

The Rabbinic Solution to Linking Shavuot and Sinai

Solving a Calendar Problem

Introduction:

The day on which the Israelites are commanded to observe the festival of Shavuot is one of only ten days marked in the Hebrew text of the bible with the unusual phrase **בַּעֲצָם הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה**, *b'etsem ha'yom ha'zeb*. That phrase and the ten days that it marks create an important message that I have called "The Hidden Bones Apocalypse." Based on analysis of the Greek text of the Septuagint and of the text of the Samaritan Pentateuch, I have argued (elsewhere) that the phrase marking those ten days must have made its way into the Hebrew text of the bible sometime between about 200 BCE and about 100 BCE. But, during that period, we would not expect Shavuot to be included in a list of ten unusually important days. It was a commanded festival, but it was not nearly as important as Sukkot, for example, or Rosh HaShanah; neither of which is among the ten days marked by the Hidden Bones phrase. It is only when Shavuot is associated with the Sinai event that its marking makes sense. And that connection was not made by the leaders of rabbinic Judaism until sometime between about 200 CE and about 500 CE, centuries later than it seems the marking occurred. That is, between the time of the Mishnah and the Babylonian Talmud. So, why was Shavuot among the ten days marked with the hidden bones phrase in the second century BCE? And why did it take so long for the early rabbis to make the connection between Shavuot and Sinai? The answer to those questions is found in what was one of the greatest disagreements in Jewish history, in the controversy over the proper cultic calendar.

Analysis:

The festival of Shavuot, as we know it from the biblical text, was a harvest holiday. Offerings of the first fruits of the harvest were made, accompanied by the recitation of a brief history of the Israelite experience. It was important enough to warrant the requirement of perpetual observance, and it was importantly associated with the holiday of Passover by the fifty-day period of the counting of the omer that separates the two. But there is nothing in the biblical account that associates Shavuot with the covenant and revelation at Sinai. During the Second Temple period Shavuot was observed as the bible requires; it was a time for giving thanks for the harvest.

That Shavuot was both a harvest festival *and* a commemoration of the Sinai event, though, was a crucial understanding of the book of *Jubilees*, which dates to about 150 BCE.¹ That it was a commemoration of the Sinai covenant, *and* the day on which covenants more broadly were made and renewed was also a given for the sectarians of Qumran in the last two centuries, or so, BCE.² The celebration of Shavuot as a festival importantly associated with Sinai would make perfect sense to one who held to the 364-day calendars of *Jubilees* and Qumran. And, as such, it might well merit inclusion in a list of ten highly important biblical days. But that was not the calendar of the late Second Temple or of the early rabbinic period that followed, and according to the 354-day rabbinic calendar of the late Second Temple, the two events did not coincide. But sometime between about 200 CE and about 500 CE, a solution acceptable to the rabbinic authorities and based on the rabbinic calendar was found. The Mishnah, compiled in about 200 CE, did not associate the two events. But the Babylonian Talmud, three centuries or so later, does explicitly reference Shavuot as “the day on which the Torah was given.” (*Pesachim* 68b) So, it seems the interpretation that allows the two to share a date was devised sometime during that period.

¹ Jubilees 6:17–22 gives us the first account of Shavuot being “two-fold and of two kinds,” both a Festival of First Fruits and as a commemoration and renewal of the covenant that “the Israelites forgot until I [God] renewed it for them at this mountain [Sinai].”

² See, for example, the Temple Scroll 11QT 19:9.

The problem the rabbis faced was knotty one. It is fascinating that the biblical text does not contain a date for an event so essential as the Sinai theophany, but it does not. Likewise, while we have specific dates for Passover and Sukkot, for example, the date of Shavuot is not fixed. It is observed fifty days after a date that seems clearly to be variable. The fifty-day period is counted from the time of a harvest event, and the timing of harvests is variable depending on geography, weather, and growing conditions. It is the ambiguity of both dates, however, that ultimately allowed the rabbis to find a solution.

It was concluded that the sixth day of the Hebrew month of Sivan could be shown to be both the date of the Sinai event and the date of the required Shavuot observance. That is not the date of the festival in *Jubilees*, though, or in the calendar of the sectarians, which points out the key problem: different calendars produce different dates for biblically required observances. Those using the “wrong” calendar will not be properly observing biblical law.

The solution determined by the rabbis required several key interpretations. We will first review the line of reasoning that produces a date of the sixth of Sivan for the observance of Shavuot. Elements of that analysis are fixed by the biblical text and so there is less flexibility available in assigning a fixed date to it.

Dating the Shavuot Observance

Shavuot is to be observed fifty days after an event described in Leviticus 23:11 as the waving of a sheaf of barley from the first barley harvest of the year. From that day we are to count seven weeks of seven days and then observe the holiday on the following day, the fiftieth. The specification is unambiguous in the biblical account and there is little scope for interpreting the

duration differently.³ So, the variable element that the rabbis had to work with was the date the counting begins.

The issue is immediately obvious. If the duration is fixed and our aim is to show that the required observance is to be on a fixed date, then the counting must also begin on a fixed date. But how can we assign a fixed date to a harvest, which will inevitably vary from year to year and place to place. This is the NRSV translation of the text prescribing the beginning of the counting:

And from the day after the sabbath, from the day on which you bring the sheaf of the elevation offering, you shall count off seven weeks; they shall be complete. You shall count until the day after the seventh sabbath, fifty days; then you shall present an offering of new grain to the Lord.” (Lev 23:15-16)

The text seems to define the beginning of the period in two ways. There is just enough ambiguity to allow a choice between “the day after the sabbath” or the day of the elevation offering. The rabbis chose to work with the day after the sabbath. The question then is, what sabbath is that? Or, more accurately, what does “sabbath” mean in that context?

William Propp, in his commentary on Exodus, analyzes five different answers that have traditionally been proposed to that question.⁴ Jacob Milgrom, in his commentary on Leviticus, analyzes four interpretations, which he describes as giving rise “to arguably the most long-lasting schism in the history of the Jewish people.”⁵ That is a very strong statement, but it reflects the level of tension in the community over these issues. The arguments analyzed by Propp and Milgrom are fascinating, but we do not need to review the detail: we can jump to the conclusion.

³ There is an opposing opinion that holds that the duration is fifty-one days. Those who hold that view must also accept the seventh of Sivan as the “correct” date of the event.

⁴ William H. C. Propp. Exodus 1–18. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary. AB Vol 2. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 430-432

⁵ Jacob Milgrom. Leviticus 23–27: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary. AB Vol. 3b. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 2056-2063

In the context of this requirement, “the sabbath” cannot be allowed to have its typical meaning. It cannot refer to the seventh day of the week, because there is no weekly sabbath that will always be on the same date, and we need a fixed beginning date for our counting period. Nor can it be the sabbath that falls within the festival of unleavened bread, for the same reason. We cannot define it as the seventh day of the festival of unleavened bread because, as we will see below, that would put the indicated date after any likely date of the Sinai event. The sabbath, therefore, must have another meaning in this context.

The rabbis found the solution by generalizing the term “sabbath” to denote any day of required rest. In that sense, every holiday on which work is prohibited would be considered “a sabbath” regardless of the day of the week on which it happened to fall. We have the example of Yom Kippur, which is known as “the sabbath of sabbaths,” for instance, to validate the idea. That would allow Passover, with its fixed date, to be considered a “sabbath.” And, if we interpret “the day after the sabbath” to mean the day after Passover, we can then define a fixed date for Shavuot. If we start counting our fifty days from (and including) the sixteenth of Nisan; which is the day after Passover); we find that Shavuot then falls on the sixth of Sivan; the sixth day of the third month of the year. And, as we see below, that is a date that the rabbis could work with.

Dating the Sinai Event

Exodus 12 tells us that the exodus event occurred in the middle of first month of the year. The Passover sacrifice was offered on the night of the fourteenth (Exod 12:6) and Israelites left Egypt on the next day: clearly, the *middle* of the first month. Exodus 19:1 tells us that they entered Sinai and camped at the foot of the mountain *בחדש השלישי*, *ba'chodesh ha'sblishi*. The plain sense of that Hebrew phrase is “in the third month ...” The verse continues, “... after the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day, they came into the wilderness of Sinai.” So, they arrived

sometime in the third month after they left, which would put their arrival in the last half of the month of Sivan (the third month), or the first half of the month of Tammuz (the fourth month). But, neither of those accomplishes the rabbinic purpose. A different reading was required. Four interpretive steps are needed to arrive at the desired conclusion.

First, the term *ba'chodesh* was understood to mean “on the new moon” rather than “in the month.” This defines the day as the being the first day of a month: i.e., a new moon. The word *chodesh* is a form of the word meaning “new” and later usage does support an understanding of *chodesh* as “new moon” as well as “month.” But that is not how the word is used in the Pentateuch. There are twenty-three instances in the Hebrew Pentateuch in which the word *chodesh* is associated with the preposition represented by the letter *bet*. In twenty-two of those cases the reference is to a specific numbered month as in Genesis 7:11 *ba'chodesh ha'sheni*, meaning “in the second month”; to a specific named month as in Exodus 13:4 *ba'chodesh ha'aviv*, meaning “in the month of Aviv”; or, to a specific antecedent statement in which the month is numbered or named, as in Exodus 13:5 *ba'chodesh ha'zeh*, meaning “in this month” referring to the month identified in the prior verse. There are two examples in the Pentateuch in which the day of the new moon is specified. In both Numbers 10:10 and 28:11, the text uses the combination of *rosh* and *chodesh* to make its intent understood. If it were intended that Exodus 19:1 refer to a new moon, we would expect the text to use a form of that combination of words: i.e., *rosh* and *chodesh*, to convey its intent. It does not. Only in Exodus 19:1 is *ba'chodesh* understood to mean “on the new moon.” That is an extraordinary understanding adopted for an extraordinary and specific purpose. It was key to the rabbinic agenda.

Second, the reading is not understood to mean “on the third new moon *after* the Israelites had gone out ...” It was interpreted to mean, “on the third new moon *of the year* (which, parenthetically, happens to be) ... after the Israelites had gone out.” That means our reference point

in dating the event is pulled back from the middle of the first month to the beginning of the first month. Those two interpretive steps allow the understanding that the Israelites arrived at Sinai on the first day of the month of Sivan, only a month and a half after leaving Egypt.

Third, it is proposed that there was a three-day period of preparatory activity before Moses's first meeting with God, during which time the camp was set up. The idea that some time passed before Moses was first called up the mountain is reasonable. The determination that it was three days seems designed to make the numbers work. That takes us to the third of Sivan.

Fourth, Exodus 19:10–11 tells us that, in their initial encounter, God told Moses to instruct the people to be ready “on the third day,” meaning the third day from the instruction. So, it is concluded that the Sinai revelation and covenant event occurred on the sixth day of the Hebrew month of Sivan, which coincides with the date derived above for the Shavuot observance. That might not be an easy interpretive approach to defend, but it can be explained. And now the Sinai event and the Shavuot observance coincide!

Conclusion

In that way a new rabbinically sanctioned conclusion was reached that supports the observance of Shavuot even without a first fruits requirement. That importantly freed the holiday from its connection to the land and to an agricultural society. It could be observed anywhere. And it established the connection between the Sinai event and Shavuot that was previously unavailable.

The approach taken by the rabbis to reach the desired conclusion is creative. It bends rules of grammar and bypasses the most straightforward approaches to understanding the text. On the other hand, it is hard to argue against a formal observance of the Sinai event and covenant. The importance of that event and of the law only increased with the fall of the Second Temple, and the rabbis were rebuilding a Judaism for the post-temple period. A path to the goal was found and the

goal was a worthy one. It is important to understand, though, that the root of the problem the rabbis struggled to solve was in the controversy over the calendar. For the authors of apocalypse and for the sectarian community of the late Second Temple era, whose calendar had 364-days, the problem that vexed the rabbinic authorities did not exist. For them, Shavuot and the Sinai event occur not on the sixth of Sivan but on the fifteenth.

The fact that Shavuot was marked with the unusual Hidden Bones phrase sometime in the second century BCE strongly suggests that the person responsible for the marking held to the 364-day calendar of Jewish apocalypse.

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