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When Does Counting the Omer Begin?

The *omer* or “sheaf” offering takes place ממחרת השבת, “after the Shabbat” (Leviticus 23:15). Jewish interpreters have debated the exact meaning of this phrase for two millennia, resulting in all four possible dates being adopted by one Jewish sect or another.

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A *Sefirat ha-Omer* booklet (“Counting of the Omer”) c. 1800 Zürich, [Braginsky Collection](https://www.e-codices.ch/en), B327, f. 50

The Omer Offering of First Sheaf

Following its description of the laws of the Matzot festival, Leviticus 23 describes the requirement to bring the *omer* (עומר, “sheaf”), the first cut of grain, to the priest:

ויקרא כג:י …כִּי תָבֹאוּ אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי נֹתֵן לָכֶם וּקְצַרְתֶּם אֶת קְצִירָהּ וַהֲבֵאתֶם אֶת עֹמֶר רֵאשִׁית קְצִירְכֶם אֶל הַכֹּהֵן. כג:יאוְהֵנִיף אֶת הָעֹמֶר לִפְנֵי יְ-הוָה לִרְצֹנְכֶם מִמָּחֳרַת הַשַּׁבָּת יְנִיפֶנּוּ הַכֹּהֵן.

Lev 23:10 …When you enter the land that I am giving to you and you reap its harvest, you shall bring the first sheaf of your harvest to the priest. 23:11 He shall elevate the sheaf before YHWH for acceptance in your behalf; the priest shall elevate it on the day after the shabbat.

Unlike the Pesach offering and Matzot Festival, no exact date is given for this *omer* offering, only that it happens after the shabbat when the harvest is first reaped.[1]

Establishing the correct date of the *omer* offering was especially important since the date for the Bikkurim festival (also called Shavuot) is determined by it:

ויקרא כג טו וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם מִמָּחֳרַת הַשַּׁבָּת מִיּוֹם הֲבִיאֲכֶם אֶת עֹמֶר הַתְּנוּפָה שֶׁבַע שַׁבָּתוֹת תְּמִימֹת תִּהְיֶינָה. כג:טז עַד מִמָּחֳרַת הַשַּׁבָּת הַשְּׁבִיעִת תִּסְפְּרוּ חֲמִשִּׁים יוֹם וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם מִנְחָה חֲדָשָׁה לַי-הוָה.כג:יז …בִּכּוּרִים לַי-הוָה…

Lev 23:15 And from the day on which you bring the sheaf of elevation offering– the day after the sabbath — you shall count off seven weeks. They must be complete: 23:16 you must count until the day after the seventh week — fifty days; then you shall bring an offering of new grain to YHWH. 23:17… as first produce (*bikkurim*) to YHWH…

It is likely that Leviticus did not imagine set dates for the *omer* or *bikkurim* offerings and was content to let the farmers make the offering after first cuts each year, and to start counting from then; this would differ year by year, depending on when the grain would ripen. Such an interpretation fits with the way Shavuot (=Bikkurim) is determined according to Deuteronomy:

דברים טז:ט שִׁבְעָה שָׁבֻעֹת תִּסְפָּר לָךְ מֵהָחֵל חֶרְמֵשׁ בַּקָּמָה תָּחֵל לִסְפֹּר שִׁבְעָה שָׁבֻעוֹת.טז:יוְעָשִׂיתָ חַג שָׁבֻעוֹת לַי-הוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ…

Deut 16:9 You shall count off seven weeks; start to count the seven weeks when the sickle is first put to the standing grain.16:10 Then you shall observe the Feast of Shavuot (Weeks) for YHWH your God…

Here, too, the festival that is celebrated seven weeks after the first cut is not given a date. Leviticus differs from Deuteronomy in that the counting is from the offering of the *omer*, which takes place “after the shabbat,” whereas Deuteronomy’s counting begins after the first cut, whose timing is left entirely open. Nevertheless, neither contains a precise date for the Bikkurim/Shavuot festival.

The Date of the Omer Offering

In Second Temple times, Bikkurim/Shavuot developed into a very important holiday.[2]Consequently, determining when it fell out was of great importance to all Jewish groups. But how is such a date to be determined? Leviticus gives three indications:

1. After the first cut of grain,
2. After Matzot is celebrated (implied),
3. On the day after “the Sabbath.”

The first cut of grain would be in early spring, too general an indication to determine a precise date. The dating after Matzot, celebrated for seven days from the fifteenth of Nissan until the twenty-second, is a bit more helpful—but exactly when after Matzot? Finally, “after Sabbath is also helpful, but to which Sabbath does this refer?

Four Possible Dates

Assuming the *omer* offering is to take place on a set date, which is what all Jewish sects have assumed for more than two millennia, the verse can be interpreted four different ways, depending on two factors:

1. Does Shabbat (שבת, “Sabbath”) in the verse mean “Saturday” (i.e., Friday night to Saturday evening), or might this word have another meaning, e.g. any Festival on which the people are commanded to rest (ש-ב-ת)?
2. Does the placement of Lev 23:15 (concerning beginning the counting) after the Matzot festival mean that it should take place after all seven days of Matzot are over, or perhaps only that it takes place after Matzot has begun, and thus can fall during Matzot?

These two issues are independent of each other and the various options and combinations can be presented nicely as a Punnett square:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|   | **Shabbat is Saturday** | **Shabbat is a Festival** |
| **After Matzot *ends:*** | 1. The Sunday after Matzot | 3. The day after Matzot |
| **After Matzot *begins:*** | 2. The Sunday of Matzot | 4. The second day of Matzot |

Each of these options was chosen by at least one sect of Judaism.

1. The Sunday after Matzot Ends (Essenes, Sadducees, Samaritans)

Since Shabbat generally means Shabbat, and the passage about the *omer* offering appears after the passage about the festival of Matzot, the simplest interpretation is that the *omer*should be offered on the Sunday following the end of the festival of Matzot. This appears to be how the verse was understood in the second century B.C.E. sectarian book of Jubilees, which describes how Abraham established the festival of Bikkurim (*Jub* 15:1-2):

In the fifth year of the fourth week of that jubilee, in the third month, in the middle of the month, Abram made a feast of the firstfruits of the harvest of grain. And he offered up a new sacrifice upon the altar, the firstfruits of the food for the Lord…[3]

The 15th of Sivan is also the date of Shavuot/Bikkurim among the Essenes in Qumran, who used a 364-day calendar, which guaranteed that a given holiday would fall out on the same day every year.[4] Thus, in the Qumran calendar, the *omer* was offered every year on the 26thof Nissan, which is the first Sunday after Matzot and fifty days before the 15th of Sivan.

Moreover, it seems from the Temple Scroll that this day was treated as a holiday in Qumran (11QTb 5-6):

5 [ובעשרים וששה בחדש הראישו]ן֗ שבתו֗ן זכ֗ר֗ון מקרא קודש 6 [כול מלאכה לוא תעשו בו כי אם אוכל א]ש֗ר יעשה לנפש…

[On the 26th of the firs]t [month] is a day of rest, a sacred convocation, [all forms of labor you shall not perform, except that food whi]ch is made for a person.[5]

Another group that seems to have read the verse as referring to the day after the Shabbat are the Sadducees, Hebrew Tzedukim (צדוקים), named for the Zadokite priests who made up the bulk and leadership of this group. Although we do not have documents from this group, rabbinic texts that polemicize against the Sadducees on this point (see later on), putting them in the same category as the Essenes (Boethusians), testifies to their reading the text this way.

Finally, this is also the interpretation of the Israelite-Samaritans, who to this day begin the *omer* counting from the Sunday after Matzot ends, and Shavuot fifty days later.[6] In a letter written to the Samaritans of England in 1734, and copied by the Samaritan Bible commentator, Meshalma ben Ab Sakhuah the Danafite in 1740, the holiday is described thus:

ונספר חמשים יום ממחרת השבת אשר הוא מן שבעת יומי המצות עד ממחרת השבת השבעית ויהי החלם יום האחד ואחרם יום האחד ואחרם הוא יום חג הקציר. ואתקרי שמו חג השבעות ויום הבכורים.

We then count fifty days from the day after the Sabbath that is from (=after) the seven days of Matzot until the day after the seventh Sabbath. We thus begin their counting with the first day (Sunday) and finish with the first day (Sunday), and this last day is the holiday of Katzir (“Reaping”), and it is called the Festival of Shavuot (“Weeks”) and the festival of Bikkurim (“first produce”).[7]

As the Samaritans do not use the Essene 364-day solar calendar, but rather a lunar calendar with leap year adjustments similar to the Rabbinic Jewish calendar, Shavuot for Israelite-Samaritans does not have a set date.

2. The Sunday During Matzot (Karaites)

The second interpretation, that the passage is a reference to the Shabbat during Matzot, is the reading and practice of Karaite Jews.[8] During the early Middle Ages, the Karaites defended this view against the opposing view of rabbinic Jews (see below) who polemicized against them, such as Sa’adia Gaon. For this reason, the Karaite sage Aaron ben Elijah (c.1328-1369) in his halakhic work, *Gan Eden,*spends more than half of his section on the laws of Shavuot defending the Karaite interpretation of “after the Sabbath.” He begins the entire section with this observation:

הדבור במחרת השבת: יש לדעת כי החלוקה רבתה בין חכמי הקראים ובין חכמי הרבנים, שאנחנו אומרים מחרת שבת בראשית והם אומרים מחרת יום טוב…

The discussion of “after the Sabbath” – it should be known that the distinction between the sages of the Karaites and the sages of the Rabbanites is great, for we say it means after the Sabbath of creation and they say it means after Yom Tov…

He then continues by bringing proofs and argumentation, beginning with this:

כי לא מצאנו בכל הכתוב שנקרא המועד שבת, וא[ם] כ[ן] איך יתכן לומר כי מחרת השבת הוא מחרת המועד?

…for we do not find anywhere in scripture that a holiday is called “shabbat,” and if so, how can one suggest that the verse says “after the Sabbath” and means “after the holiday”?!

In chapter 3 of the Shavuot laws, Aaron ben Elijah goes on to explain one reason why they count from the Shabbat during Matzot and not the one after. Noting that the term is “the Shabbat” not “a Shabbat,” i.e., it has a definite article that should refer back to something, he writes:

בעבור שהקדים בפרק הקודם שבעת ימים מצות תאכלו ואע”פ שהוא פרק מופרד תהיה ידיעתו שבה על שבעת ימי מצה בעבור השבת שיש בשבעת ימי מצה.

Because the previous section stated “You shall eat matzah for seven days,” even though it is a separate section, the definite article can be understood as referring back to the seven days of matzah because of the Shabbat that falls during the seven days of matzah

Since Karaite Jews use a lunar calendar, decreeing that Shavuot always fall out on a Sunday means that the festival has no set date (the same as for the Israelite-Samaritans discussed above).[9]

3. The Day after Matzot (Beta Israel)

Many Jewish interpreters read the reference to “after the Sabbath” as meaning “after the festival,” connecting it to the previous passage that described the holiday of Matzot. They note that the root ש.ב.ת, meaning “to rest,” is applied to festivals in this chapter (Lev 23); the festival of Teruah is called *shabbaton* (שַׁבָּתוֹן; v. 24) and Yom Kippur is called *shabbat shabbaton* (שַׁבַּת שַׁבָּתוֹן; v. 32).

Assuming that Shabbat here refers to one of the two festival days of Matzot that fall on the first and last (seventh) day of the holiday,[10] the simplest interpretation would be that “after the festival” means after the seventh day of Matzot, when the holiday is entirely over. This is the way the Beta Israel (Falasha/Ethiopian Jews) understand the verse, as Sharon Shalom, a contemporary Beta Israel Jew who is also a rabbi, writes in his book on Falasha halakha:

מנהג בני הקהילה להתחיל לספור את ספירת העומר מיום טוב האחרון של חג הפסח. גם ב”ביתא ישראל” הבינו שהפסוק “ממחרת השבת” מדבר על יום טוב, אך לא על יום טוב ראשון כי אם על האחרון. על פי זה, חג השבועות יחול לעולם בי”ב בסיוון.

The custom of the community is to begin counting the omer after the final festival of Pesach. Similarly, the “Beta Israel” understand the verse “the day after the Shabbat” as referring to Yom Tov, but not to the first Yom Tov but to the second one. According to this, Shavuot will always fall out on the 12th of Sivan.[11]

Shalom further discusses why the second Yom Tov was chosen:

כאשר שאלתי את אחד הכהנים לטעם מנהג זה, הוא השיב לי ”קבלה היא מאבותינו וכך אנו נוהגים במשך דורות.“ ייתכן שדחיית הספירה נעשתה כדי שלא לערב את מצוות הפסח עם מצוות ספירת העומר. לכן רק כאשר מסיימים לחגוג את הפסח אפשר להתחיל במצווה חדשה.

When I asked one of the priests what the reason for this is, he answered me “It is a tradition from our ancestors, and this how we have practiced for generations.” It seems likely that the pushing off the counting was done so as not to mix the mitzvah of Pesach with the mitzvah of counting the *omer*. Therefore, only when the celebration of Pesach is completely finished is it possible to start this new mitzvah.

A simpler hermeneutic may be at work here, however. The passage about the *omer* appears after the description of the Matzot is complete, i.e., after the Torah discusses the festival of the seventh day. This could be understood to imply that the counting only begins after the holiday ends, which is how it is understood by the Essenes, Sadducees, and Samaritans, as noted above.

4. The Second Day of Matzot (Philo, Josephus, Pharisees, and Rabbis)

The most familiar and prevalent interpretation of the verse is also the most counterintuitive. The rabbis, their predecessors the Pharisees, and other Second Temple period authors such as Philo and Josephus, all understand “after Shabbat” as “after the first festival (*yom tov*) of Matzot.” According to this interpretation, the counting of the *omer* begins on the second day of Matzot.

For example, Philo writes (*Special Laws* 1:162):

But within the feast [of Matzot] there is another feast following directly after the first day. This is called “The Sheaf.”[12]

Josephus also follows this interpretation (*Ant*. 3:5 [250]):

On the second day of Unleavened Bread, that is to say the sixteenth, our people partake of the crops which they have reaped and which have not been touched till then, and esteeming it right first to do homage to God to whom they owe the abundance of these gifts, they offer to Him the first-fruits of the barley…[13]

The rabbis state this explicitly in a halakhic midrash:

ממחרת השבת – ממחרת יום טוב.

“The day after the sabbath” – that is, the day after the festival.[14]

Thus, this is how the verse is translated in Rabbinic Targums:

Onkelos

תִמְנוֹן לְכוֹן מִבָּתַר יוֹמָא טָבָא…

You shall count from after Yom Tov…

Pseudo-Jonathan

ותימנון לכון מבתר יומא טבא קמאה דפסחא…

You shall count from after the first Yom Tov of Pesach…[15]

Early Rabbinic Polemic

The rabbis were almost certainly aware that their own reading was not the simple meaning of the text, which explains why they were defensive about it and why rabbinic literature contains harsh polemics against the Sadducee and Boethesian (Essene) interpretation of Shabbat as Shabbat.[16]

The rabbis likely inherited this polemical stance from their Pharisee predecessors; in other words, even though the Sadducees and Essenes no longer existed in the rabbinic period, the rabbis continued to polemicize against positions that they held.[17]

In the Scholion to *Megillat Taʿanit*,[18] the rabbis even explained the Second Temple period celebration that lasted from the 8th of Nissan until Passover, as celebrating how the Pharisees/Rabbis defeated the Sadducees/Boethesians on the question of when Shavuot falls:

מפני שהיו הצדוקין אומרי[ם] אין עצרת אלא לאחר השבת. ניטפל להם רבן יוחנן בן זכאי ואמ[ר] להם מנין לכם? ולא היו יודעים להביא ראיה מן התורה אלא אחד שהיה מפטפט כנגדו ואומר מפני שהיה משה אוהב את ישראל ויודע שעצרת יום אחד הוא אמ[ר] יעשו אותה אחר השבת כדי שיהו להם שני ימים טובים…

Because the Sadducees said that Shavuot[19] is always on a Sunday. Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai went among them and said to them: “From where did you learn this?” None of them were able to bring a proof from the Torah except one man who was babbling opposite him and said: “Because Moses was a lover of Jews, and he knew that Shavuot was only one day, so he said, let’s make sure it is always on a Sunday so that they get two days of celebration back to back.”[20]

R. Yohanan ben Zakkai responds by proving that Moses didn’t really like Jews, and when the Sadducee then accuses of R. Yohanan ben Zakkai of teasing him, he responds:

שוטה שבעולם לא תהא תורה שלימה שלנו כשיחה בטילה שלכם…

“You incredible fool! Our perfect Torah is nothing like your pointless chatter…”

According to the story, the Sadducee gives up and admits he doesn’t understand the Torah, and allows R. Yohanan ben Zakkai to explain the verses to him in typical (rabbinic) midrashic fashion. The irony of this story is that it demonstrates the proverb “the best defense is a good offense” since the Sadducees could have responded to R. Yohanan ben Zakkai by quoting the verse, “on the day after Shabbat,” and insisting that the verse means what it says.[21]

Four Views out of Five

In summary, all four possible readings of the phrase “the day after Shabbat” have been reflected in Jewish interpretation and practice through the years:

1. The Sunday after Matzot (Jubilees, Essenes, Sadducees, Samaritans),
2. The Sunday of Matzot (Karaites),
3. The day after Matzot (Beta Israel),
4. The second day of Matzot (Philo, Josephus, Pharisees, and Rabbis).

The one position that does not appear to have been advocated by any Jewish group in the last two millennia is the simplest meaning of the verse, namely that the *omer* offering has no set time or date, only a range of possible dates depending on the realities of the harvest season.

[View Footnotes](https://www.thetorah.com/article/when-does-counting-the-omer-begin)

1. For discussion, see Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27* (AB 3B; New York: Doubleday, 2001) 1990-2011; Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989/5749) 158-160.
2. Editor’s note, for more on this see, Norman Solomon, [“Shavuot: How the Festival of Harvest Grew,”](http://thetorah.com/shavuot-how-the-festival-of-harvest-grew/) *TheTorah.com* (2014).
3. Translation if from “Jubilees” translated by James L. Kugel, in *Outside the Bible: Ancient Jewish Writings Related to Scripture*, vol. 1 (3 volumes; eds., Louis H. Feldman, James H. Kugel, and Lawrence H. Schiffman; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 2013), 272-465 [345]. For more on Shavuot in Jubilees, see Michael Segal, [“The Festival of Covenants,”](https://thetorah.com/the-festival-of-covenants/) *TheTorah.com* (2014).
4. For more on the 364 day sectarian calendar, see Michael Segal, [“The Jewish Calendar in Jubilees,”](http://thetorah.com/jewish-calendar-in-jubilees-a-solar-year/) *TheTorah.com* (2014).
5. This is Qimron’s reconstruction, which appears in his edition of the Temple Scroll in, Elisha Qimron, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: The Hebrew Writings*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi, 2010 [Hebrew]), 137-207 [157].
6. See Benyamim Tsedaka, [“The Samaritan Shavuot,”](http://thetorah.com/the-samaritan-shavuot/) *TheTorah.com* (2014); Benyamim Tsedaka, (translator and editor) and Sharon Sullivan (co-editor), *The Israelite Samaritan Version of the Torah: First English Translation Compared with the Masoretic Version* (Eerdmans, 2013), 284.
7. For the full text and translation, See Moses Gaster, *The Samaritans: Schweich Lectures 1923* (London: British Academy, 1925), 170-180. Admittedly, the phrase “from the days of Matzot” could also be understood as “the Shabbat of Matzot,” but this is not what the Samaritans do. Another letter, from the late 17th or early 18th century C.E., is similarly ambiguous:

ויום שביעי חג המצות נחג ראש שלש רגלים וממחרת השבת ספירות חמשים יום עד ממחרת השבת נחג ביום הבכורים.

And the seventh day of the Festaval of Matzot we celebrate as the first of the three pilgrimage festivals. And on the day of the Shabbat [begins] the counting of fifty days until the day after the [seventh] Shabbat, when we celebrate the Festival of the Bikkurim.

(Gaster, Samaritans, 159-169.) As the Shabbat is referenced after the seventh day of Matzot, and this is how Samaritans practice, it is likely that this is what the text means to convey. Bernard Revel also takes for granted that the Samaritans read the verse as the Sadducees did. See Bernard Revel, *The Karaite Halachah* (Philadelphia: Cahan, 1913), 43, n. 66.

1. See [“Shavuot,”](http://adamoh.org/TreeOfLife.lan.io/NTCh/Karaite%20Korner%20-%20Shavuot%20%28Feast%20of%20Weeks%29.htm) on *The Karaite Korner*.
2. For more on the Karaite calendar, see Daniel Lasker, [“Biblical Exegesis as a Source of Jewish Pluralism: The Case of the Karaites,”](https://thetorah.com/biblical-exegesis-as-a-source-of-jewish-pluralism-the-case-of-the-karaites/) *TheTorah.com* (2017).

ויקרא כג:ז בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן מִקְרָא קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם כָּל מְלֶאכֶת עֲבֹדָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ.כג:ח …בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי מִקְרָא קֹדֶשׁ כָּל מְלֶאכֶת עֲבֹדָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ.

Lev 23:7 On the first day you shall celebrate a sacred occasion: you shall not work at your occupations. 23:8 …The seventh day shall be a sacred occasion: you shall not work at your occupations.

1. See Sharon Shalom, *From Sinai to Ethiopia* (Tel Aviv: Yedioth Aharonot, 2012), 181-182 [Hebrew].
2. Philo, “On the Special Laws 1-4,” trans. Naomi G. Cohen, in *Outside the Bible:* *Ancient Jewish Writings Related to Scripture* (eds., Louis H. Feldman, James H. Kugel, and Lawrence H. Schiffman; Philadelphia: JPS, 2013), 1075.
3. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities Books I-IV* (trans., H. St. J. Thackeray; Loeb Classical Library; London: William Heinemann, 1967 [1930]), 438-441.
4. See *Sifra,* *Emor*, Parasha 12, ch. 10, 1-4; b. *Menachot* 65a-66a; *Megillat Taanit*, Scholian on the 8th of Nissan entry.
5. Strangely, the Peshitta here reads ܘܡܢܘ ܠܟܘܢ ܡܢ ܒܬܪܗ ܕܝܘܡܐ, “and count from after the day” (ומנו לכון מן בתרא דיומא), which does not seem to clarify one way or the other (perhaps the text is corrupt).
6. The Rabbis never actually say to which Shabbat these groups refer, but from Jubilees and what we know of the Essenes, we can deduce it referred to the Shabbat after Matzot (see above).
7. Interestingly, the rabbis never mention the Samaritans who did exist during their time and also read the verse this way.
8. For more on these sources, see Vered Noam, [“Megillat Ta’anit and Its Scholion,”](https://thetorah.com/megillat-taanit-and-its-scholion/)*TheTorah.com* (2015).
9. The Rabbis always call Shavuot “Atzeret.”
10. The text here is from the Parma MS, the Oxford MS, the standard edition and the Babylonian Talmud all have versions of this story, but with a Boethesian instead of a Sadducee. See discussion in Vered Noam, *Megillat Taʿanit: Versions, Interpretation, History* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 2003), 60-61, 174-179 [Hebrew].
11. The prevalence of this assumption implies that the tradition of first grain being celebrated (whether offered or eaten) immediately after Pesach and on Matzot may imply that such a tradition predates the verse in Leviticus. Perhaps such a tradition is reflected in the book of Joshua, which describes the Israelites first Pesach on the land:

יהושע ה:יא וַיֹּאכְלוּ מֵעֲבוּר הָאָרֶץ מִמָּחֳרַת הַפֶּסַח מַצּוֹת וְקָלוּי בְּעֶצֶם הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה.

Josh 5:11 On the day after the Pesach offering, on that very day, they ate of the produce of the country, unleavened bread and parched grain.

Be that as it may, the rabbis inherited the Torah as we have it and needed to explain the verse and defend their practice.