

Resurrection on the Day of the Omer? Interpreting 1 Corinthians 15:20 in the Light of Leviticus 23:9–15 and Menahot 10:2–3

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Abstract

In 1 Corinthians 15:20 and 23, Paul calls Jesus “the first fruits of those who are asleep.” According to John, Jesus died on the Eve of Passover and was resurrected on the third day, which was the day of the Omer ritual, the ritual of the first fruits. There have been many attempts to prove that Paul alludes intentionally to the first fruit implicitly, remembering the chronology of Jesus’s last days. After a brief survey of the main questions and arguments in favour of the thesis, based on a passage in the Mishnah, this article attempts to draw attention to some new observations which could further strengthen this reading. Beyond the date, there are at least three additional motifs of the Omer ritual attested in the Mishnah which correspond to Pauline Christology: the beginning of the ritual at Passover Eve, the significance of the night during the ritual, and the importance of the ritual signalling a new season.

Key Terms

first fruit; day of the Omer; resurrection; Passover; day of Jesus’s death; Last Supper

1 Introduction

A few years ago, in the pages of this journal, Jakob Thiessen (2012) argued for the thesis that Paul makes a subtle allusion to the “offering of

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the first fruits of the barley harvest on 16th of Nisan” in 1 Cor 15:20 and 23, when he calls Jesus “the first fruits of those who are asleep.” This is not a new assumption; one can read it already in Bengel’s *Gnomon* (1742) and since then in various studies (e.g., Bunsen 1891, 85–95; Wenham 1979, 306; Humphreys 2011, 68–69; Hwang 2013, 104; White 2015, 117; Jochum 2021, 91). According to this view, Paul’s choice of words relies on the chronology of Jesus’s last days. However, this claim has several problems which make such a reading difficult. After a brief survey of the main questions and arguments, based on a Mishnah passage, I will attempt to draw attention to some new observations in favour of the thesis. Thus, this article offers a historical-critical reconstruction of the chronology of the Last Supper tradition according to the Gospels, Paul and other relevant sources.

First, it is important to emphasise, that in 1 Cor 15 Paul uses many metaphors, comparing the resurrection with the harvest and Jesus with the very first ripened corn. In the argument of Paul Jesus is the first person ever resurrected and faith in him can lead the believers to new life. In this way, Jesus is the first fruit, the paradigm, the foretaste of what is coming. A similar image occurs later when Paul in 1 Cor 15:35–37 illustrates the burial of the body by sowing a grain of wheat or some other seed.

However, the image of seeding and harvesting as a metaphor for a new life is not unique to Paul. We have numerous examples from Graeco-Roman myths.² For example, it is said of Adonis (*Schol. in Theocr. Id.* 3.48d):

Adonis, that is, the grain which is sown, passes six months in the ground after the sowing, and Aphrodite has him for six months, which is the mildness of the open air. And after that people harvest him.³

In this version of the myth, the annual resurrection of Adonis is compared with sowing and harvesting, as in 1 Cor 15. Of course, these parallels do not automatically mean the dependence of Paul’s *theologoumena* on these myths. They only show that these motifs were well-known and widespread at the time of the NT writings. It is more likely that Paul draws the image of the sprouting and harvested seed primarily from the world of agriculture (Cook 2020). If so, we can surely assume that Paul builds on the concepts of agricultural works originating in the OT. Sowing and harvesting were

² For a collection of the most relevant parallels, see Cook (2017; 2018).

³ Translation from Cook (2017, 68; 2018, 83).

among the most significant events of the year in Israel and were celebrated with various rituals.

2 Festivals in Israel

In the OT, several texts concern feasts, which we can designate as feast catalogues or feast lists: Exod 23:14–17; 34:21–23; Lev 23; Num 28–29; Deut 16. According to classical studies, the oldest feast calendar is attested in the Covenant Code, where three feasts are prescribed: the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Harvest, and the Feast of Ingathering.⁴ These feasts are not connected in their original setting to the main narratives of salvation history, but they are concerned with agricultural activities. The name “Feast of Unleavened Bread” (מַצֹּת)⁵ and the time of the feast (month Abib)⁶ suggest that the Feast of Unleavened Bread was a celebration of the harvest of early cereals, especially barley. By contrast, the Feast of Harvest was celebrated at the harvest of the wheat, while the Feast of Ingathering was when the autumn fruits ripened. The ritual Decalogue in Exod 34:21–23 cites the Covenant Code and so has the same feast catalogue (Gesundheit 2012, 11–43). Deuteronomy 16 goes a step further and links Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread for the first time. But the Feast of Harvest and the Feast of Ingathering appear under different names as well, as Feast of Weeks and Feast of Tabernacles. During all these feasts Israel shall remember, “that you were a slave in Egypt.” A more elaborate priestly catalogue of feasts can be found in Num 28–29, where the sacrifices are incorporated into all feasts. The last, and probably the latest feast list, we read of in the Holiness Code, in Lev 23, where seven main feasts appear, and among them the Omer Feast, Feast of the First Sheaf. The essence of the feast is to give thanks for a promising harvest. From this viewpoint the festival has a proleptic character, which can be noticed even in the stipulation connected to the feast: from the sacrifice on this day one was allowed to eat food made from the new grain (v. 14). So, the Omer has landmarked a new period in the year, shortly after the new year, the day of the new food, the new bread is celebrated. Theologically these days are of course connected with the idea of divine

⁴ For a brief survey of research history on this topic, see Kilchör (2013, 340–367). Newer studies, e.g., Van Seters (1983) and Wagenaar (2005) tend to see Exod 23:14–17 as J’s reinterpretation of Deut 16*, and regard the latter as the oldest feast catalogue.

⁵ The Hebrew name of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, מַצֹּת, has no equivalent in other Semitic languages, and its meaning is more than likely related to the Greek word μάζα, which designates “barley bread” (Wagenaar 2005, 8).

⁶ אָבִיב means “ears (of corn) already ripe, but still soft” (HALOT s.v.), indicating the time of the month (Wagenaar 2005, 8).

providence and provision. The fat ears show that YHWH has blessed Israel's "basket and kneading bowl" (Deut 28:5) and "the land has yielded its crops, and the trees their fruit" (Lev 26:4). The Omer is a sign of the undisturbed covenant between YHWH and Israel.

The problem with this feast is not the content, but rather the question of when the Omer feast should be observed.

We read twice about the time of the feast, in Lev 23:11 and 15.⁷

on the day after the Sabbath, the priest shall raise it.	מִמֶּחֳרַת הַשַּׁבָּת יִנִּיפֶנּוּ הַפֶּהָן:
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.	וּסְפֹרְתֶם לָכֶם מִמֶּחֳרַת הַשַּׁבָּת מִיּוֹם הַבִּיאָתְכֶם אֶת־עֹמֶר הַתְּנוּפָה שֶׁבַע שָׁבָתוֹת תְּמִימֹת תִּהְיֶינָה:

These texts mention that the day of the Omer is the day after the Sabbath. But what is meant by the Sabbath? Sabbath can mean the seven-day week, the weekly rest day, the weekly Sabbath, and can be used as a noun for the feast (cf. HALOT s.v.; Milgrom 2001, 2057). In addition, all these meanings are present in Lev 23. For example, Lev 23:3 concerns the weekly Sabbath when it speaks of the seventh day on which all work must cease. In Lev 23:15 the seven Sabbaths to the Feast of Harvest denote the seven-day period from one Sabbath to another, namely the week. Leviticus 23:24 prescribes that the first of the seventh month should be a *שֶׁבֶתוֹן*, that is, a celebration. Thus, the context of the Omer does not lead to a clearer understanding of the term and a precise date. Depending on how we understand the Sabbath in Lev 23:11 and 15 it can be the rest day on the first and the last day of Unleavened Bread, the weekly Sabbath under the week of Unleavened Bread, and the very first day after the Unleavened Bread.

However, if we look at v. 15 it is striking how cumbersome and complicated the formulation of the verse is. The Sabbath occurs here twice and seemingly with two different meanings: in the first sentence as a designation for a day, whatever it was, and in the rest of the verse referring to the seven days. According to Milgrom (2001, 2060), this is not very likely, and he proposes that the Sabbath here, and in v. 11 as well, means the seven-day week ending in a Sabbath. Based on this observation, he

⁷ The citations are according to the NRSV.

claims that the text originally commanded the farmers to bring the Omer offering “on the morrow of the first Sabbath after he began the harvest.”⁸ The time of the ritual was dependent on the harvest date, which may vary from region to region and depending on the weather (cf. Noth 1985, 148).⁹ In the present context the day of the Omer falls after Passover, and from this day should be counted seven weeks to the Feast of Harvest. But the exact date remains unclear. How these festivals were related to each other in an early stage is probably shown in Josh 5:10–11 (cf. Fishbane 1985, 144–154):

While the Israelites were camped in Gilgal they kept the Passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho. On the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain.

In this text Israel observes the Passover, and on the day after they ate parched grain and unleavened cakes, which according to Lev 23 is allowed only after waving the sheaf before YHWH, namely after the Omer. Thus, according to Josh 5, the Omer falls on the day after Passover, and Josh 5 understands the Sabbath as Passover. However, this is only a reading, a tradition of the Omer. If we look at the time of the NT and further, we see a divergence in the tradition regarding the date of the festival. There are four main theories about this feast (Milgrom 2001, 2056–2063; Wagenaar 2005, 148; Hartley 1992, 385–386; Saulnier 2012, 124–125):

- (1) In Qumran and the Book of Jubilees, the Omer was observed after the whole week of the Unleavened Bread;
- (2) The Samaritans, the Karaites and the Sadducees understood the Sabbath after the Omer falls as the weekly Sabbath during the Feast of Unleavened Bread;
- (3) The translators of the LXX, Philo, Josephus and the Pharisees interpret the Sabbath as the first day of Unleavened Bread;

⁸ However, Milgrom (2001, 2060) does not rule out the possibility that מִן־הַקָּרֵת הַשְּׂבִיטָה is an old gloss, in which a redactor for the increasing importance of the Sabbath expanded the text accordingly.

⁹ This must be true for the other agricultural festivals as well. It is very likely that the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Harvest and Ingathering in the beginning were celebrated according to the actual climatic and regional circumstances (Gerstenberger 1993, 309; Körting 1999, 97; Milgrom 2001, 2055; Weyde 2004, 71; Wagenaar 2005, 76–77). The fixing of the festivals to exact dates can be linked to the process of centralisation of the feasts (Rhyder 2019, 290–291).

- (4) Modern Falasha Jews understand the Sabbath as the seventh day of Unleavened Bread.

As already mentioned, this diversity of the views stems from the ambiguity of the word “Sabbath.” But if we look for the possible background of 1 Cor 15, this is not the clear original intention of the text but rather the question of how Paul could have understood the text.

According to Acts 22:3 and Phil 3:5 Paul was a Pharisee of the tribe of Benjamin, so his feast calendar had to be identical with the Pharisaic calendar. In this view, the Sabbath from Lev 23:11, 15 refers to the first day of Unleavened Bread, and the Omer falls on the day after. If the Passover is on 14 Nisan (Exod 12:6; 13:4; Lev 23:5, etc.), the first day of Unleavened Bread is 15 Nisan, and accordingly, the Omer is on 16 Nisan. If we also consider that in Israel the day begins at sunset, a possible beginning of the feast can be placed on the evening of 15 Nisan.

If we compare these insights with the last days of Jesus according to the Gospels, we can easily detect some synchronisms above all with the story of John. John presents Jesus as the Lamb of God (John 1:29, 36), who died at the time when the Passover sacrificial lambs were slaughtered,¹⁰ on the Eve of Passover (παρασκευή, John 19:14, 31). The priests “did not enter the headquarters, to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover” (18:28), which means the festival is not over at the time of the crucifixion. In light of this, Jesus died on 14 Nisan, on the Eve of Passover. The first day of Unleavened Bread was a Sabbath (John 19:42), and Jesus was resurrected on the third day after he died,¹¹ on 16 Nisan. John does not speak of the Omer, but according to what we know about this festival, the Pharisees observed the Feast of First Fruits on 16 Nisan, exactly on the day when Jesus was resurrected. Based on these observations many, as already mentioned above, have assumed a

¹⁰ According to John 19:14, Pilate led out Jesus around the sixth hour (11–12 AM [Schneider 1978, 308]) of the day to the people. According to the rabbinic sources from this time, the Passover sacrifices were brought to the temple for slaughter, while Philo attest to the sacrificing of the Passover lambs from noon (Strack and Billerbeck 1961, 836–837, 847). Therefore, it is very likely that John, with his remark, wants to underscore the analogy between the Passover and Jesus’s sacrifice as the Lamb of God.

¹¹ John does not speak explicitly of the resurrection on the third day; however, if Jesus died on Passover Eve, that was at the same time as the preparation day for the Sabbath (19:31), and if Jesus was resurrected on the first day of the week (20:1), it is clear that the resurrection took place on the third day after the crucifixion. A closer reference could eventually be the time indication “on the third day” in the story of the wedding in Cana. This enigmatic notice may combine well-known OT motifs (Hos 6:2; Jonah [see below]) with the traditions of Jesus’s life here with the resurrection on the third day. For a fresh look at the topic, see Jojko (2020, 127–129).

connection between this chronology and the 1 Cor 15 text. Yet two main questions must be addressed. First, the Synoptic Gospels have another chronology; second, we must prove that Paul knew the chronology attested by John.

3 The Day of Jesus's Death

In the Synoptic Gospels the Last Supper is clearly a Passover meal, which Jesus ate before his arrest (Matt 26:17–19; Mark 14:12, 14, 16; Luke 22:8, 11, 13, 15). If so, he was alive on the Eve of Passover, and he was executed on the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. He died accordingly on 15 Nisan and was resurrected on 17 Nisan. A shared tradition with John is that the day between the crucifixion and the resurrection was a Sabbath. But if Jesus died on the 15th then he resurrected not on the day of the Omer but a day after. If Paul alludes to the Omer, he cannot base his text on the chronology known from the first three Gospels. Of course, Paul predates the Gospels, but even in this case, the question remains, why do two chronologies exist, and which one could have been used by Paul? To answer this problem, there are three major hypotheses.¹²

Some have attempted to reconcile the discrepancy by assuming two calendars.¹³ In Qumran and the Book of Jubilees a 364-day lunisolar calendar is attested, which has the interesting feature that all festivals fall every year on the same day of the week; the Passover on Tuesday. In Jerusalem, though, a 354-day lunar calendar was used at the same time, where the days of the festivals migrated from year to year. According to the thesis, the Synoptic Gospels reflect the lunisolar calendar, while John is using the official lunar calendar. However, to my knowledge, we do not have any evidence for two calendars in Jerusalem in the first century CE.

A similar solution is offered by Humphreys (2011), who poses a sunrise-to-sunrise lunar calendar in the case of the first three Gospels and the official Jewish calendar in John.¹⁴ However, the arguments in this case also seem to be unconvincing. Allegedly, three groups may have used the sunrise-to-sunrise calendar: Samaritans, Zealots, and some Essenes. However, the document attesting to the calendar in Samaritan circles dates

¹² For a recent exhaustive review of the relevant works, see Pitre (2017, 251–373) and Rosik (2020).

¹³ The first influential work on this topic stems from Annie Jaubert, *La date de la Cène*, from the year 1957. Since then, many have been trying to support and maintain her thesis (see Saulnier 2012, 19–63).

¹⁴ The idea is adopted by the *Encyclopedia of the Historical Jesus* (see Hoehner 2008, 116–117).

1335 CE (Humphreys 2011, 138); the Qumran text in question, related to the Essenes, is very controversial, as Humphreys (2011, 144) also acknowledges; and the evidence for the corresponding Zealot calendar is a Josephus passage (*J.W.* 5.99), where the Zealots celebrate the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread on 14 Nisan. However, the Synoptic Gospels too recall the Day of Passover as “the first day of Unleavened Bread” (Matt 26:17; Mark 14:2; Luke 22:7), as some rabbinic texts do as well (Strack and Billerbeck 1961, 814–816). So even in this case, the argument proves weak.

Another possibility is not a different calendar, but only the different observation of the Passover. Already Chwolson (1908) pointed to a debate of Hillel and his opponents about the Passover, namely if the Passover falls on a Sabbath, whether it is allowed to prepare the meal and the sacrifice, or whether one should rest as the law of the Sabbath requires. In this case, a part of the people, probably the Sadducees, propose an earlier celebration of Passover, on 13 Nisan, while very likely the Pharisees have no problem with offering the Passover sacrifice on the Sabbath. This theory would explain the differences between John and the Synoptic Gospels. Jesus would have observed the Passover earlier with his disciples, and John would reflect the pharisaic viewpoint. But we would expect the opposite. In the Gospel of John, the priests, who must have been Sadducees, are mentioned. So, they should already have eaten the Passover meal before 14 Nisan, in order to be able to enter the Praetorium and meet Pilate.¹⁵

Many scholars, however, have been trying to solve the problem on a literary level. Regarding the Last Supper, we have three main traditions: the Synoptic Gospels, John 13 and 1 Cor 11. If we look at John and the account of Paul of the Last Supper, it becomes clear that they attest to the Last Supper, but without any reference to a Passover meal. Neither Paul nor John speaks of it as a Passover meal. More interesting is that the Synoptic Gospels, which describe the Last Supper as Passover, do not speak during the meal of the main part of the Passover, the lamb, or relate the Exodus-Haggadah, and Jesus does not refer to himself as Passover lamb (Bultmann 1995, 286; Reinbold 1994, 85–86; Schröter 2006, 44; Wedderburn 2013, 79–81). More striking is that the account of the Last Supper in Matt 26:2–19 and Mark 14:1–16 shapes only the preparation of the meal as an arrangement for the festival and only Luke testifies to a

¹⁵ For more counterarguments against Chwolson’s thesis, see Strack and Billerbeck (1961, 845–847) and Saulnier (2012, 10–11).

speech of Jesus referring to the meal as *πάσχα* (Luke 22:15).¹⁶ Extra-biblical texts (e.g., the Talmud; Gos. Pet.) attest, as John, to Jesus's death on Passover Eve.¹⁷ A further hint conveys the note of all four Gospels (Matt 27:16–26; Mark 15:7–15; Luke 23:18; John 18:40) about the Passover amnesty of Barabbas. This legal custom, if historical, “makes sense only if the person set free could share in eating the Passover meal” (Theißen and Merz 1998, 158). Based on these observations it is very likely that the oldest Last Supper tradition had no reference to the Passover and the Synoptic Gospels transform the Last Supper into a Passover meal. Historically it was a festive but regular meal as it appears in John. This means at the same time that the Passover tradition is a post-Pauline literary creation of the Synoptic Gospels. If Paul has knowledge of any passion narrative, its chronology should be the same as in the Gospel of John.¹⁸ It seems that the oldest tradition attests to the death of Jesus on 14 Nisan, which implies his resurrection on the day of the Omer. As the last step, let us take a closer look at 1 Cor 15.

4 Paul and the Paschal Tradition in 1 Corinthians

Paul calls Jesus the first fruit. The Greek noun used here (*ἀπαρχή*) is identical with the noun in Leviticus in the LXX. The train of thought is that Jesus is the first one, the first sheaf, and then come the others, the believers. But is there something that refers to the Passover or the Omer? At the beginning of the chapter, Paul says, in an adopted formula (3b–5), Jesus was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. Paul knows the tradition of the resurrection on the third day. But, unfortunately, the reference point for these three days is not specified and even the meaning of the phrase “in accordance with the scripture” (*τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ τρίτῃ κατὰ τὰς γραφὰς*) remains unclear. Wolff (1982, 162–163) lists seven possible interpretations of the phrase; it alludes to: (1) a historical event; (2) a short period; (3) the separation of the spirit from the body on the third day; (4) the resurrection on the third day as other dying and rising deities, for example, Osiris; (5) the custom of the celebration of Sunday; (6) Hosea 6:2 or Jonah; (7) the general lore of the OT, the salvation of

¹⁶ The text of Luke may reflect liturgical formulae of the primitive church (Green 2011, 181).

¹⁷ “On Passover Eve they hung the corpse of Jesus the Nazarene after they killed him by way of stoning” (Sanh. 43a:20; trans. Davidson Talmud); “And he delivered him to the people on the day before the unleavened bread, their feast” (Gos. Pet. 3; trans. Robinson 1897, 7).

¹⁸ The possibility cannot be ruled out that Paul and John draw from a common source since, according to the tradition, both writings were written in Ephesus (Daise 2016, 510). As already noted above, John and Paul have a similar description of the Last Supper which further reinforces this assumption.

YHWH on the third day. The plural makes it hard to reduce the focus of the text to a single OT passage (Schrage 2001, 42; Thiessen 2012, 389). But in all cases Paul could have used other symbolic numbers rather than three. Thus the question of why Paul is even using this motif remains. Paul must have had in mind a *tertium comparationis* for the analogy which girded his thought on the matter. I suggest the starting point of Paul may have been a version of the passion narrative of Jesus, which, as we have seen, attests to the resurrection on 16 Nisan and the third day after the crucifixion (cf. Wolff 1982, 164; Lang 1994, 211). That means, when we read 1 Cor 15, Paul refers from the very beginning to certain traditions of Jesus's life, but he does it in a very implicit way. He does not tell the whole story, but only alludes to some details of it. This could be the case with the Omer as well, but it is not certain that the three days are counted from Passover as attested to by John. More evidence is required. The question is: is there any proof in Paul for the death of Jesus at the time of Passover?

Two references can help to determine the tradition known by Paul about the death of Jesus.

The first is 1 Cor 5:7: "Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed." In this verse, Paul is using again motifs from the OT which he reinterprets. As in the Gospel of John, he calls Jesus *πάσχα*, the paschal lamb. Of course, in his argumentation, he gives the festivals mentioned here a new theological meaning: Jesus is the Passover and the believers the unleavened, cleansed new community, and it is clear that there is a close analogy between Christ's saving act and the Passover typology (Robertson and Plummer 1911, 103; Conzelmann 1981, 126; Schrage 1991, 383; Wolff 2011, 107). However, in this case, too, the link must have some basis. The Passover does not fit well with the message conveyed by Paul. For him, Jesus died for the sins of the people, and his death has a cleansing function, but the Passover is a reminder of deliverance, not propitiation from sins (cf. Daise 2016, 513). Paul could have chosen other types of sacrifices that have explicit purifying functions. He does it, for example, in Rom 3:25, when he calls Jesus *ἱλαστήριον*, that is, the "mercy seat," alluding to the Day of Atonement. But in the case of the Passover, he must have another motif in mind, for example, the biography of Jesus, who died on the Eve of Passover.

The last hint for a possible allusion to the Passover is 1 Cor 16:8: "But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost." This seemingly insignificant

sentence carries an important piece of information. The next reference point for Paul in the writing of the epistle is Pentecost, the Feast of Harvest, which is after Passover. If he had written the epistle close to another festival, he would have mentioned another feast. But he is writing very likely close to Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Robertson and Plummer 1911, 102; Daise 2016, 218–519). If so, it is quite understandable why Paul is using so many references stemming from this festive period. As we have seen, this time of the year is full of symbolic and liturgical acts, and if Paul does not refer to all of them, but selects only a few motifs, for example, the Passover for Christ, this points to a certain connection to both, which again could rely on Jesus's death on Passover Eve.

These individual observations can appear not to be conclusive but reading them cumulatively points in the same direction: Paul alludes to a tradition in which Jesus dies on 14 Nisan and is resurrected on the day of the Omer. We can put the question as follows: What is more plausible? Is Paul using random motifs that miraculously coincide with the chronology of the last days of Jesus, or does he know these traditions and alludes to them intentionally in a very subtle way? The latter seems to be more plausible. It is very likely that when Paul calls Jesus the first fruit, he is alluding to the Omer day, on which Jesus was resurrected. Rabbinic texts show us what significance this date could have had, especially *Mishnah Menah. 10:2–3*. Although the *Mishnah* is remarkably later than the writings of the NT, going back to the third century CE (Dubrau 2009), it testifies to the main Jewish traditions from the first centuries of our era. It emerged from the need to conserve the oral tradition from the post-temple period (Kraemer 2019), so its content must reflect religious thoughts very similar to those of Jesus's time. Thus, the *Mishnah* forms an important background against which the NT can be read. Even in the case of 1 Cor 15:20, it sheds light on some interesting details.

5 **Menaḥot 10:2–4**

The text reads as follows:¹⁹

The requirement of the Omer is to bring it from [barley growing] nearby. [If] it [the crop] did not ripen near Jerusalem [in time for use on Nisan 16] [however,] they bring it from any place.

¹⁹ For a comprehensive collection of texts related to the Omer, see Ehrmann (1937).

M'SH Š: It was brought from Gaggot Serifin, and [the grain for] the two loaves [Lev. 23:17] from the valley of En Sokher.

How did they do it? Agents of the court go forth on the eve of [the afternoon before] the festival [of Passover]. And they make it into sheaves while it is still attached to the ground, so that it will be easy to reap. And all the villagers nearby gather together there [on the night after the first day of Passover], so that it will be reaped with great pomp. Once it gets dark [on the night of the sixteenth of Nisan], he says to them, “Has the sun set?” They say, “Yes.” “Has the sun set?” They say, “Yes.” “[With] this sickle?” They say, “Yes.” “[With] this sickle?” They say, “Yes.” “[With] this basket?” They say, “Yes.” “[With] this basket?” They say, “Yes.” On the Sabbath, he says to them, “[Shall I reap on] this Sabbath?” They say, “Yes.” “[Shall I reap on] this Sabbath?” They say, “Yes.” “Shall I reap?” They say, “Reap.” “Shall I reap?” They say, “Reap”—three times for each and every matter. And they say to him, “Yes, yes, yes.” All of this [pomp] for what purpose? Because of the Boethusians, for they maintain, “The reaping of the [barley for] the omer is not [done] at the conclusion of the festival.”

They reaped it, and they put it into basket. They brought it to the court [of the Temple]. “They did parch it in fire, “so as to carry out the requirement that it be parched with fire [Lev. 2:14].”²⁰

This passage attests to the issues discussed above. It is clear, that the Boethusians, that is, the Sadducees, object to the case when the Omer falls on a Sabbath, and therefore the sheaves were to be ripened on a rest day (Hauptman 2005, 101).²¹ But the text clearly shows that most of the people did not have any problem with preparing the Omer sheaves on a Sabbath. The Gospels agree that the resurrection happened on the first day of the week (cf. Matt 28:1; Mark 16:1.9; Luke 24:1; John 20:1), so the day before must have been a Sabbath. When Jesus died on 14 Nisan and was resurrected on the third day (16 Nisan), then 15 Nisan was a Sabbath, so the case described in the text of Menah. 10:2–4 was precisely applicable in the year of Jesus’s crucifixion.

The next important piece of information is that emissaries go out on the eve of the festival. Which festival is meant is not specified, but based

²⁰ Translation of Neusner (1988).

²¹ A Qumran fragment possibly attests to the sanction of raising the Omer on Sabbath (Wacholder 2001, 99). Unfortunately, the text is too fragmented to evaluate it for the context of the Omer.

on other rabbinic texts the Passover seems to be very likely (Ehrmann 1937, 6).²² The emissaries prepared the sheaves before Passover, binding them together while they were still attached to the ground. The preparation of the Passover meal took place at this time in Jerusalem. The following significant act of the Omer was the actual harvesting with the sickle on the border of the 15th and 16th in the evening (Prosic 2004, 98; Hauptman 2005, 101). The 15th was the actual day of Passover that began with slaughtering the lamb “between the two evenings” (בֵּין הָעֶרְבָיִם, Exod 12:6), during the transition of the day. The ritual drama between the emissaries and the residents of the town emphasises that the Passover is over and at nightfall, the 16th of Nisan began, the morrow of the Sabbath. The Mishnah wants to prove that the rabbinic practice of the festivals corresponds to the prescriptions of the OT, especially that of Lev 23.

The night plays a major role in the Omer offering. The sheaves are waved and the corns parched as soon as it was possible, at the very beginning of the day. Since, according to the official calendar, the day has begun with the evening, the Omer was presented immediately after sunset; therefore, the threefold question in the Mishnah. So, three major events interplay in these days: on the 14th of Nisan, the Eve of Passover with the preparation of the sheaves, on the 15th, the actual day of Passover/first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread with cutting the sheaves, and at the transition from the 15th to the 16th, the Omer offering leading to the second day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

6 Conclusion

Based on the above observations, we can identify three significant interplays between the date of the resurrection and the Omer ritual: (1) The Omer ritual only reaches its zenith on 16 Nisan but begins on Passover Eve, so the whole celebration takes three days, beginning with the preparation of the sheaves. The Easter event is also a three-day event rather than solely a Sunday morning miracle. (2) The Omer ritual is performed at night. This corresponds to the notice of all the Gospels that Jesus was resurrected during the night and the women/disciples found the empty tomb early in the morning. (3) The ritual of parching takes place in the temple and marks the beginning of the new season when the eating of

²² According to Targum Ruth 1:22, Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem “on the Eve of Passover, on the day the children of Israel began to harvest the Omer of the heave-offering.” This is another hint that the ritual acts of the Omer began on Passover Eve; cf. Brady (2017, 78, 80–81).

the new grain was allowed. Of course, in addition, the resurrection of Jesus marks a new era for the believers who will follow the first fruit. Within a Jewish background, these connections may have been clearer than for the modern reader, but as the paschal motifs in other instances in 1 Corinthians show, Paul alludes to these connections implicitly and assumes that they are evident to his readers. Something similar may be true for the motif of the Omer. Jesus is the first fruit who was resurrected on the night of the Omer offering, ushering in a new era of new life, just as the Omer landmarks the season of eating new grain. Paul likely wanted to convey even these thoughts when he speaks of Jesus as the first fruit.

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