enjoy seems too deliberate to easily dismiss. While the symbolism of this ritual remains a mystery to those who have not accepted Jesus, through messianic eyes the meaning seems clear and powerful.

When Jesus said of the unleavened bread, “Take, eat; this is My body,” He was not instituting an empty ritual. He was identifying Himself personally with both the matzah and the Passover lamb, bringing to mind the words of the prophet Isaiah:

Surely He has borne our
griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth (53:4-7).

In fulfillment of this anticipation of a prophet in Israel, those who believe in Jesus believe that when we share in the bread of Communion and Passover, we share in Christ, who became our matzah. He was broken on our behalf to become our bread. In Mideastern culture, “bread” is the staff of life, a symbol of all the provisions we need to live.

Each time we share in the cup of Communion, we share in the Passover cup of the New Covenant.

There are other elements in the Passover meal that also draw our attention to the first redemption out of Egypt, and the second redemption through the Messiah, but we cannot examine them all in one booklet. We’d be leaving out a critical element, however, if we did not take time to examine the “Kiddush cup.”
Another important element in a traditional Jewish Passover observance is wine. During a typical Passover Seder, four cups are shared, each with its own significant picture in the ritual. The first cup is called the “cup of sanctification,” which sets the feast apart from any commonplace meal. The second cup is the “cup of plagues,” remembering the calamities visited upon the Egyptians. The third cup is called the “cup of redemption,” recognizing and memorializing the Hebrews’ release from captivity. The fourth cup is called the “cup of praise,” during which the family recites Psalms 113–118, traditionally considered the praise Psalms.¹⁰

Our attention here is on the third cup, the “cup of redemption,” the “Kiddush cup,” which in the modern Seder comes after the eating of the afikomen. Because of the ritualistic order of the meal and the rich significance of this observance, some Christian theologians believe that this is the cup Jesus lifted, blessed, and declared, “Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.”¹¹

A cup of red wine is symbolic of blood in Jewish tradition, which is significant in our story. In the Pentateuch (first five books of the Bible) and throughout the ancient world, covenants were sealed and confirmed with blood. This is no less true in the Gospels. Symbolically with the cup and literally through His blood shed at the crucifixion, the Messiah proclaimed the beginnings of
a new covenant predicted by the Jewish prophet Jeremiah: “Behold, the days are coming,” says the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them,” says the Lord. “But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” says the Lord: “I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” says the Lord. “For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more” (Jer. 31:31-34).

Obviously, this New Covenant has not yet reached its complete fulfillment. Many thousands of Jews and millions of Gentiles have come to faith in Jesus, and God remembers their sins no more. Yet not all of the house of Israel or the house of Judah have taken this step of faith.

Those who believe in Jesus as Messiah believe that each time we share in the cup of Communion, we share in the Passover cup of the New Covenant. With this symbol of our redemption, we remember not only the death of Christ but also the blood that has sealed the New Covenant, for “in Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace.”12
UNLEAVENED BREAD (CHAG HAMATZOT)

On the fifteenth day of the same month is the Feast of Unleavened Bread to the Lord; seven days you must eat unleavened bread (Lev. 23:6).

In a general sense, the holiday of Passover is used interchangeably with the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Technically, however, the Lord’s Feast of Unleavened Bread begins on Nisan 15, the day after the Passover sacrifice.

Known in synagogues as Chag HaMatzot, this holiday lasts for a week. For 7 days the people of Israel are to eat only unleavened bread in remembrance of the day God delivered His people from Egypt.

That historic day deserves to be remembered: In droves, a multitude estimated at 3 million men, women, and children—along with the herds and wealth of Egypt—began their exodus. In the span of a heartbeat, the children of Israel were literally transferred out of the kingdom of slavery and into the kingdom of liberty, a community redeemed.

“They departed from Rameses in the first month, on the fifteenth day of the first month; on the day after the Passover the children of Israel went out with boldness in the sight of all the Egyptians.” They took their bread in its mixing...
bowls, without time for the leaven (yeast) to form or for the bread to rise. When the order came to leave, they left—flat bread and all!

This act of leaving Egypt with unleavened bread has led to one of the most colorful traditions of the Passover season. In anticipation of the days of unleavened bread, Jewish mothers do their “spring cleaning.” With great care they sweep and search and scrub their homes to remove every bit of leaven. Floors are swept, pots are boiled, cupboards are emptied—all in an effort to remove any trace of leaven. Then just before Passover, bonfires are lit in empty lots and fields all over Israel to destroy any of the bread and crumbs that have been found.

Rabbis point out that leaven puffs up bread the way pride does. Flat bread speaks of humility and obedience. Unleavened bread speaks of our readiness to put away from us the evil inclination that lives within all of us. It reminds us that freedom is not enough. God did not deliver His people from Egypt just for them to be free, but that they’d be free from the bondage of sin. He delivered His people to enjoy the liberty that is found by all who learn to live in humble dependence on the one true God.

The apostle Paul, a Jewish scholar in his own right, may have been alluding to this in 1 Corinthians 5:7-8:

\[
Purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was
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sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

In Paul’s eyes, and in the understanding of other rabbis, leaven is an illustration of sin. The Feast of Unleavened Bread therefore speaks of the need for God’s people to live new lives marked by a break from the bondage experienced in the kingdom of sin and darkness.

What we must also keep in mind, however, is the messianic significance Jesus claimed for the matzah of Passover. When He broke the unleavened bread of the Seder and said, “This is My body which is given for you. This do in remembrance of Me,” He was saying that the matzah of the Passover had a meaning that is realized fully in Him.

Some who believe in Jesus see a mysterious and ironic picture of Him that has unintentionally shown up in the way unleavened bread is made. By rabbinic decree, matzah must be striped, pierced, and burned in such a way as to appear bruised. Is the likeness coincidental? Or has the

The Feast of Unleavened Bread speaks of our need for a break from the bondage of our old way of life.

God of Israel woven His story into the traditions of people who do not yet believe? The Jewish prophet Isaiah, speaking of God’s suffering Servant, told us that it is by His stripes we are healed, that He was pierced for our

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transgressions, was bruised for our iniquities, and of course was without sin.

We have left our own “Egypt,” carrying our Bread with us—and not merely with us, but in us, the very Bread of Life.

There are indications that the God of the Bible wants us to see Jesus as our source of “sinless bread.” Bethlehem, the place of Jesus’ birth, is rendered in Hebrew as Beit-lechem, meaning “the house of bread.”

Keeping in mind this picture of Messiah as our matzah, listen to what Jesus said in the Gospel of John:

Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me (6:53-57).

John went on to say that this teaching was so difficult that, upon hearing it, many of Jesus’ disciples turned away from Him (vv.60-66). We can see why. If taken literally, Jesus’ comments about eating His flesh and
drinking His blood seem cannibalistic. Yet if Jesus was speaking figuratively of spiritual truths (v.63), and if He is the Messiah-bread of Israel, His message is profound. Jesus who became our unleavened bread has invited us to share in Him. He invites us to give ourselves to Him and adopt His own character, purging the leaven of our old ways. Many who believe in Jesus have found this picture compelling. We have left our own “Egypt,” carrying our Bread with us—and not merely with us but in us—the very Bread of Life. Like Lot fleeing Sodom, the Israelites were not to look back on their former life but were to take the flat bread with them, not even giving it time to rise. We too, once we come into a saving knowledge of Messiah, must turn from the former things and walk in faith into spiritual maturity and faithfulness, putting away the childish and sinful things, and trusting God for all that lies ahead.

If the unleavened bread of the Passover is fulfilled by God’s Messiah, it means that we are not left to live a sinless life in our own strength.
The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: ‘When you come into the land which I give to you, and reap its harvest, then you shall bring a sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest to the priest. He shall wave the sheaf before the Lord, to be accepted on your behalf; on the day after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it’” (Lev. 23:9-11).

The third appointed feast was delayed until the people of Israel took possession of their Promised Land. Once they began taking its harvest, they were to begin observing a feast of firstfruits “on the day after the Sabbath.” Since Passover was a day on which no common work was to be done, it appears that “the Feast of Firstfruits” was to be observed on Nisan 15.

For as long as the Jewish people had a tabernacle or temple, they were to give to the temple priests a portion of all their increase and harvest. “This shall be the priest’s due from the people, from those who offer a sacrifice, whether it is bull or sheep: they shall give to the priest the shoulder, the cheeks, and the stomach. The firstfruits of your grain and your new wine and your oil, and the first of the fleece of your sheep, you shall give him.”

When this sacrifice was given to the priests, the offerer made a
proclamation: “I declare today to the Lord your God that I have come to the country which the Lord swore to our fathers to give us.” The priest would then take the basket, or baskets, and place them before the altar. Following the commandment of God, the man would then recite, in the presence of a priest, the following Scripture:

You shall answer and say before the Lord your God: “My father was a Syrian, about to perish, and he went down to Egypt and dwelt there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. But the Egyptians mistreated us, afflicted us, and laid hard bondage on us. Then we cried out to the Lord God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and looked on our affliction and our labor and our oppression. So the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and with an outstretched arm, with great terror and with signs and wonders. He has brought us to this place and has given us this land, ‘a land flowing with milk and honey’; and now, behold, I have brought the firstfruits of the land which You, O Lord, have given me.” Then you shall set it before the Lord your God, and worship before the Lord your God (Dt. 26:5-10).

Again, the intent behind the ritual was not mere tithes and offerings, or superficial observances, but remembrance in one’s heart that God had redeemed them out of slavery into a new kingdom.
At this appointed time they were to acknowledge in their hearts and confess before witnesses that the fruits of their labor were a grace-gift from the Almighty, who is the source of all material and spiritual wealth, and that they no longer lived as slaves in bondage but as free citizens in God’s kingdom.

Once again, however, there is reason to see a messianic significance to the third appointed feast. The New Testament refers to the resurrected Jesus as the firstfruits of those who will be resurrected (1 Cor. 15:20,23). In this light it is important to see how the resurrection of Jesus links Him to the historic Feast of Firstfruits.

The Gospels tell us that “After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week began to dawn, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb” (Mt. 28:1). Keep in mind that according to Leviticus 23:11, the Feast of Firstfruits was to be observed on the first day after the Sabbath of Passover.\(^\text{17}\)

Firsthand reports about the resurrection tell us that Jesus rose from the grave on Sunday, the first day of the week after the seventh-day Sabbath. Jesus rose from the dead not on just any day. The reality as it played out was not coincidentally on the first day of the week; rather the Messiah rose according to God’s intentional design in order to fulfill the holy Torah. He rose on HaBikkurim—the Feast of Firstfruits. His resurrection was a promise of the life and everlasting freedom that would come to all who believed in Him.

Of the Feast of Firstfruits Alfred Edersheim says, “Each family, and every individual separately
acknowledged, by the yearly presentation of the firstfruits, a living relationship between them and God, in virtue of which they gratefully received at His hands all they had or enjoyed, and solemnly dedicated both it and themselves to the Lord.”

How much more, then, is this true for those who confess Jesus as Messiah! Those who believe in Jesus can gratefully see Him as the resurrected firstfruit of the eternal harvest that God has promised to those who trust Him.

Like Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Firstfruits is ripe with messianic overtones. Each is also rich with insights and principles for our faith. Each feast has a connection to the others and to the events of Israel’s past. Each feast also has a prophetic and messianic connection to Israel’s future.

What is also clear is that these feasts can no longer be kept as they were observed in ancient Israel. Ever since the destruction of the temple in AD 70, there has been no temple in which to offer sacrifice or to bring firstfruits. As a result, synagogues remember the Feast of Firstfruits with prayers.
INTERMEDIATE OBSERVANCE: Counting The Sheaves (Sfirat HaOmer)

You shall count for yourselves from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering: seven Sabbaths shall be completed (Lev. 23:15).

This commandment is not a holiday as such, but it represents a process still observed among Orthodox, Conservative, and Messianic Jewish synagogues. Together these groups obey the commandment to count the passage of time, day by day, from the Feast of Firstfruits to the next major biblical feast: Shavuot. Shavuot, which will be discussed in greater detail in the next section, is also known as Pentecost, and it falls exactly 50 days after the Feast of Firstfruits.

In synagogues and in Jewish homes the observant Hebrew greets each evening (the beginning of the Jewish day) with special prayers to mark off the days until Shavuot. This observance is not a countdown, but an anticipation of the coming appointed time of God. During this time Psalm 119 is read in the synagogues as observant Jewish people meditate on its words of encouragement.

An attitude of anticipation can also be seen in a prayer recited every evening during the Counting of the Sheaves: “May it be Your will, Lord our God, and the God of our forefathers, that in the merit of the omer count that I have counted today, may there be corrected whatever blemish I have caused . . . and may I be cleansed and sanctified with the holiness of Above.”

The observant Jewish
man or woman looks to these days as a time of introspection, with the nightly prayers helping to examine his or her life, in anticipation of the great work he expects the Creator to do on the 50th day, the Day of Pentecost.

Leviticus 23:15 instructs the celebrants to be mindful of the passage of time from Passover to Pentecost, the 49 intermediary days. Some rabbis teach that this time is like waiting for a friend who is coming from afar for a special visit, bearing with him great news. Certainly in the biblical history of the apostles, the 49 days between Pesach and Shavuot were spent in fellowship with and being taught by the resurrected Messiah. But He left them with the promise that a unique Counselor would come. And a very intimate friend did visit on Shavuot—the Holy Spirit.

In the church today, Pentecost is calculated in the same way: 49 days after the resurrection.\(^{20}\) Few Christians, however, pay attention to the period between Easter and Pentecost. If believers followed this example of Israel, they might experience unexpected blessing. The days that mark the period from the cross to the dramatic beginning of the church (from the resurrection to the coming of the Holy Spirit) could become a time of quiet soul-searching and renewal. It could give the church an annual opportunity to contemplate the return of the Messiah in power to the earth!
Count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath; then you shall offer a new grain offering to the Lord. You shall bring from your dwellings two wave loaves of two-tenths of an ephah. They shall be of fine flour; they shall be baked with leaven. They are the firstfruits to the Lord. And you shall offer with the bread seven lambs of the first year, without blemish, one young bull, and two rams. They shall be as a burnt offering to the Lord, with their grain offering and their drink offerings, an offering made by fire for a sweet aroma to the Lord. Then you shall sacrifice one kid of the goats as a sin offering, and two male lambs of the first year as a sacrifice of a peace offering. The priest shall wave them with the bread of the firstfruits as a wave offering before the Lord, with the two lambs. They shall be holy to the Lord for the priest. And you shall proclaim on the same day that it is a holy convocation to you. You shall do no customary work on it. It shall be a statute forever in all your dwellings throughout your generations (Lev. 23:16-21).

Earlier we spoke of the Jewish reading of Psalm 119 during the “Counting of the Sheaves,” of meditating on the commandments of God, and of the importance of self-examination for 50
days after Passover. This emphasis on a thoughtful relationship to the Word of God is important because it is universally commemorated in the synagogues that on Pentecost the Law (or “teachings” of God) was given to Moses on Mount Sinai. Accompanied by fire, 

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On Pentecost all the spring feasts culminated in the New Covenant era, when the Spirit of God would begin establishing a new kingdom on earth.

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the Almighty wrote the Ten Commandments for the children of Israel. Fire is an important element in Pentecost.

In the second chapter of Acts, the disciples, along with the multitude of witnesses from other nations, had just come from the Shavuot service in the temple where every year the prophet Ezekiel was read: “I looked, and behold, a whirlwind was coming out of the north, a great cloud with raging fire engulfing itself; and brightness was all around it and radiating out of its midst like the color of amber, out of the midst of the fire.”

21 In the presence of this assembly the sound of a mighty wind and fire announcing the presence of the Lord was about to replay the vision of Ezekiel!

When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of
a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance (Acts 2:1-4).

Once again the fire of God appeared, but this time to His trusted friends. Peter, the man who had backslidden and even denied knowing the Messiah three times, now rose with courage and gave his first sermon. The marvel of Messiah’s Spirit, the Ruach HaKodesh in the Hebrew (“Holy Breath”) had fallen. The same breath that gave life to Adam, transforming him from a lump of clay into a living man, now transformed lives by the thousands!

An important fact about Shavuot is that it is one of three pilgrim feasts when all Israelite men were required by law to come to Jerusalem and bring their offerings to the temple. On this day, as Acts tells us, there would have been Hebrews from all over the known world gathered in the upper rooms of the temple. These were temple-observant men: “Parthians and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya adjoining Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs.”

Peter spoke to the multitude, reminding them, “For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off.” Hence the key to Peter’s sermon, “Whoever calls on
the name of the Lord shall be saved,” was proclaimed for the Jew and the Gentile. While incidental to the message, note that Peter spoke of King David during his sermon (Acts 2:25-36). Jewish tradition teaches that David died on Shavuot, and this too, like the reading from Ezekiel mentioned earlier, would have been in the forefront of the minds of the Hebrew men surrounding Peter. All of these events and memorials came together to touch the hearts of unbelieving Jews, moving them to ask, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?”

Peter’s answer then is as valid today: “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

Because Pentecost, or the Feast of Weeks, is associated with the giving of the Law and the coming of the Spirit, it is interesting to compare the outcome of those two events. We read in Exodus 32:28 that 3,000 men died at Mount Sinai because of the sin of worshiping the golden calf. Contrast that loss of 3,000 lives with the New Testament Shavuot when 3,000 men came to new life in Jesus 50 days after the celebration of Passover.

The believers of Pentecost were worthy of death. But because their
faith rested on the great High Priest, Jesus, who had made atonement for their sins, they were now alive eternally—part of the firstfruit harvest, the first tithe, and the promise of Jeremiah 31:31. On this Pentecost all the spring feasts culminated in the New Covenant era, when the Spirit of God would begin establishing a new kingdom on earth—not by overthrowing governments or armies, but through the humble submission of individual hearts, one at a time, over hundreds of years. “‘Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,’ says the Lord of hosts.”

Shavuot is also called “Atzeret shel Pesach,” the completion of Passover. It ties together the first night of Passover to the final observance of Shavuot, continually reminding the faithful that God is the Redeemer and Rock of our salvation, the only One who can rescue us from bondage. Several times in the Gospel of John our Messiah said that if we abide in Him, He will abide in us:

I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing (Jn. 15:5).

This was not merely some utopian teaching and a thing to humanly strive for, as if man could attain such merit on his own power. It was a promise of the Most High. On Pentecost, at the close of an era in human history and at the dawn of a new season of planting and bearing fruit, the Spirit came to abide in every man, woman, and child who called out in faith to Messiah.
MERELY A COINCIDENCE?

The stage had been set by the Ancient of Days, the pattern laid out for all to see in the first of the mo-a-deem’, these appointed spring-time festivals. The Messiah of Israel put aside His glory and joined the ranks of mankind, becoming the incarnate One. He “tabernacled” among us, as John’s gospel said, and dwelt among His own creation. Then came the climax of His time on earth—the crucifixion. The battle had been waged in the events of the Passover week as He became both the bread and wine and the lamb of sacrifice that death might pass over both the Jewish believers and all mankind who accept Him by faith today. Three days and nights passed until the victory was declared. At Firstfruits, Jesus, the slain lamb, became the Savior, the firstfruit of our resurrection; glorified and dedicated, conquering the power of sin and death forevermore. With great anticipation, we count the days from Passover to Pentecost and the birth of the church. The first harvest of humankind, 3,000 strong, issued in the new era of messianic revelation, a perpetual spring season that continues to permit germination, blooming, and growth. Is it merely a coincidence that these New Testament events correspond so perfectly to the pictures and lessons presented to us in the feast days? And does God have pictures for us of the final harvest represented in the Fall Feasts: the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles?

As one friend puts it so
well, “there are no such things as coincidences, only ‘God-incidences.’”

ENDNOTES:
1 Exodus 12:29-32. 2 Exodus 12:22. 3 Exodus 12:23. 4 http://www.memphis.edu/egypt/karnaktm.htm. 5 Exodus 12:6. 6 Exodus 12:8. 7 Exodus 12:12. 8 Some rabbis (Moshe benNachman chief among them, 1194–1270) are of the opinion that the afikomen is eaten in commemoration of the Pesach offering (Passover—Its Observance, Laws and Significance, p.75, 1994, Mesorah Publications, Ltd., Brooklyn, NY). 9 Seder is the Hebrew term for “order”; it is the order of the liturgy for the meal celebration. 10 Found in the Order of Service for most Passover celebrations. 11 Matthew 26:27-28. 12 Ephesians 1:7 (see also Col. 1:14). 13 Numbers 33:3. 14 Isaiah 53:5; Zechariah 12:10. 15 Deuteronomy 18:3-4. 16 Deuteronomy 26:3. 17 On this the Pharisees and Sadducees disagreed. The Sadducees believed this “Sabbath” to be the Saturday that falls during the week of Passover. The Pharisees, however, believed that Passover is a Sabbath, and therefore, the second day of Passover (Feast of Unleavened Bread) was also Firstfruits. Regardless, the calendar will frequently fall so that the Feast of Unleavened Bread does fall on a Sunday, fulfilling both the Pharisee and Sadducee interpretations. 18 The Temple, Alfred Edersheim, p.380, reprinted 1994, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI. 19 Shavuot—Its Observance, Laws and Significance, p.35, Mesorah Publications, Ltd., Brooklyn, NY, 1997. 20 At the Council of Nicea (AD 325), Emperor Constantine forbade the observance of any biblical feast because of their strong Jewish overtones, and the calculation of the resurrection was no longer based on Passover but on the first Sunday after the spring equinox. Occasionally, however, the two seasons do coincide. 21 Ezekiel 1:4. 22 Acts 2:9-11. 23 Acts 2:39. 24 Acts 2:21. 25 Acts 2:37. 26 Acts 2:38. 27 Romans 3:23. 28 Zechariah 4:6.
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