

SHAVUOT AND CHRISTIAN PENTECOST

SHAVUOT, The Festival of Weeks, is also known as PENTECOST, a Greek term meaning “Fiftieth” [i.e. 50th day of counting the Omer as described in Leviticus 23:15-16.] Shavuot, falling on 6th Sivan, is one of the three Jewish “pilgrimage feasts.” Shavuot has agricultural roots in the “first fruits” of the late harvest, and, in post Temple spirituality, spiritual links to the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai.

Christianity, arising as it does from its Jewish spiritual foundations, draws upon its roots in Judaism in order to articulate its understandings. It is in the early Pentecost experience of the Church that a Christian understanding of Jesus’ divinity and presence with the Church can begin to emerge. That understanding is communicated in and through the Holy Spirit who is experienced at Pentecost as “tongues of fire” (Acts 2:3) and at other times as “a burning within” (Lk. 24:27, 32); an understanding that is rooted in the disciples’ understanding of tradition and scripture and the teaching of Jesus.

PASSOVER AND REDEMPTION

In Jewish tradition the period between Passover and Shavuot has come to represent the time between the Redemption from Egypt and the Covenant at Sinai [In the Giving of the Torah] through which Israel draws near to God. A similar relationship exists in Christian spirituality—at Pentecost, the Church is born into a new relationship with God which is centered on the risen Christ and the presence of his Spirit with the community.

FROM THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS TO PENTECOST

The fiftieth day after the Resurrection of Jesus (on Easter Sunday), Pentecost remembers the manifestation of the Spirit in the community of his disciples, and celebrates the continued presence of the Spirit of God within the Church. The fifty days from Easter resurrection to Pentecost are celebrated as one feast day, or one GREAT Sunday. Days, above all other days, for singing ALLELUIA (Pope Paul VI, 1969).

The NT reading for Pentecost from Acts (2:1-11) relates that the Holy Spirit was experienced by the gathered community as “fire.” Luke's gospel also relates the physical experience of the divine presence when Jesus’ exegesis of the scriptures “from the Pentateuch to the Prophets” was the catalyst for “their hearts burning within” (Lk. 24:27, 32).

At Pentecost they were gathered together "and suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each one of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit...." (Acts 2:22-4).

FIRE AND EXEGESIS

The presence or manifestation of the LORD in Jewish tradition is often associated with the physical appearance of fire. The encounter



between Moses and the LORD at Sinai is several times described in terms of fire and smoke (i.e., Ex. 19:18). In Exodus (24:16, 17) we read, “The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it ... the appearance of the cloud of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel.”

The meetings between the LORD and Moses in the *Ohel Moed* (Tent of Meeting) when “the pillar of cloud would descend...and the LORD would speak with Moses” (Ex. 33:9); and later, in the cloud and the Glory of the LORD that settled on the *Ohel Moed* and filled the *Mishkhan* (Dwelling Place/Tabernacle) seen by all [as cloud by day and fire by night (Ex. 40:34)] are visualizations of the faith of Israel in the Divine presence (*Shekhinah*), and articulations of the joy associated with Israel’s acceptance of the Covenant of Sinai by.

FIRE and **JOY** are biblical and rabbinic expressions for theological realities that are manifested in encounter with the LORD and the experience of living (fulfilling) Torah — they convey the public apprehension and expression of this Divine-human encounter which is felt by the community. Rabbinic commentary also makes it clear that the “fire and joy” of Torah is a complete experience derived from the exegesis of Torah, both the WRITTEN Torah, which is the Pentateuch, the Prophets and the Writings, and the ORAL Torah. The experience of fire is a confirmation that oral Torah is part of the COMPLETE Torah because it “manifests the unity and divinity of the entire, complete and perfect Torah” (Avril & Lenhardt, 2002).

CHRISTIAN Pentecost remembers the manifestation of the Spirit in the community of his disciples, and celebrates the continued presence of the Spirit of God within the Church. Similarly, while Shavuot has harvest links it is at the same time, a festival which has always incorporated an “encounter” spirituality. The importance of the spiritual encounter with the LORD is only fully realized in the later transformation of Shavuot by the rabbis (after the loss of the Temple) into a festival which links the Exodus from Egypt (The Passover) with the Gift of the Torah at Sinai.

SIMCHAH SHEL TORAH—THE JOY THE TORAH

The Divine presence encountered in Torah is called *Simchah shel Torah* (The Joy of Torah) which has its foundations in the joy of Sinai; the joy of redemption and promise, the joy of revelation and the joy of the commandments. In *Simchah shel Torah* one finds Truth and Unity and Understanding.

TONGUES, AS OF FIRE

Tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each one of them...

A reflection on the Jewish understanding of Joy of Torah experienced in exegesis and in living the commandments helps us to understand the experience of the disciples at Pentecost in Jerusalem after the resurrection. Already they have been shown by Jesus through the exegesis on the road (Emmaus, Lk. 24:27), and again in Jerusalem with the disciples (Lk. 24:45), the unity of the Torah and its capacity to provide meaning to their experiences. In the complete Torah which points back to the Sinai experience of redemption to glory—from suffering to liberation, and forward to a future redemption, the disciples have the teachings which help them come to understand the promise and purpose revealed in the suffering and death of Jesus. With this new understanding, that in Jesus every person can emerge from suffering to future glory, the Church emerges. The imagery of fire which accompanies their understanding and the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-11) is a reflection of the Divine Joy which is animated by a deep searching of the scriptures and the presence of the Spirit of the risen Jesus.

REFERENCES.

Avril, A., & Lenhardt, P. *Three Roads: Emmaus, Gaza and Damascus*, (2002) unpublished.
Schechter, S., *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology*, Woodstock, Jewish Lights, 1993.

