

Covenant and Pentecost

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The festival of weeks is a minor topic in the Old Testament but a major one in subsequent Jewish and Christian reflection. I wish to explore what the Old Testament has to say about the holiday and then look at developments connected with it in the *Book of Jubilees*, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Acts of the Apostles. Understanding how some early Christians dealt with the festival of weeks (Pentecost in Greek) will serve as a reminder of how deeply early Christianity was indebted to its mother religion—both to its scriptural base and to subsequent reflection on it.

The Festival of Weeks in the Old Testament¹

שבועות (*šābūtôt*), or the festival of weeks, is one of the three holidays when males were commanded to go to the sanctuary for sacrifice; the other two pilgrimage festivals were unleavened bread (its dates are the first month, from the fifteenth through the twenty-first = 1/15-21) and booths/tabernacles (7/15-21 or 22). Because it is a pilgrimage festival, the festival of weeks (hereafter weeks) seems to be an important occasion, but, unlike the other two pilgrimage holidays, it receives no specific date in the Pentateuch. Exodus 23:16 says: “You shall observe the festival of harvest, of the first fruits of your labor, of what you sow in the field.”² The only clue about when it was observed comes from the context where this *harvest* festival falls between the time of unleavened bread, mentioned in 23:15, and the “festival of ingathering at the end of the year” in 23:16. Exodus 34:22 is the first passage that assigns the festival its familiar name and identifies the harvest with which it was associated: “You shall observe the festival of weeks, the first fruits of wheat harvest.”³

¹For a survey, see VanderKam, “Weeks, Festival of,” *ABD* 6.895-97.

²Bible quotations are from the NRSV.

³For the two passages from Exodus, see Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus*, vol. 3 (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 262-69. He maintains that the legislation in Exodus 23 is older than that in Exodus 34, agreeing on this point with Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 194-97.

We read more about the festival in Deuteronomy 16:9-12 and Leviticus 23:15-16, which explain how to determine its date. Deuteronomy stipulates, “[y]ou shall count seven weeks; begin to count the seven weeks from the time the sickle is first put to the standing grain. Then you shall keep the festival of weeks for the Lord your God” (16:9-10). Leviticus 23 is more specific: “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” (vv. 15-16). The time when the fifty-day count begins—bringing “the sheaf of the elevation offering”—seems to be a day soon after Passover (23:9-11, 15), but Leviticus gives no date for it either. From all this we can say that the festival of weeks occurred in the third month but can be no more specific than that.

Naturally, the Torah’s failure to offer a precise date for the holiday did not go unnoticed among ancient exegetes who noticed anything unusual in the scriptural text. As a result, disputes arose about when weeks was to be celebrated. The source of the controversy was the statement in Leviticus 23:15 that the fifty-day period leading to the festival of weeks was to begin “from the day after the sabbath, you shall count off seven weeks.” The problematic word here was *Sabbath*, which could have at least two meanings. One was, of course, the weekly Sabbath. If the word were read in this sense, the festival of weeks would always fall on a Sunday. The problem with this reading was that the text did not say which Sabbath day after Passover was the one intended. One Jewish tradition (in *Jubilees* and the Dead Sea Scrolls), as we will see, interpreted Leviticus 23:15 as pointing to the first Sabbath day after the eight days of Passover and the festival of unleavened bread (hence, after 1/14-21). A second exegetical possibility was to read *Sabbath* in the sense of *festival*. This is not the first meaning of the term that comes to mind, but it is attested in the Bible. A clear example occurs in the legislation for the Day of Atonement, which the biblical calendars date to the tenth day of the seventh month, whatever day of the week that may be. Leviticus calls it “a sabbath of complete rest” (23:32; see also v. 33). If we understand the law about the festival of weeks in this sense, the word *Sabbath* could refer to the first day of the festival of unleavened bread (the first holiday after Passover [see Josh 5:11]) or the last day of the same festival (the two most sacred days of the seven-day celebration are marked by special assemblies [Lev. 23:7-8]). The fifty-day period would then begin from either 1/16 (= the rabbinic option) or 1/22.⁴

⁴For convenient summaries of the debate and references to the primary texts, see Robert H. Charles, *The Book of Jubilees or the Little Genesis* (London: Black, 1902), 106-7 n; M. D. Herr, “The Calendar” in *The Jewish People in the First Century*, 2 vols., ed. Shemuel Safrai and Menachem Stern, *Compendia rerum iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum*, 1 (Assen: van Gorcum, 1976), 1.858-60; and Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus*, vol. 3, Anchor Bible 3B (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 2056-63.

Outside the legislative sections, the festival of weeks is most inconspicuous in the Old Testament. Its name occurs only in 2 Chronicles 8:13 in a list of the three annual holidays. It may be implied in 2 Chronicles 15:10-15, where a covenant is made and sealed with an oath (vv. 12, 14-15). The use of the term *oath* (השבעה [v. 15]) could be pointing to the festival of weeks (הג השבעה) in this context of the third month.⁵ The festival of weeks surprisingly is omitted from the list of holidays in Ezekiel 45:18-25.

The Festival of Weeks in *Jubilees* and the Dead Sea Scrolls

The issue of when the festival of weeks was celebrated may be of little interest now, but it is worth noting because it plays a role in the developing meaning of the festival in later times. In the *Book of Jubilees*, a Hebrew work written in approximately 160-150 B.C.E.,⁶ and the Dead Sea Scrolls, which belong in the same tradition as *Jubilees*, the festival of weeks becomes the central holiday in the year.

Jubilees shows how the festival of weeks became closely tied with the covenant made at Mt. Sinai and recounted in Exodus 19-24. As the author rewrites the stories from Genesis 1 to Exodus 19, he makes reference to the festival of weeks in a series of significant passages. The simple fact that he even mentions it is important because Genesis never names the holiday; it is revealed to Moses after the point where *Jubilees* ends its reproduction of the biblical story. The main point about the holiday in *Jubilees* is that the author associates it with the single covenant that God made and renewed on different occasions.

The first passage where the writer couples weeks and the covenant is *Jubilees* 6:17-19. Here, the eternal covenant with Noah (Genesis 9) is under consideration. In *Jubilees*' chronology of the flood, the earth became dry on 2/17, and on 2/27 all the animals on the ark emerged (5:31-32). Noah then walked off the craft on 3/1 "and built an altar" (6:1; cf. Gen. 8:19). His sacrifice serves as a transition to the covenant between God and himself. After the story about the covenant ends, the angel of the presence who is revealing the contents of *Jubilees* to Moses on Mt. Sinai says:

it has been ordained and written on the heavenly tablets that they should celebrate the festival of weeks during this month—once a year—to renew the covenant each and every year. This entire festival had been celebrated in heaven from the time of creation until the lifetime of Noah. . . Then Noah and his sons kept it. . . until Noah's death. . . Abraham alone kept (it), and his sons Isaac and Jacob [see 44:4] kept it until your [= Moss's] lifetime.

⁵See, for example, Sara Japhet, *First and Second Chronicles: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 724-25; Hugh G. M. Williamson, *First and Second Chronicles*, The New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 270.

⁶See VanderKam, *Textual and Historical Studies in the Book of Jubilees*, Harvard Semitic Monographs, 14 (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977), 207-85.

During your lifetime the Israelites had forgotten (it) until I renewed (it) for them at this mountain [= Sinai].⁷

The initial biblical reference to the holiday is embedded in the stories about the laws revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai, but the writer of *Jubilees* antedates the celebration of the festival of weeks to the time of creation, and he makes Noah, not Moses, the first scriptural worthy to keep it. The pericope also highlights the festival by relating it not only to Noah but also to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses—the great heroes of the biblical story.

As it recounts the biblical story, *Jubilees* repeatedly dates covenants to the festival of weeks. Chapter 14 assigns to it the covenant of the pieces made with Abram in Genesis 15, and chapter 15 ties the eternal covenant of Genesis 17 to the festival of weeks. It also claims that Isaac was born “in the third month; in the middle of the month [= 3/15], on the day that the Lord had told Abraham—on the festival of the firstfruits of the harvest” (16:13).⁸ In *Jubilees*, Abraham dies on the festival of weeks (22:1), Jacob’s son Judah was born on it (28:15), and Jacob and Laban concluded their treaty on 3/15 (29:7).

Jubilees 1 shows that the entire book must be understood in the context of the festival of weeks. *Jubilees* 1:1 says: “During the first year of the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt, in the third month—on the sixteenth of the month—the Lord said to Moses: ‘Come up to me on the mountain. I will give you the two stone tablets of the law and the commandments which I have written so that you may teach them’.” *Jubilees*’ date for weeks is 3/15; from this it follows that the revelation of the book’s contents to Moses took place on the day after the festival (cf. Ex. 24:4). Our author interpreted the curiously imprecise date as being “in the third month of the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt, on that very day” in Exodus 19:1 by resorting to the numerical value of letters in the word הח (on *that* very day). It seems meaningless in a context that fails to specify a day, but by adding ז (= 7) + ה (= 5) he was able to determine that the time intended was the twelfth day. Three days of preparation then followed so that the covenant was made on 3/15, that is, on the festival of weeks. The sequence in the Prologue and *Jubilees* 1:1-4 passages based on Exodus 24:12-18,⁹ shows that the

⁷The translations of *Jubilees* are from VanderKam, *The Book of Jubilees*, 2 vols., Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 510-11, Scriptorum Aethiopicum 87-88 (Leuven: Peeters, 1989), vol. 2.

⁸The writer deduced the date from evidence in Genesis. The two triggers were the promise that Abraham’s son would be born on the בְּזֶמְרָן (“[at this] season,” Gen 17:21; 18:14; 21:2) and the prediction that the blessed event would occur “in due season” (בְּזֶמְרָן [literally: at a living time, that is, when things start to grow], 18:10, 14), which the author of *Jubilees* understood to be referring to a point early in the agricultural cycle. See VanderKam, “The Temple Scroll and the Book of Jubilees” in *Temple Scroll Studies: Papers Presented at the International Symposium on the Temple Scroll. Manchester, December 1987*, ed. George J. Brooke, Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha: Supplementary Series, 7 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 220.

⁹Jacques T. A., and G. M. van Ruiten, “The Rewriting of Exodus 24:12-18 in Jubilees 1:1-4,” *Bibische Notizen* 79 (1995): 25-29.

covenantal ceremonies took place on the festival of weeks, the very date on which earlier enactments of the agreement were made. For *Jubilees*, weeks was a festival of covenant making and covenant renewal (cf. 6:17, “to renew the covenant each and every year”). The holiday is not in the first instance identified with the act of giving the Torah; covenant is the primary association for the holiday in *Jubilees*.¹⁰

This same association between the festival of weeks and covenantal renewal surfaces in the Qumran texts.¹¹ The holiday is mentioned in some of the calendrical texts, which indicate the date on which the authors observed it. They prove that weeks was celebrated on 3/15.¹²

In some Qumran texts, as in *Jubilees*, the festival of weeks appears to be the occasion for a yearly covenantal ceremony. The Rule of the Community refers to an annual ceremony at which candidates for admission entered the group and those who were already members apparently renewed their commitment (1QS 1.16-3.12). In the ceremony, the priests recite the benefits that God has given to Israel, while the Levites curse the adherents of Belial. Those entering the covenant respond by saying “amen, amen.” The text adds: “Thus shall they do, year by year, for as long as the dominion of Belial endures.” (1QS 2:19)¹³ We do not learn from the Rule of the Community when the covenantal ceremony was to occur, but two copies of the Damascus Document from cave 4—4QD^a (4Q266) 11 16-18 = 4QD^c (4Q270) 7 ii 11-12—probably supply the date. “All [the inhabitants of] the camps shall congregate in the third month and curse those who turn right [or left from the] Law” (4QD^a [4Q266] 11 16-18).¹⁴ If the

¹⁰See also Georg Kretschmar, “Himmelfahrt und Pfingsten,” *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 66 (1954-55): 224-27; Jean Potin, *La fête juive de la pentecôte: Études des textes liturgiques*, 2 vols., *Lectio Divina* 65-65a (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1971), 1.123-31.

¹¹For an earlier study of the topic, written before the cave 4 texts were available, see B. Noack, “The Day of Pentecost in Jubilees, Qumran, and Acts,” *Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute* 1 (1962): 73-95. For a more recent survey of the passages, see VanderKam, “Shavuot,” *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 2 vols., ed. Lawrence Schiffman and James VanderKam (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 871-72.

¹²For the calendrical documents, see Ben Z. Wacholder and Martin G. Abegg, *A Preliminary Edition of the Unpublished Dead Sea Scrolls: The Hebrew and Aramaic Texts from Cave 4*, fascicle 1 (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1991), 60-101. The official edition has now appeared in print: Shemaryahu Talmon, Jonathan Ben-Dov, and Uwe Glessmer, *Qumran Cave 4 XVI: Calendrical Texts*, Discoveries in the Judaean Desert, 21 (Oxford: Clarendon, 2001).

¹³The translation is from Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 5th ed. (New York: Allen Lane, Penguin Press, 1997). Sariana Metso (*The Textual Development of the Qumran Community Rule*, Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah, 21 [Leiden: Brill, 1997]) maintains that this part of the text was not in the earliest form of the Rule; nevertheless, its presence in 1QS guarantees that it dates from no later than 100-75 B.C.E., the date of the manuscript.

¹⁴The translation is from Joseph M. Baumgarten, *Qumran Cave 4 XIII: The Damascus Document* (4Q266-273), Discoveries in the Judaean Desert, 18 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 77.

two constitutional texts are talking about the same occasion,¹⁵ the Qumran fellowship and other groups in the wider Essene movement renewed the covenant on the same holiday as the one to which *Jubilees* assigns the great biblical covenants.

The Qumran community, which probably renewed the Sinai covenant annually on the festival of weeks, organized itself like the nation of Israel at Mt. Sinai. We know that in traditional Jewish readings of Exodus 19 and 24, Israel was considered an ideal society as it stood before the mountain to enter into covenant with its Lord. The text itself and some playful exegetical moves were associated with this understanding of the situation.

The Bible gives the impetus for picturing Israel as an ideal people when they encamped at Mt. Sinai and received the Torah. Upon being presented with the Lord's words by Moses, "[t]he people all answered as one: 'Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do'" (Ex. 19:8). There, the nation, who are to be "my treasured possession out of all the peoples" (19:5), consecrated themselves and washed their clothes to prepare for the Lord's appearance (19:10-15). At the end of the section, after the ten commandments and the covenantal code had been revealed to Moses (Ex. 20-23), the description of the ratification ceremony includes these words: "and all the people answered with one voice, and said, 'All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do'" (24:3; cf. v. 7 where they add that they will be obedient). Some early commentators indicate that Israel wore white clothes. Philo, for example, claims that they not only abstained from intercourse (Ex. 19:15) but also from all pleasures other than the ones necessary for life. After mentioning that they had washed themselves and their clothes for three days, he writes: "So in the whitest of raiment they stood on tiptoe with ears pricked up in obedience to the warning of Moses to prepare themselves" (*Dec.* 45). Josephus claims that they ate more sumptuously than they normally did and that all—men, women, and children—wore splendid clothing (*Ant.* 3.5, 1 [fl78]).¹⁶

¹⁵Józef T. Milik has supported the identification ("Milki-sedeq et Milki-reša' dans les anciens écrits juifs et chrétiens," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 23 [1972]: 135-36), but Baumgarten thinks it might have preceded Pentecost (p. 78).

¹⁶For a summary of homiletical developments of the theme, see Mann, *The Bible as Read and Preached*, vol. 1. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1940), 456-59. He mentions the theme that the Torah heals all bodily ailments and writes: "At the giving of the Law all Jews, afflicted in their bodies as a result of the hard labor in Egypt, were healed by the ministering angels. 'And all the people saw the lightnings' (Ex. 20.18), is evidence for there not being among them any blind; they said 'we shall do and hear' (Ex. 24.7), ergo there were none among them of mutilated hands or being deaf; 'and they stood at the bottom of the mount' (Ex. 19.17), hence there were no lame among them. Thus, God renewed Israel physically, and accordingly in the initial v. of S[eder] (Ex. 19.1) there is employed the expression בְּיָדָם (instead of בִּידָהּ) to denote this renewal (חֲדָשׁ). (456-57) See also *Mekhilta* Bahodesh 3.37-40.

An important set of passages in this regard is found in *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer* 41. In harmony with other treatments of the biblical material, it contrasts the strife that had marked Israelite conduct before they arrived at Sinai and the bliss that characterized their life together once they had come to the mountain.¹⁷ This conclusion is drawn from Exodus 19:2 where, in the phrase “Israel camped there in front of the mountain,” the verb is in the singular (unlike the plurals of the preceding verses), as if Israel were unified, a single entity:

until they all came to Mount Sinai, and they all encamped opposite the mountain, like one man with one heart, as it is said, “And there Israel encamped before the mount.” The Holy One, blessed be He, spake to them: Will ye receive for yourselves the Torah? Whilst the Torah had not yet been heard they said to Him: We will keep and observe all the precepts which are in the Torah, as it is said, “And they said, All that the Lord hath spoken we will do, and be obedient . . .”¹⁸

The text notes that both women and men received the Torah, although they were separated from one another.¹⁹

The author also deals with the holiness of the people and explains its meaning: “What was the sanctity of Israel in the wilderness? There were no uncircumcised people in their midst; the manna descended from heaven for them; they drank water out of the Well; clouds of glory surrounded them.”²⁰ The unique status of those who experienced the revelation is clarified by R. Phineas:

All that generation who heard the voice of the Holy One, blessed be He, on Mount Sinai, were worthy to be like the ministering angels, so that insects had no power over them. They did not experience pollution in their lifetime, and at their death neither worm nor insect prevailed over them. Happy were they in this world and happy will they be in the world to come, and concerning them the Scripture says, “Happy is the people, that is in such a case” (Ps. cxliv.15).²¹

¹⁷There is a textual problem at this point. The Hebrew actually reads “smoothness,” not “strife,” but it is possible that a confusion of two very similar words is involved. See Gerald Friedlander, *Pirkê de Rabbi Eliezer* (New York: Hermon, 1970), 320 n. 7. As he comments, the *Mekhilta* and Lev. Rab. 9:9 support reading “strife” in this context.

¹⁸The translation is from Friedlander, *ibid.*, 321. See also *Mekhilta* Bahodesh 1.108-11.

¹⁹This is a midrashic understanding of the parallel expressions “the house of Jacob” and “the Israelites” (literally: the sons of Israel) in Exodus 19:3. The former was taken to refer to the women, the latter to the men. See *Mekhilta* Bahodesh 2.6-11.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 323.

²¹*Ibid.*, 327.

Some Targums to Exodus 20:18c say that the people not only responded obediently but also prayed (cf. Acts 1:14; 2:42).²²

One other point should be added to this interpretive tradition. According to the Rule of the Community, the residents of Qumran practiced a community of goods. The person who wished to join the group went through a several year-long process of training and testing. At some point in his training his goods were given to the community but not used by it; when he became a full member, all of his property was merged with that of the community (1QS 6:19-22). This is a practice that is also related to the understanding of Israel as an ideal society at Mt. Sinai and is more specifically an interpretation of Deuteronomy 6:5, part of the Deuteronomic reflection on the Sinai covenant.

1QS 1:11-12

All those who freely devote
themselves
to His truth shall bring all their
knowledge,
powers and possessions into the
Community of God.

Deuteronomy 6:5

You shall love the Lord your God with
all
your heart, and with all your soul, and
with
all your might.

The passage from the Rule, despite its differences from Deuteronomy 6:5 in wording, offers an interpretation of the three key words in it: *heart* is understood to mean “knowledge,” *soul* is taken as “powers,” and *might*, in line with a more widely attested exegesis, is read as “possessions.” This latter term is so understood in Tg. Ps-J. and Tg. Onq. Deut 6:5. Contributing possessions to the community was taken as a requirement of Deuteronomy 6:5 and is obviously related to the theme of an ideal community at Sinai.²³

The Festival of Weeks and Acts 2

With the information supplied in the previous sections, we may turn to the New Testament evidence regarding the festival of weeks or Pentecost.²⁴ Because all of the first followers of Jesus were Jewish, it comes as no surprise that they would celebrate a holiday mandated in the Scriptures, and we may assume that

²²See Potin, *La fête juive*, 1.216-17; 2.69 where the pertinent texts of the Geniza version of the Palestinian Targum and ms. 110 of the Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris are given. For the entire theme of Israel as a holy nation, see 1.207-17, 305-7. The *Mekhilta*, among other texts, claims that no Israelite suffered from bodily defects at that time and supplies scriptural warrant for the assertion (Bahodesh 9.14-22).

²³See Catherine Murphy, *Wealth in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in the Qumran Community*, Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah, 40 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 120-30.

²⁴For Pentecost in the New Testament, see Joseph Fitzmyer, “The Ascension of Christ and Pentecost,” in his book *To Advance the Gospel: New Testament Studies*, The Biblical Resource Series, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 277-87 (the essay was originally published in *Theological Studies* 45 [1984] 409-40).

they observed it in the manner acceptable at their time. The most famous passage about the holiday is, of course, Acts 2, which is dated to the Day of Pentecost (2:1), the day for the miraculous gift of the Spirit.

Relation with Old Testament Information about the Festival of Weeks

On a superficial level, little in Acts 2 reminds one of the biblical legislation for the festival of weeks or of the covenantal associations with it in the *Jubilees*-Qumran tradition. Differences include the fact that Acts 2 says nothing about the first fruits of the wheat harvest, and the writer gives no indication of his view on calculating the date for the holiday. Then, too, we do not read about the sacrifices on it or the joy connected with it. Furthermore, one can hardly say that Acts 2 uses the language of covenant making and covenant renewal, although there seems to be a general similarity between Pentecost as the birth of the church (the new people of God) and the covenant at Sinai as the beginning of Israel as God's chosen nation. The list of places from which the audience came in Acts 2:8-11 reflects the fact that the pilgrimage festival was observed by Jews of the various Diasporas. Beyond this, there is little in Acts 2 that strikes the reader as arising from what the Old Testament says about the festival of weeks.

Highlights of the Account in Acts 2

For our purposes, we should highlight four features in the Acts 2 story.

First, the author states that when "the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place" (2:1). The entire group numbered about 120 people (1:15), a multiple of the suggestive twelve. The topic treated immediately before Acts 2 (1:15-26) is the selection of Matthias to fill out the number of apostles to twelve, and those were the leaders of the band of 120 believers. The place where they gathered is not named, but it is called a "house" in v. 2. The house has often been understood to be the temple, but the word is too vague to secure the point.²⁵

Second, the giving of the unseen Spirit is marked by visible signs: "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 of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability" (2:2-4).

Third, Peter's apology for the group involved the use of several passages from the Old Testament that supported his interpretation of the event. The passages that he cited are Joel 2:28-32, which he relates to the last days (2:17-21);

²⁵See, for example, Frederick F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 114. He thinks that the phrase "where they were sitting" in v. 2 rules out identification of the place with the temple.

Psalm 16:8-11 (2:25-28; Ps 16:10 is repeated in v. 31); Psalm 132:11 (cf. 2 Sam 7:12-13 in v. 30); and Psalm 110:1 (vv. 34-35).

Fourth, the result of the event and proclamation was that the small band of 120 grew dramatically as 3000 joined them (v. 41). We learn that the entire group “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (v. 42). Their fellowship was so ideal that “[a]ll who believed were together and had all things in common” (v. 44).

Acts 2 in Its Setting

Despite appearances, there is good reason for thinking that Luke was informed about and influenced by the associations that Pentecost had attracted by the time he compiled his account of the beginning of the church. In order to see this, one must take a wider look at the chapter within its context.

Acts 1-2

Acts 1 forms an essential part of the context for the second chapter. It not only has a number of references to the Holy Spirit (vv. 2, 5, 8, 16) but its story about Jesus’ ascension reminds the biblically literate reader of episodes from the life of Moses. For example, Acts 1:3 refers to the forty days between the Resurrection and the Ascension; that number recalls several time-spans in Moses’ career, including his two stays atop Mt. Sinai. Also, the account of the Ascension, whether the one in Luke 24 or the one in Acts 1, contains other reminders. We learn that the Ascension took place on a mountain (Acts 1:11-12; Luke 24:50 places it at Bethany, which is on the Mt. of Olives) and that a cloud hid Jesus from the sight of the disciples who were following his upward flight (1:9, 11). His ascent had been preceded by the disciples’ question: “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” (v. 6). All of these motifs are attested in the Sinai stories. There, “Moses went up to God” (Ex. 19:3; cf. v. 20; 24:1-2). Moreover, a cloud plays a role in the Sinai stories, as the Lord comes down on the mountain in a thick cloud (19:16), and Moses is said to have entered the cloud during his ascent (24:15-18). One wonders also whether the disciples’ question about restoring the kingdom is meant to remind the reader of the Lord’s words at Sinai: “Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (19:5b-6a). Is the command to the disciples to wait in Jerusalem (Acts 1:4; Luke 24:49) meant to recall (or perhaps serve as a contrast to) Moses’ order to the elders to wait for him and Joshua until they returned to them (Ex. 24:14)? Whatever the answers to these questions, it is probably not accidental that the last part of Acts 1 is concerned with restoring the disciple band to the number twelve with the choice of Matthias, just as the twelve tribes were a party to the covenant in Exodus 24: “He rose early in the

morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up twelve pillars, corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel” (24:4).²⁶

So, the reader of Luke-Acts might be expected, since Jesus’ parting words in the gospel pointed clearly to the Scriptures, to have Moses and Mt. Sinai in mind as he turned his attention to the Pentecost story in Acts 2.²⁷ In *Jubilees*, we find an inseparable bond between Moss’s ascent, covenant renewal, and the festival of weeks. In Acts 1-2, we find a similarly close tie between ascent and Pentecost when the Spirit was given. These are interesting parallels, but the similarities extend only so far; the difference lies in the theme of covenant renewal in *Jubilees* and the giving of the Spirit in Acts.

Acts 2 in Its Jewish Setting

If we return to the texts that preserve Jewish reflections on the Sinai stories, we find interesting parallels to features of Acts 2.

Tongues as of Fire and Languages:²⁸

Commentators have often adduced texts that, in connection with Exodus 19-24, remind one of themes from Acts 2 such as the firelike tongues associated with the languages of the audience. Luke writes about “tongues [γλῶσσαι], as of fire” (2:3), and he says that the recipients of the Spirit spoke in other languages (v. 4 [γλῶσσαις]). The combination of fiery tongues and languages²⁹ has been traced to the midrashic traditions that grew around Exodus 19:16: “On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled.” The word קול (translated as “thunder”) was understood, not as “thunder,” which the context requires, but as “voices,” a standard meaning of the term in other contexts. If, however, Exodus 19:16³⁰ were read as *voices*, the voices in question would seem to be God’s speech. The verse could also be related to Exodus 20:18 (“When all the people witnessed [literally: saw] the thunder קול and lightning”) and to the statements about the Lord’s voice (קול) in Psalm 29, which became a lectionary psalm for the fes-

²⁶Cf. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, AB, 31 (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 221, 232. As he notes, the meaning of the episode in Acts 1:21-26 is related to Acts 2: It allows the twelve apostles to confront the twelve tribes of Israel at Pentecost.

²⁷For a list of verbal parallels between Exodus 19 and 24, on the one hand, and Acts 2, on the other, see Jacques Dupont, “The First Christian Pentecost,” in *The Salvation of the Gentiles*, trans. John R. Keating (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 1979), 35-59.

²⁸For this section, see Potin, *La fête juive*, 1.231-59.

²⁹It is perhaps worth noting that both revelations—of the divine voice at Sinai and of the Spirit in Acts 2—happened in the morning (Ex. 19:16; Acts 2:15; see Potin, *ibid.*, 304).

³⁰Luke’s term ἦχος in Acts 2:2 is related to the verb ἤχευε in LXX Exodus 19:16 (Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 238).

tival of weeks. There, the voice of the Lord is mentioned and praised seven times, and one of these seven references reads: “The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire” (29:7). Commentators inferred from such passages that the Lord’s words came in seven voices and were visible because they were accompanied by fire.³¹ The Lord does, of course, appear in fire at Sinai, as Exodus 19:18, 24:17, and Deuteronomy 4:11 indicate; moreover, Exodus 20:18 refers to lightning (לפידים).

The sources for these exegetical traditions are much later in date than Luke-Acts, but Philo (ca. 20 B.C.E.-50 C.E.), who wrote before Luke-Acts, seems to know similar interpretations of the biblical text. In his *Decalogue*, he alludes to the voice of the Lord that the people “saw” and tries to explain what this might mean. In §33, he writes that God, “giving shape and tension to the air and changing it to flaming fire, sounded forth like the breath through a trumpet an articulate voice so loud that it appeared to be equally audible to the farthest as well as the nearest.” Later in §§46-47, he says:

Then from the midst of the fire that streamed from heaven there sounded forth to their utter amazement a voice, for the flame became articulate speech in the language familiar to the audience, and so clearly and distinctly were the words formed by it that they seemed to see rather than hear them. What I say is vouched for by the law in which it is written, “All the people saw the voice” [LXX Ex. 20:18], a phrase fraught with much meaning, for it is the case that the voice of men is audible, but the voice of God is truly visible. Why so? Because whatever God says is not words but deeds, which are judged by the eyes rather than the ears.³²

It is interesting, in connection with Acts 2, that Philo pictures a flame as becoming articulate speech and that the language was “familiar to the audience.”

Philo’s explanation of the voice from Sinai made visible by flames was not the only approach taken; another way of explicating the קָלָה of Exodus 19 was to take it as meaning “languages,” specifically the languages of Israel’s nearest neighbors or even the languages of all the nations on the earth.³³ The first option—the languages of Israel’s neighbors—involved relating the Exodus passages to other scriptural allusions to the divine appearance at Sinai.

The nations of the world were asked to accept the Torah, and this [was done] so as not to give them grounds for saying [to God], “If we had been offered [the Torah] then of course we would have accepted it upon our-

³¹For references, see Kretschmar, “Himmelfahrt und Pfingsten,” 238-39. *Mekhilta* Bahodesh 4.3-4 says, “the Torah is fire, was given from the midst of fire, and is comparable to fire” (Jacob Z. Lauterbach, *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, vol. 2 [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1949]).

³²The translation is from Francis H. Colson, *Philo VII*, LCL (Cambridge: Harvard, 1937).

³³See, for some of the references, Otto Betz, “The Eschatological Interpretation of the Sinai-Tradition in Qumran and in the New Testament,” *Revue de Qumran* 6 (1967): 92-93.

selves.” So they *were* offered it and did not accept it upon themselves, for it says [with reference to the Sinai legislation], “The Lord came from Sinai and [earlier had] dawned from [Mt.] Seir [home of the Edomites] upon them, He shone forth from Mt. Paran [home of the Ishmaelites, Gen. 21:21], He proceeded from ten thousand holy ones, with **the fire of law** in His right hand to them. Yea, He favored peoples. . . .” [traditional Hebrew text of Deuteronomy 33:1-3].³⁴

The passage goes on to explain that the Edomites, Ishmaelites, and Moabites and Ammonites (as one group) rejected the Torah that prohibited the sins with which they were intimately associated; only the Israelites accepted it (Ex. 24:7) when it was offered to them. If the Torah was offered to the four nations, it follows that it was presented to them in their own languages.³⁵

The notion that the Torah was offered to the seventy nations of the world in their respective languages also required a combination of varied biblical passages. Genesis 10 provides a list of the seventy nations on the earth, and Psalm 68, which refers to Sinai several times and figures in various ancient treatments of the Sinai events, provided more information for clarifying the voices of Exodus 19 and 20. If the לָשׁוֹנוֹת were languages, then the term could be related to Psalm 68:12 (English 11)³⁶: “The Lord gives the command; great is the company of those who bore the tidings.” R. Yohanan, who is credited in several sources with a comment on the verse, is quoted in b.Shabb. 88b as saying: “What is meant by the verse [Ps 68:12 is quoted]—every single word that went forth from the Omnipotent was split up into seventy languages.” The same statement is attributed to R. Yohanan in Exod. Rab. 28:6 in connection with the revelation at Sinai. There, too, Psalm 68:12 is adduced.³⁷ In b.Shabb. 88b, his saying is followed by one from the school of R. Ishmael which brings Jeremiah 23:29 into the discussion: “Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?” “The School of R. Ishmael taught: *And like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces*: just as a hammer is divided into many sparks, so every single word that went forth from the Holy One, blessed be He, split up into seventy languages.”³⁸

So, we have in different Jewish sources these elaborations of the Sinai story in which the divine word takes fiery form and addresses the nations in their

³⁴This translation from the *Mekhilta Bahodesh 5*, is that of James L. Kugel, *The Bible as It Was* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1997), 411.

³⁵Potin, *La fête juive*, 1.256-57, where other references are given.

³⁶See Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 259, for a negative comment on whether Acts 2:33 alludes to Ps 68:19.

³⁷Potin, *La fête juive*, 1.252-53.

³⁸The two citations from b.Shabbat are from Harry Freedman, *The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Moed: Shabbath*, 2 vols. (London: Soncino, 1938), 2.419-20.

own languages. It is reasonable to conclude that Luke, in Acts 2, chose to express the gift of the Spirit through the symbols of fiery tongues, which enabled the apostles to speak the languages of their international audience of pilgrims in conscious dependence on Jewish ways of interpreting texts in the Sinai pericopes and the developed meaning of Pentecost/weeks.

The Scriptural Passages Used

While Acts 2 exhibits influence from Jewish traditions, the Old Testament passages cited in the chapter are not the ones that became the lectionary readings for the festival of weeks. We do not know whether there were set readings in the later first century C.E. or whether passages other than the ones that later became standard were used in synagogue services; but there simply is no agreement. M.Meg. 3.5 says that Deuteronomy 16:9-12 was the Torah passage for the festival of weeks. B.Meg. 31a adds that Habakkuk 3 was the haphtarah and that some considered Exodus 19 to be the Torah passage and Ezekiel 1 the haphtarah. However, t.Meg. 4.5 and j.Meg. 3.74b indicate that Exodus 19-20 was the lection. Also, the tractate Sopherim names Psalm 29 as the psalm for the festival.³⁹ The only similarity between the later Jewish lectionary practice and the contents of Acts 1-2 is that in the latter themes associated with Moses' ascent of a mountain and the revelation to him in Exodus 19-20 are echoed.

The Ideal Fellowship

Another aspect of the story in Acts 2—the nature of the community formed by the first Christians—may also be paralleled by Jewish understandings of the events at Sinai.⁴⁰ As we have seen, the Bible itself gave rise to the idea of imagining the situation as ideal when Israel encamped at Mt. Sinai and received the Torah. The Qumran community embodied those ideal features in its structure, and the church of Acts 2-4 seems to have done the same. They, too, had all things in common and lived a life characterized by prayer and obedience to the apostles' teaching, just as Israel had been unified and receptive to the revelation at the mountain.

Conclusions

Several conclusions for understanding Acts 2 follow from the evidence presented above.

First, Acts 2 offers little that reminds one of what the Old Testament says about the festival of weeks; Luke was influenced, however, by exegetical traditions that had grown around this festival in Jewish circles.

³⁹See Potin, *La fête juive*, 1.141-42. For a more detailed treatment, see Mann, *The Bible as Read and Preached in the Old Synagogue*, 1.453-55.

⁴⁰Betz ("The Eschatological Interpretation," 93-94) relates this feature to the Qumran community's understanding of its pure and celibate character.

The *Jubilees*-Qumran tradition shows that by the second century B.C.E. the festival of weeks was closely tied to the events at Mt. Sinai, especially the covenant between God and Israel. The festival of weeks was the date for making and remembering the biblical covenants and for renewing the Sinaitic covenant.

The description of Jesus' ascension in Acts 1 reminds one of Moses' ascent of Mt. Sinai before the covenant was made and the Torah given.

In the writings of Philo but far more extensively in later rabbinic sources, there are midrashic associations with Exodus 19-20 and 24 (the theophany and covenant of Sinai) that are similar to elements in Acts 2. The appearance of the invisible Spirit in fiery tongues that symbolized proclamation of God's mighty acts in the languages of the world reflects the widespread tradition that Israel saw the קָלִיִּם (voices), which were evident in fiery form and addressed to the seventy nations.

The ideal Christian fellowship in Acts 2:42-47 but also in Acts 1:14 seems to be modeled on the notion that Israel at Sinai was a harmonious nation that unanimously accepted the Torah and lacked the blemishes, social and physical, that otherwise characterized it.

Second, there are differences between the Sinai stories as understood in Jewish exegesis of Scripture and the story in Acts 1-2.

The heavenly gift is not the same: At Sinai it was the divine word, while in Acts 2, it was God's Spirit. It is at least clear that the word and Spirit are the comparable entities; and, though they are parallel in the stories, only Acts 2 has the Spirit, a unique element in the New Testament story.

The Old Testament passages quoted in Acts 2 are not the ones that became the lectionary readings in the synagogues on the festival of weeks. The only agreement is the fact that Acts 1-2, in evoking the Sinai stories, shows the influence of Exodus 19-20 as a lection for the day. Joel 2:28-32, which is prominent in Acts 2, did not become a synagogue reading on the festival.

In the midrashic retellings of the Sinai stories, the one who proclaims the word is the Lord himself, and he is the one who offers the Torah to the nations; in Acts 2 the apostles (and perhaps others) proclaim the message as empowered by the Spirit.⁴¹

In the Jewish exegetical traditions, the Torah was offered to the nations who rejected it; in Acts 2 the message was presented to Jewish people who lived among the nations (they are identified as coming from the known world) and many accepted it.

Not all of the elements in Acts 1-2 are reflections of midrashic developments around the Sinai chapters. There are unique elements in the New Testament account, and it is possible that other Old Testament passages, as they were later

⁴¹Potin, *La fête juive*, 1.311-12.

interpreted,⁴² contributed to the themes of Acts 1-2. But the evidence presented here shows that, in Acts 1-2, Luke was influenced by Jewish traditions about Mt. Sinai and the festival of weeks. The first Christian church, like the ancient people of Israel, was given birth by a stupendous act of revelation and was divinely outfitted for its task as an ideal society—one whose message, unlike that of ancient Israel, would be accepted throughout the world.

⁴²See, for example, the passage about Eldad and Medad in Num. 11:26-30. Some of the Targums say that the Holy Spirit rested on them as they prophesied about Joshua's succeeding Moses. See Martin McNamara, *The New Testament and the Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch*, Analecta Biblica, 27 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1966), 235.