

## First Fruits

*A compilation on a complex topic. Peter Schmidt. 2019.*

*Bible quotes are from NASB unless indicated otherwise. All underlining is mine.*

It is not easy to get the full picture about the practice of offering first fruits, because the texts talking about it are scattered. There is a host of questions related to the theme. One of them is whether the two terms **בְּכוּרִים** *bikkûrîm* and **רֵאשִׁית** *rē'sît* mean the same thing, and how they should be translated where they occur together. There are several other terms related to first fruits which can be misunderstood. Further, there are several festivals involved, and some of them are called by more than one name.

I first give an overview in the form of a table. It lists the festivals where first fruits were offered. The table comes with a number of remarks on problems of interpretation. Most of them concern the general background, though, not matters of translation. I then present the relevant texts from the Pentateuch, with some quotations from the UBS *Handbook* series added. Finally, I discuss some translation-relevant issues and comment on some word choices and individual verses.

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Table: Occasions and objects of first fruit offerings				
Month	Feast	Season	Offering	Reference
	<i>Gray highlighting marks pilgrimage festivals</i>		<i>Accompanying animal sacrifices are not listed (see Lev 23:12-13/18-19).</i>	
1 <sup>st</sup> month = Abib = Nisan	during or soon after the Feast of Unleavened Bread [see remark # 1]	beginning of barley harvest	the first sheaf [or: an “omer”?]	Lev 23:10/11 [see remark # 2]
3 <sup>rd</sup> month = Sivan	Festival of Weeks = Day of the First Fruits = Festival of Harvest (the latter two names occur only 1 x each) [> Pentecost]	seven weeks later  wheat harvest [see remark # 3]	“a new grain offering”  two loaves of bread “a freewill offering in proportion to the blessing that you have received” (NRSV)	Deut 16:9 Num 28:26  Ex 23:16a Ex 34:22 Lev 23:15-17  Deut 16:10
		in connection to either the Feast of Unleavened Bread, or the Festival of Weeks, or independently [see remark # 4]	“fresh heads of grain roasted in the fire, grits of new growth” + oil + incense	Lev 2:12-16
	at the first baking with the new grain	[see remark # 5] given to priest[?]	a loaf from the first batch of dough	Num 15:19-20
7 <sup>th</sup> month = Ethanim (= Tishri)	Festival of Ingathering (this name occurs only 2 x) = Festival of Shelters / F. of Booths / F. of Tabernacles	end of the year [see remark # 6] after harvest of second-crop grains, tree and vine crops such as olives and grapes	“Every man shall give as he is able, according to the blessing of the Lord”  grain, oil, wine; wool tree fruit etc.	Ex 23:16b Ex 34:22 (Num 18:12-13) Deut 16:13-17  Deut 18:4 [see remark # 7] Deut 26:2ff. [see remark # 8]

## 1. The first fruits and the calendar: an overview

When were which first fruits offered? The table above shows how the “bits and pieces” from different texts relate to each other. For some more details, please see the Remarks below.

### Remarks

#### 1. Lev 23:11/15: which is the “day after the sabbath”?

The meaning of the phrase “on the day after the sabbath” (Lev 23:11/15) is much debated. In summary, the problem is this:

The Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were not bound to the weekly rhythm, but were determined by date: the Passover was celebrated on the 14<sup>th</sup> of Abib (= Nisan), the Feast of Unleavened Bread for the following seven days, from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> Abib (= Nisan) (Lev 23:5-6). **Since the first and last day of this week-long festival counted as “Sabbaths” in the sense of special days of rest, there could be altogether four different Sabbaths that the text might refer to**, and a fifth possibility is to take “Sabbath” as the whole week of the festival – and there is some support by various scholars and traditions for each one of them. Further, Kiuchi presents yet another view, which also deserves consideration.

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|--|--|
| (a) rest/holiday of the 15 <sup>th</sup> ,<br>[thus the ‘omer-festival is on the 16 <sup>th</sup> ]                        | orthodox Judaism                               |
| (b) following weekly Sabbath (“Saturday”)  | some sects; Wenham, Levine[?]                  |
| (c) rest/holiday of the 21 <sup>st</sup> (/ or possibly the 22 <sup>nd</sup> )<br>(or: festival’s weeklong period of rest) | Baker (/ a Jewish sect in Ethiopia)<br>Milgrom |
| (d) the next weekly Sabbath (“Saturday”)   | Book of Jubilees[?]                            |
| (e) the Saturday after cutting the first sheaf   | Kiuchi, Hieke[?], and others                   |

I am not in the position to decide on this, but grammatically and logically the last option (e) makes sense. In a way, this goes together with the *Handbook*’s conclusion – although that is probably meant to keep the rendering ambiguous: “... it is probably best to use the ordinary word for **sabbath** when translating this verse.” – Cf. HFA: “am Tag nach dem folgenden Sabbat” (= “on the day after the following Sabbath”, i.e. after harvest has begun).

For further perusal, I offer some quotes from the literature.

Wenham (NICOT, 1979):

*On the day after the sabbath* (vv. 11, 15, cf. v. 16)—the meaning of this phrase has been the subject of much controversy. Is the sabbath in question the ordinary sabbath, i.e., the first Saturday after the beginning of the festival of unleavened bread? Or is the sabbath the first day of unleavened bread when heavy work was forbidden? According to the first interpretation “the day after the sabbath” means Sunday; according to the second it means the sixteenth day of the month.

Orthodox Judaism and most modern commentators favor the second suggestion. Some Jewish sects, however, and a few modern writers favor the first suggestion. [Footnote: Elliger, p. 315; Heinisch, p. 104; Bertholet, p. 80.] The exegetical arguments are finely balanced. It seems slightly more natural to equate “the sabbath” with Saturday than with the first day of the feast. Furthermore, if one accepts that Leviticus is based on the Jubilees Calendar, [Footnote: See above on v. 6.] it would seem more likely that the first sheaf was offered on Sunday (the day after the sabbath) than on Thursday (second day of the feast).

Levine (JPSTC, 1989) about the phrase “on the day after the sabbath” (verses 11/15):

The accepted rabbinic interpretation is that here *shabbat* does not refer to the Sabbath day but means something similar to *shabbaton* in verse 39, that is, a time of resting. This characterization applies both to the Sabbath and to festivals.... Although this interpretation resolves a difficulty in the text, it does not convey its simple sense. It has been suggested that the words ... represent an abbreviation of the phrase ... “until the morrow of the seventh ‘sabbath’ of days” in verse 16

below. Verses 15-16 use the term *shabbat* in the sense of “week”; verse 11 uses the abbreviation *shabbat* in its normal sense of a particular day, the Sabbath. ...

Hartley (WBC, 1992) (on 23:15-22):

The date for this festival is seven weeks after the firstfruits were offered on the day ממחרת שבת, “after the Sabbath.” The identification of this day for offering the firstfruits has been debated. Van Goudoever (*Biblical Calendars*, 18–29) enumerates four interpretations of שבת for beginning the counting of fifty days. In the first, שבת, “sabbath,” is for the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the fifteenth of Nisan. שבת, “sabbath,” then is taken to mean a solemn day of rest, not the seventh day of the week. M. Fishbane notes that Josh 5:10–12, which reports the first Passover celebrated on entry into the promised land, describes the people’s eating bread and קלי, “roasted grain,” on the fifteenth of Nisan (*Biblical Interpretation*, 147–49). He demonstrates that Josh 5:10–12 is an exegesis of Lev 23:10–14. Fishbane (149–51) goes on to argue that שבת in these two passages has its old technical sense of “full moon.” The LXX, *Sipra* ‘Emor 23:11, 15, Targum Yerusalmi and Targum Onqelos, Philo (*Special Laws* 2:162, 176), and Josephus (*Ant.* 3.10.5) support this position (van Goudoever, *Calendars*, 18–19). The second position is that שבת is the Sabbath falling during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Three groups, the Boethusians, the Samaritans, and the Karaites, all who very likely had priestly origins, follow this tradition (van Goudoever, 23). Bertholet (80) holds that Deut 26:9 supports this position. A third position is that it is the day after the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the twenty-second of Nisan. A Jewish sect in Ethiopia follows this practice; van Goudoever (25) posits that the origin of this tradition can be traced back into the post-exilic era. The fourth position is that שבת is the Sabbath immediately following the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Van Goudoever (25) thinks that the Book of Jubilees supports this position, though indirectly. In any case he discovers that concern for counting the fifty days was more important to the sects than it was in mainstream Judaism (29). For Christians the Council of Nicaea set the counting of the fifty days from Sunday to Sunday for πεντηκοστή, Pentecost, thus following the priestly calendar (van Goudoever, 182). The date in the heading at Exod 19:1 connects the giving of the law at Mount Sinai with the Feast of Weeks. After the destruction of the Second Temple in A.D. 70, this feast became a Feast of the Law.

Milgrom (AB, Leviticus 23–27, 2001) translates “from the day after the sabbath-week” and comments in an excursus on pp. 2056-2063. P. 2060:

In vv. 11-16, it [i.e. the word *šabbāt*] bears only one meaning, the sabbath-week, not the sabbath day.

Baker (Cornerstone, 2008) on Lev 23:9-14:

The exact date of the festival of the firstfruits of the barley harvest is debated. It was to be literally “on the day after the Sabbath” (23:11, 15–16), but which Sabbath? It could not be the one mentioned in 23:3, which occurs every week. It could be the Sabbath following the fifteenth day of the first month, the beginning of the celebration of the Unleavened Bread festival (ABD 4.317), so the events here would have happened during the Unleavened Bread festival (Ross 2002:415). This would result in the celebration of both festivals at the same time. It could refer to the seven-day period of relative rest (a weeklong Sabbath) during the Unleavened Bread celebration and therefore would start the day after this finished (Milgrom 2001:2056–2063). The latter seems preferable, not necessarily because the entire week was a Sabbath, but because the seventh day was such, with its complete cessation from work (23:8), even if it didn’t fall on the Sabbath.

Kiuchi (ATOC, 2007) on Lev 23:9-14:

... However, the common assumption of these two views that the rules in vv. 9-15 deal with the continuation of the rules on the unleavened bread in vv. 5-8 is questionable. The two sets of rules, vv. 5-8 and 9-15, are separated by the statement of the Lord’s address in vv. 9-10aa, and have their own independent introductory statements (vv. 4, 10aa). Thus it is unlikely that *haššabbat* (the sabbath) in v. 11b refers to the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The article in *haššabbat*

does not refer to the previous mention of šabbat but functions to make a genetic reference to the sabbath (IBHS 13:5.1f): it refers to the Saturday immediately after the people are ready to bring the sheaf to the priest, and the rule says that the priest waves in on the Sunday. ...

Cf. also Hieke (HThKAT, 2014) (vol. 2, pp. 903-904).

## 2. Lev 23:10/11: the first barley sheaf: a public or a private offering?

Milgrom (on Lev 2:14) mentions the

... Second Temple practice when this rite was a public offering of a single 'ōmer of barley grain rather than the individual offering of each farmer who would offer it (together with a lamb as a burnt offering; Noth 1977) at the local sanctuary whenever his grain ripened, ...

ABD (s.v. First Fruits) says about Lev 23:10-14: "...; this was a public ceremony performed on behalf of the nation." Further, Ex 34:22 is also taken as a public occasion.

However, one may question whether the texts were meant like this originally; are they not directed to the individual farmer? In Deut 16:16, the people are told they "shall not appear before the Lord empty-handed" – and this seems to refer to all three pilgrimage festivals. (Cf. the two loaves of bread to be brought in "from your dwelling places", Lev 23:17).

Hieke (HThKAT, 2014) at least considers the following (on v. 10, vol. 2, p. 902):

Angesichts des im Vergleich zum Wochenfest relativ geringen Begleitbrandopfers (nur ein Lamm gegenüber sieben Lämmern, einem Stier und zwei Widdern) wäre es schon denkbar, dass ursprünglich jeder Bauer seine erste Garbe dargebracht hat – dann aber wäre das 'omer-Fest ein erneutes »Wallfahrtsfest« kurz nach Pessach-Mazzot. Von der Praktikabilität und der rabbinischen Auslegung her ist damit das »Fest der ersten Garbe« ein offizielles Fest am Heiligtum (in Jerusalem), bei dem eine symbolische »erste Garbe« dargebracht wurde (Milgrom, 1986-1987; C. Nihan, Priestly Torah, 506).

*English of the underlined:* Considering that – compared to the Festival of Weeks – the accompanying burnt offering was relatively minor – it would be conceivable that originally every farmer offered his first sheaf.

## 3. Ex 34:22: wheat harvest: at its beginning or at its end?

There is some unclarity about the precise timing. Several resources take the Festival of Weeks (= Festival of Harvest) as the *end* of the whole grain harvest:

Stuart (NAC, 2006) talks about the offering taking place after the wheat harvest (on Ex 34:22). So also Harrison (TOTC, 1980) (on Lev 23:15):

The festival of pentecost (weeks) occurred at the termination of the harvest season, ...

This is confirmed by what ABD says. Referring to the famous Gezer calendar, it states (s.v. Agriculture, vol. 1, p. 97):

A study of this inscription shows that ... harvesting barley commenced at the Passover festival (end of March), and the conclusion of wheat harvesting was celebrated with the festival of weeks/Pentecost (end of May; Borowski 1987: 31-44). [Cf. a similar explanation s.v. Harvests, Harvesting, vol. 3, pp. 63-64.]

We have to reckon with minor differences in the harvesting time, depending on the geomorphological and climatic conditions in different regions (see *op. cit.*).

Similarly, *Das Große Bibellexikon* says (s.v. Ackerbau, § III. Ernte, p. 14):

Sie [i.e., die Erntezeit] beginnt mit der Gerste etwa Anfang April je nach Witterung und Lage des Feldes und erstreckt sich über rund zwei Monate, wobei der Weizen am spätesten geerntet wird.

*English:* It [i.e., harvesting] begins with the barley around the beginning of April, depending on the weather and the location of the field, and extends over roughly two months, with wheat being harvested last.

What is strange about this is that Israel is told to bring some bread as *first fruits*, but it happens toward the *end of the harvest* (cf. Num 28:26: “on the day of the first fruits, when you present a new grain offering”).

Milgrom (JPSTC, 1990) takes a different view. He says (re: Num 28:26-31, p. 244):

... the Feast of Weeks ... marks the beginning of the wheat harvest, which occurs seven weeks after the beginning of the barley harvest (Lev 23:15-16).

He further says (on Lev 23:15-22, p. 1991), beginning with a response to the Gezer calendar data:

However, this evidence holds for only the Gezer region, located in the southern Shephelah, where grain could ripen early. The agricultural reality of the rest of the land, however, prove otherwise:

1. As noted by the rabbis, “The beginning of the barley harvest till the end of the wheat harvest is three months” (*Ruth Rab.* 5). ...

2. The rabbis knew of years when no wheat had ripened by the festival, ...

... Thus the ‘*omer*’ of barley and the firstfruits of wheat are to be brought at the beginning of their respective seasons.

Hieke (vol. 2, pp. 906-907) also discusses this question and concludes (p. 907): “Vielleicht ist es wahrscheinlicher, dass das Wochenfest den *Beginn* der Weizenernte markierte.“ (“Perhaps it is more likely, that the Festival of Weeks marked the beginning of the wheat harvest.”)<sup>1</sup>

#### 4. (a) Lev 2:14: a voluntary or a compulsory offering?

The verse begins with an if-clause: “If [☐] you bring a grain offering of early ripened things ...”. This is not something that is demanded (as if it said “Bring a grain offering of early ripened things!”); the text only specifies the requirements which apply in case someone wants to bring such an offering. Levine clarifies:

Our text indicates a voluntary, unscheduled sacrifice to be burned on the altar and hence to be prepared with unleavened dough. The offering ordained in 23:14-17 is an obligatory offering, to be baked on Shavuot from the new grain crop, of leavened dough. It is to be placed before the Lord rather than burned on the altar.<sup>2</sup>

#### 4. (b) Lev 2:12-16: at which occasion(s) would such offering(s) be brought?

This is related to the preceding question. The text does not state at which feast or other occasions these offerings of first fruits would be made.

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<sup>1</sup> Brueggemann (Cornerstone, 2008) says (on Num 28:26):

..., the Festival of Harvest celebrated the conclusion of the barley harvest seven weeks after the first cutting of grain ...

Why he relates the Festival of Weeks to the end of the *barley* harvest, without talking about the *wheat* harvest, is not clear. Num 28:26 is about *first fruits*, and about a *new grain offering*.

<sup>2</sup> Milgrom (pp. 192-193) first states:

... the conditional construction of this verse indicates that it is a voluntary offering (Ibn Ezra), a conclusion underscored by the use of the particle *'im*, which continues the previous cases, all of which are voluntary ...

However, after discussing the case textcritically, he concludes it is a compulsory offering, one reason being the following:

..., the very term *bikkûrîm* ‘first-ripe fruits offering’ implies its compulsory nature, because all Biblical sources mandate that firstfruits must be given to the sanctuary from every crop (Num 18:13; Neh 10:36).

He changed his mind on the conjunction, now advocating “If ...”, formerly having suggested “When ...”.

The tension could be resolved though if we suppose that the farmer decided to give a larger amount of the firstfruits than the required minimum.

ISBE (s.v. First Fruits) mentions Lev 2:14-16 in connection with Ex 34:22-26 and the Festival of Weeks (Festival of Harvest). Wenham also says verse 14 suggests that “one appropriate occasion for presenting a cereal offering was the harvest festival, ...”.

But Levine sees this text as something distinct from the Festival of Weeks as described in Lev 23:15-17 (see above).

Milgrom (193) connects it with the bringing of the sheaf at the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Lev 23:10-11). Watts (HCOT, 2013), without pressing the point, also says that the sheaf offering of Lev 23:9-14 “likely does refer to the same ritual”.

Harrison, Hartley, Kiuchi and Baker do not comment explicitly on this issue.

It seems to me that, apart from syntactical considerations, the description of the offering as “fresh heads of grain roasted in the fire, grits of new growth” (v. 14), which differs from both the “sheaf of the first fruits” in Lev 23:10 and the “two loaves of bread” in Lev 23:17, suggests that Moses has indeed **additional voluntary offerings from the first fruits** in view. These might have been brought together with the “first sheaf”, or at the Festival of Weeks (Festival of Harvest), but would not have been bound to these dates.

#### **4. (c) Lev 2:14: what is the “grain offering of early ripened things” – barley or wheat?**

Milgrom argues on the basis of Arab peasants’ practice, and on the structure of the chapter, that in this verse only barley, not wheat, is in view.

#### **5. Num 15:19-20: at the first baking: Where did this happen?**

The commentaries do not explicate how this relates to the other first fruit offerings. Wenham observes that “The word for *offering* (Hebrew *ʾrūmah*, 19-20) is a technical term for a portion given to the priest ...” Where and when the handing over to a priest happened we do not know. Milgrom makes a point of the *terumah* being “a dedication without ritual outside the sanctuary, effected either by an oral declaration ..., or by a physical act ...”. It could be that these offerings were given to the priests who lived nearby.

In later Judaism, the offering was implemented in the home by the woman putting a handful of her dough into the fire (so also Brueggemann).

#### **6. Ex 23:16: The end of the year**

Ex 23:16 puts the Festival of Ingathering at “the end of the year”. The *Handbook* states:

**At the end of the year** means at the end of the agricultural year, which came in September-October, or “in the autumn” (TEV), just before the rainy season began.

But when the months are counted, the “first month” is what is elsewhere called Abib or Nisan, which is in *spring*. Thus there is mixed evidence about the new year beginning in autumn or in spring. For a thorough discussion of the issue, see e.g. ISBE s.v. New Year, § II.

#### **7. Deut 18:4: the timing**

No date is given in this passage, but wine and oil are mentioned; therefore I list this reference together with the other references concerning the Festival of Ingathering.

#### **8. Does Deut 26 talk about the Festival of Harvest or about the Festival of Ingathering?**

The commentaries do not discuss this question systematically, and the Bible dictionaries are quiet about the issue.<sup>3</sup>

Let us begin with one of the more informative commentaries on this section, namely Tigay’s (JPSTC, 1996). He says (on v. 2):

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<sup>3</sup> I checked: ABD s.v. First fruits; ISBE s.v. Booths, Feast of / Feasts / First fruits / Harvest; *Lexikon zur Bibel* s.v. Erstgeburt, Erstling; *Das Grosse Bibellexikon* has no entry for “Erstling” (= first fruit) and does not address the issue under “Fest/Feste” (= festivals).

... No date is specified for bringing them, and it probably varied for different farmers, depending on their work load, the species that each grew, and the date of the harvest of each species in each part of the country. ...

..., the ceremony probably had no necessary connection with the festivals, but many farmers would have found it most convenient to bring the first fruits when they traveled to the Temple for those festivals. [He adds information from the Mishnah.]

This practical perspective sounds reasonable at first. However, we need to note, that Deut 16:16-17 prescribes:

<sup>16</sup>“Three times in a year all your males shall appear before the Lord your God in the place which He chooses, at the Feast of Unleavened Bread and at the Feast of Weeks and at the Feast of Booths, and they shall not appear before the Lord empty-handed. <sup>17</sup>Every man shall give as he is able, according to the blessing of the Lord your God which He has given you.

These lines make it likely that people did bring their first fruits at the festivals. They had to bring *something*. Why would they not bring the first fruits, which were due anyway?

Further, the text speaks of כָּל-פְּרִי הָאָרֶץ ‘all fruit of the ground’. This does not only refer to barley and wheat, but to all other produce as well (see *Handbook*; so also Gesenius / Donner); in fact, פְּרִי *p<sup>r</sup>rî* primarily designates fruit from trees (like figs, grapes, olives, dates). These become available only later in the year, that is, at the Festival of Ingathering (= Feast of Booths). Therefore, I cannot see how the Festival of Harvest (= Festival of Weeks) [alone] can be taken as the context for the bringing of the first fruits in Deut 26, even if several commentators hold this view.<sup>4</sup>

Christensen (WBC, 2002) is more balanced when he says (on vv. 3-4):

The offering was to be presented “to the priest who is there in those days” as an act of public worship, within the context of the annual pilgrimage festivals. ... The firstfruits were to be presented at the Feast of Weeks and at the Feast of Booths, the two festivals that followed the harvests and the processing of their products.

He continues (under “Explanation”):

The basket of firstfruits was a token payment of the tithe, which was presented when the harvest was completed. The firstfruits of summer and fall produce were presented in like manner at the Festival of Booths (Sukkoth) in the fall.

What supports this view is the following quote regarding first fruits from the Mishnah (*m. Bik. 3*):<sup>5</sup>

Those who lived near [Jerusalem] would bring fresh figs and grapes, while those who lived far away would bring dried figs and raisins.

This clearly speaks of fruits from trees. They would not have been ripe yet at the Festival of Weeks (Festival of Harvest). Quoting more from Tigay, we read:

Literally, “some of the first of every fruit of the soil,” meaning that some of every species must be brought, not only those that 18:4 assigns to the priests. It is not clear how this gift of first fruits is related to that prescribed in 18:4. Perhaps the basket presented on this occasion contained a token amount of the three species listed there, plus token amounts of the remaining species, and the remainder of the three species of 18:4 were delivered to the priest on the same, or other, occasion(s).

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<sup>4</sup> Craigie (NICOT, 1976) states:

The firstfruits of the harvest were offered at the Feast of Weeks (16:9–12; cf. 18:4); on the link between the Feast of Weeks and the offering of the firstfruits, see Num. 28:26.

Similarly McConville (AOTC, 2002) and Merrill (Cornerstone, 2008). Milgrom more cautiously (vol. 3, p. 2004, on Lev 23:17):

..., the fixed day of the wheat offering is the day of firstfruits, par excellence. However, firstfruits from products other than grain can be brought at any time (Num 18:13; Deut 26:1-11).

<sup>5</sup> The hint comes from Christensen, who got it from Buber. The quote is taken from sefaria.org, accessed 19-08-02.



Anyhow, the ritual described in **Deut 26 must refer to the Festival of Ingathering (Festival of Shelters)**; apart from that, it might also refer to the Festival of Harvest (Festival of Weeks). – What fits better with this last festival is that, according to Deut 18:4, the first shearing of the sheep was also to be given to the priests, and **sheep shearing took place in the spring**, a few weeks prior to lambing (ISBE s.v. shear; IVP Bible Background Commentary on Gen 31:19).

A relatively minor question concerns **the partitive מִן־אֲשִׁית**. Keil (1870[?]) thinks it only means that “it was not necessary to put all the offerings of first-fruits into a basket and set them down before the altar”; but that still the first-fruits were to be all delivered at the sanctuary. On the contrary, Thompson (TOTC, 1974) holds “It was only a sample of the first-fruits that was to be taken, ...”. The question would then be, how is the rest transferred to the priests? But both these readings might be more complicated understandings of the verse than is necessary. Some **English versions simplify** by saying “you must take the first of all the ground’s produce” (NET), or “each of you must place in a basket the first part of each crop” (GNT).

More significant is the question **how much the people were to bring**. The text leaves that open. Tigay says:

... The first fruits are a token gift and no specific amount is prescribed.

He adds information from later Jewish sources about how this was handled.

The same question about **the amount of first fruits** also arises in Ex 23:16/19. There, Keil comments (on v. 19):

It is true the words, “the first of the first fruits of thy land thou shalt bring into the house of the Lord thy God,” are so general in their character, that we can hardly restrict them to the wave-loaves to be offered as first-fruits at the feast of Weeks, but must interpret them as referring to all the first-fruits, ... – including therefore the sheaf of barley to be offered in the second day of the feast of unleavened bread ...

But this does still not tell us what the individual had to bring at the Festival of Ingathering.<sup>6</sup> On Num 18:12-13, Keil says:

...; the law prescribed nothing in relation to the quantity of the different first-fruits, but left this entirely to the offerer himself; ...

## 2. Pentateuch texts with some *Handbook* comments

In the Pentateuch, first fruits are mentioned in texts that speak about the **festival calendar** (Ex 23 & 34, Lev 23, Num 28–29, Deut 16), or about the **priests’ rights** (Num 18, Deut 18), or they occur in other texts, **specifying certain kinds of offerings** or foreseeing living in Canaan (Lev 2, Num 15, Deut 26).

The texts are pasted below in canonical order. Only the key phrases that are underlined in the NASB text are also provided in Hebrew.

For convenience, those comments from the volumes of the UBS *Handbook* series that seemed most relevant for the topic are added. Further discussion of certain problems follows under heading # 3.

### 2.1. Exodus 23 and 34

**Exodus 23:14ff.** is part of the Sinaitic covenant and talks of **the three annual pilgrimage festivals**. The first is the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Then the text mentions two harvest-related feasts:

וְחַג הַקָּצִיר בְּכֹרֵי מַעֲשֵׂיךָ אֲשֶׁר תִּזְרַע	<sup>16</sup> “Also you shall observe the <u>Feast of the Harvest of the first fruits of your</u>
בַּשָּׂדֶה	<u>labors from what you sow in the field;</u>
וְחַג הָאָסִף בְּצֵאת הַשָּׁנָה בְּאֶסְפֶּךָ	also the <u>Feast of the Ingathering at the</u>
אֶת־מַעֲשֵׂיךָ מִן־הַשָּׂדֶה	<u>end of the year when you gather in the</u>
	<u>fruit of your labors from the field.</u>

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Milgrom on Num 18:12.

19 “You shall bring the choice first fruits of your soil into the house of the Lord your God. ...  
 ראשית בכורי אדמתך

The *Handbook* comments:

... The word for **harvest** refers to the grain harvest, in this case the harvest of the wheat, which ripened several weeks later than the barley. This is called the “feast of weeks” in 34.22. The “Harvest Festival” may be expressed as “The Festival for Harvesting [or, Reaping] Grain.”

**Of the first fruits of your labor** is difficult to relate to the **feast of harvest**, since the first **of** is not in the text and can only be assumed. (In 34.22 the word order is different and the **of** is not needed.) Is this simply another way of referring to feast of harvest, as in KJV and ASV, “the feast of harvest, the first-fruits of thy labors”? Or is it identifying what the people were to offer at the **feast of harvest**? NAB, NIV, and REB supply the word “with”: “You shall also keep the feast of the grain harvest with the first of the crop” (NAB). RSV, NRSV, and others add the word **of** without clarifying which meaning is intended.

TEV interprets **first fruits** differently: “when you begin to harvest your crops” (similarly CEV). But this is not really what the text is saying. The word for **first fruits** refers to what is harvested, not to when the harvesting begins. This “Harvest Festival” (TEV) was associated with the wheat harvest (34.22), and later with Pentecost, which came seven weeks after the feast of unleavened bread. It will be helpful for many translators to make it explicit that this festival occurs during the spring. TOT may be the easiest to follow: “You shall celebrate the festival of Harvest by offering the firstfruits of the crop from the seed you sow in your fields.” One may alternatively translate “Celebrate the festival for reaping grain in the spring by offering the first-fruits of the crops [or, harvest] that comes from the seed you sow in your fields.”

... **Ingathering** refers to the final “gathering in” of all the crops, both grain and fruit. TEV calls it “Festival of Shelters,” since “feast of booths” (Deut 16.13) became the more familiar name. ...

**At the end of the year** means at the end of the agricultural year, which came in September-October, or “in the autumn” (TEV), just before the rainy season began.

**When you gather in from the field** uses the verb from which the noun **ingathering** is derived. **The fruit of your labor** is literally “your doing,” but it refers to “the produce from the fields” (NAB). TEV’s “the fruit from your vineyards and orchards” may be too specific, for it does not allow for the final harvest of grain as well. If one needs to be that specific, then it is possible to say “... in the autumn when you harvest all your grain and pick the fruit in your vineyards and orchards.” (See the comment on “vineyards” at 22.5, and on “orchards” at 23.11.)

... and on v. 19:

**The first of the first fruits of your ground** is literally “beginning of first-fruits of your [singular] ground.” The word for **first** may also mean “best,” so most translations interpret it as “the choicest of the first fruits” (NRSV) or as “the best of the firstfruits” (NIV). **First fruits** means “the first grain” (TEV) or the first produce that is harvested.

On v. 16, compare Ex 34:22/26:

... חג שבועת ...  
 בכורי קציר השטים ...  
 חג האסיף ...  
 22 “You shall celebrate the Feast of Weeks, that is, the first fruits of the wheat harvest, and the Feast of Ingathering at the turn of the year. ...

26 “You shall bring the very first of the first fruits of your soil into the house of the Lord your God. ...  
 ראשית בכורי אדמתך

The *Handbook* says (on Ex 34:22):

**And you shall observe the feast of weeks** refers to the second of the three great festivals mentioned in 23.14-17. ... It is called “the feast of harvest” in 23.16, but it later came to be known as “Pentecost.” TEV and CEV call it “the Harvest Festival” in both places.

**The first fruits of wheat harvest** refers to the first crop of wheat that was harvested about seven weeks after the barley harvest. (See the comment at 23.15-16.)

## 2.2. Leviticus 2

**The chapter Leviticus 2**, which spells out **regulations regarding the grain offering**, also deals with the special case of grain offerings from first fruits. Lev 2:11-12/14-16 says:

... לא תעשה חמץ ...	<sup>11</sup> ‘No grain offering, which you bring to the Lord, <u>shall be made with leaven</u> , for you shall not offer up in smoke <u>any leaven or any honey</u> as an offering by fire to the Lord. <sup>12</sup> <u>As an offering of first fruits you shall [others: may] bring them</u> to the Lord, but they shall not ascend for a soothing aroma on the altar.
... כל-שאר וכל-דבש ...	
קרבן ראשית תקריבו אתם	
מנחת בפורים ...	<sup>14</sup> ‘Also if [ <i>or: when?</i> ] you bring a <u>grain offering of early ripened things</u> to the Lord, you shall bring <u>fresh heads of grain roasted in the fire, grits of new growth</u> , for the <u>grain offering of your early ripened things</u> .
... אביב קלוי באש גרש פרמל ...	
מנחת בפריד	

<sup>15</sup> ‘You shall then put oil on it and lay incense on it; it is a grain offering. <sup>16</sup> ‘The priest shall offer up in smoke its memorial portion, part of its grits and its oil with all its incense as an offering by fire to the Lord.

The content of v. 12 is in line with Lev 23:17 where we will read that the loaves of firstfruits *were* leavened. Besides, honey was among first fruits offered in Hezekiah’s time (2Chr 31:5).

On the verb in v. 12, the *Handbook* says:

**You may bring them:** as in RSV, many versions interpret this verb as giving permission rather than actually requiring that the first fruits be brought to the LORD. Others, however, see it as a strict requirement. ...

... grain offerings ... are acceptable as first fruits but are not to be burned on the altar. ... Probably they were simply given to the priests to be presented to God before they ate them.

About “first fruits”, it continues (on v. 14):

**First fruits:** this is the more technical term for the first grain gathered at the beginning of the harvest period. But the meaning is essentially the same as the word translated “first fruits” in verse 12.

## 2.3. Leviticus 23

**The chapter Leviticus 23**, which lays out **the festival calendar**, includes three occasions that are related to harvesting, and where some kind of first produce is required as an offering:

- At the **beginning of the grain harvest**, a **sheaf** is to be offered (v. 10).
- **Fifty days later**, **two loaves of bread** are required (vv. 16-17). Both these offerings – the sheaf and the loaves of bread – were presented as wave offerings (on translating “wave offering”, see separate paper).

- **On the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the seventh month** began the Festival of Shelters (v. 34). While its purpose was mainly to commemorate the exodus (vv. 42f.), its timing was after the “crops of the land” had been gathered (v. 39). On the crops to be offered, cf. Deut 16:13-17 etc. below.

The most relevant verses read as follows (Lev 23):

וּקְצַרְתֶּם אֶת־קְצִירָהּ  
 אֶת־עֹמֶר רֵאשִׁית קְצִירְכֶם  
 וְלֶחֶם וְקִלְי וְכֹרֶמֶל לֹא תֹאכְלוּ

<sup>10</sup> “Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘When you enter the land which I am going to give to you and reap its harvest, then you shall bring in the sheaf of the first fruits of your harvest to the priest. <sup>11</sup> ‘He shall wave the sheaf before the LORD for you to be accepted; on the day after the sabbath the priest shall wave it. <sup>12</sup> ‘Now on the day when you wave the sheaf, you shall offer a male lamb one year old without defect for a burnt offering to the LORD. ... <sup>14</sup> ‘Until this same day, until you have brought in the offering of your God, you shall eat neither bread nor roasted grain nor new growth. ...

מִנְחַה חֲדָשָׁה  
 לֶחֶם תְּנוּפָה שְׁתַּיִם  
 בַּכּוֹרִים  
 עַל לֶחֶם הַבְּכוֹרִים

<sup>15</sup> ‘You shall also count for yourselves from the day after the sabbath, from the day when you brought in the sheaf of the wave offering; there shall be seven complete sabbaths. <sup>16</sup> ‘You shall count fifty days to the day after the seventh sabbath; then you shall present a new grain offering to the LORD. <sup>17</sup> ‘You shall bring in from your dwelling places two loaves of bread for a wave offering, made of two-tenths of an ephah; they shall be of a fine flour, baked with leaven as first fruits to the LORD. <sup>18</sup> ‘Along with the bread you shall present seven one year old male lambs without defect, and a bull of the herd and two rams; they are to be a burnt offering to the LORD, ... <sup>19</sup> ‘You shall also offer one male goat for a sin offering and two male lambs one year old for a sacrifice of peace offerings. <sup>20</sup> ‘The priest shall then wave them with the bread of the first fruits for a wave offering with two lambs before the LORD; they are to be holy to the LORD for the priest.

בְּאַסְפְּכֶם אֶת־תְּבוּאֹת הָאָרֶץ

<sup>34</sup> “Speak to the sons of Israel, saying, ‘On the fifteenth of this seventh month is the Feast of Booths for seven days to the LORD. ...

<sup>39</sup> ‘On exactly the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the crops of the land, you shall celebrate the feast of the LORD for seven days, with a rest on the first day and a rest on the eighth day.

On the phrase “The sheaf of the first fruits of your harvest” in v. 10, the *Handbook* says:

... it is unnecessary to create a special technical term like first fruits. The “first sheaf” is quite adequate.

What is the “new grain offering” in v. 16? The *Handbook* states:

**A cereal offering of new grain:** literally, “a new grain offering.” The NEB rendering, “a grain offering from the new crop,” seems to communicate the meaning more clearly than either RSV or TEV. TEV adds the word “another,” because this offering of wheat mentioned here and in the following verse is distinct from the one of barley mentioned in the previous verses. Probably it is best to combine the ideas of TEV and NEB to say “another grain offering from the new crop [of wheat].”

Milgrom translates “a new cereal offering” and explains: “This offering is from wheat, in contrast to the “old” cereal offering from barley.”

## 2.4. Numbers 15

The verses **Numbers 15:17-21** follow the specifications for supplementary offerings (vv. 1-16). Vv. 17-21 are a short paragraph **demanding the giving of “first fruits” once the people will live in the land.** Vv. 19-20 read:

ראשית ערסתכם חלה תרימו תרומה  
19 ... when you eat of the food of the land, you shall lift up an offering to the LORD. 20 ‘Of the first of your dough you shall lift up a cake as an offering; as the offering of the threshing floor, so you shall lift it up.

The *Handbook* explains on v. 20:

The first loaf of bread baked from the first grain harvested is for the LORD. ... For the Hebrew word rendered **cake**, which probably refers to a ring-shaped loaf of baked bread, see the comments on 6.15. Since a cake is not in view here, this word is better translated “thick flat bread” or “loaf of bread” (CEV). ...

The words “lift up an offering” are better translated “set aside a levy / contribution” (see separate paper).

## 2.5. Numbers 18

**Numbers 18:8ff.** specifies which **offerings the priests receive.** The list includes the following items:

כל חלב וכל חלה וכל חלב תירוש ודבן ראשיתם  
12 “All the best of the fresh oil and all the best of the fresh wine and of the grain, the first fruits of those which they give to the LORD, I give them to you. 13 “The first ripe fruits of all that is in their land, which they bring to the LORD, shall be yours; everyone of your household who is clean may eat it.

This is a general statement about what the priests are entitled to. No specific festival or occasion is mentioned in this context. It seems to relate to the Festival of Ingathering primarily though. In connection with the Festival of Harvest we do not read of an organized offering, apart from the symbolic two loaves of bread[?] (but see table & remarks above).

The *Handbook* explains:

... The Hebrew term for best is literally “fat.” It is used here as a figure of speech, meaning “best part.” The Hebrew word for **oil** refers specifically to fresh olive oil. For “olive oil,” see 4.9. The Hebrew word for **wine** refers specifically to “new wine” (NLT), that is, the newly processed juice of grapes before or shortly after the fermentation process has begun (see PTB, pages 68-73). The Hebrew noun rendered **grain** occurs frequently in the Old Testament. It has a wide range of meaning and may include beans and peas as well as crops like wheat and barley (see PTB, pages 78-80). The English word grain expresses the general, broad

meaning of this Hebrew term. The word “corn” in the British edition of GNT should not be used as a model since it may wrongly suggest only “maize.”

**The first fruits of what they give to the LORD:** The Hebrew word for **first fruits** (*re'shit*) is literally “first,” but in this context it refers to the “first produce” (GNT), which is the best produce. ...

**The first ripe fruits of all that is in their land, which they bring to the LORD, shall be yours:** The Hebrew word rendered **first ripe fruits** (*bikurim*), which is literally “first ones” or “firstborn,” differs from the one translated **first fruits**, but they both refer to the first produce. The word **ripe** should be left implied here, so NRSV omits it. This sentence summarizes the previous sentence and also seems to include other types of produce in addition to the olive oil, new wine, and grain. This nuance is missed in GNT, which says simply “It all belongs to you.” A better model is “All the first crops [or, produce] of their land that the people present to me, the LORD, belongs to you” (similarly NLT).

## 2.6. Numbers 28–29

**The calendar of offerings in Numbers 28–29** includes a “day of the first fruits”. Num 28:26 says:

... יום הבכורים Also on the day of the first fruits, when  
... מנחה חדשה you present a new grain offering to the  
... בשבעת ימיכם Lord in your Feast of Weeks, you shall  
have a holy convocation;

The phrase “a new grain offering” is the same as it is found in Lev 23:16.

The *Handbook* says:

**A cereal offering of new grain** is literally “a new grain offering” (NET), but the context indicates that this grain belongs to the first yield of the new harvest.

In what respect is the grain offering “new”? This could either be taken as “newly harvested” (as in the *Handbook*), or as “new” in contrast to the former one, i.e. the first sheaf of barley (as Hieke sees it).<sup>7</sup> Compare the *Handbook*’s comment on Lev 23:16 above.

## 2.7. Deuteronomy 16

In **Deuteronomy 16**, Moses reviews **the three pilgrimage festivals**. Regarding the Festival of Weeks and the Feast of Booths, the chapter contains the following passages:

... מִהַחֵל חֲרֹמֶשׁ בְּקִמָּה תַחֵל לְסַפֵּר ... <sup>9</sup>“You shall count seven weeks for yourself; you shall begin to count seven weeks from the time you begin to put the sickle to the standing grain. <sup>10</sup> Then you shall celebrate the Feast of Weeks to the Lord your God with a tribute of a freewill offering of your hand, which you shall give just as the Lord your God blesses you; ...

... חַג הַסֹּפֹת ... שִׁבְעַת יָמִים ... <sup>13</sup>“You shall celebrate the Feast of Booths seven days after you have gathered in from your threshing floor and your wine vat; ...

... בְּאַסְפָּךָ מִגֵּרְךָ וּמִיִּקְבֶּךָ ... <sup>15</sup> Seven days you shall celebrate a feast to the Lord your God in the place which the Lord chooses, ...

<sup>16</sup>“Three times in a year all your males

<sup>7</sup> He says (on Lev 23:16b, vol. 2, pp. 908-909): “Die neue Speiseopfergabe von V 16 ist deshalb »neu«, weil sie sich von der vorher genannten »Speiseopfergabe« der »ersten Garbe« (von der Gerste) unterscheidet. ...”

<p>... בַּחֲגֵי הַמִּצְוֹת  וּבַחֲגֵי הַשִּׁבְעוֹת  וּבַחֲגֵי הַסֹּכוֹת  וְלֹא יֵרָאֶה אֶת־פָּנָי יְהוָה רִיקָם  ... אִישׁ כַּמִּתְנֵת יָדוֹ</p>	<p>shall appear before the Lord your God in the place which He chooses, <u>at the Feast of Unleavened Bread and at the Feast of Weeks and at the Feast of Booths, and they shall not appear before the Lord empty-handed.</u> <sup>17</sup> Every man <u>shall give as he is able</u>, according to the blessing of the Lord your God which He has given you.</p>
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The “putting the sickle to the standing grain” (v. 9) refers to the barley harvest. “Seven days” (v. 13) indicates the *duration* of the festival – “for seven days / seven days long”, not the *point of time* (NASB could be read wrongly like “seven days after you have gathered ...”).

## 2.8. Deuteronomy 18

**Deuteronomy 18:4:** As part of the Mosaic law in Deuteronomy (chapters 12–26), Deut 18 specifies the **privileges of the priests** (similarly to Num 18). Deut 18:4 says:

<p>... רִאשִׁית דִּבְנֵיךָ תִירְשֶׁךָ וְיִצְהָרְךָ  ... וְרִאשִׁית גֹּז צֹאנֶךָ</p>	<p>“You shall give him the <u>first fruits of your grain, your new wine, and your oil,</u> and the <u>first shearing of your sheep.</u>”</p>
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The *Handbook* comments:

**The first fruits of your grain, and of your wine and of your oil** refers to the “first share” (TEV), or “first part” (CEV), of the grain harvest and the other products. ...

**The first of the fleece of your sheep:** this is the only place where the wool from the first shearing of the sheep is included as part of the priests' dues. In some languages this will be rendered as “the first part of the hair that you cut from your sheep.”

## 2.9. Deuteronomy 26

**Deuteronomy 26:1ff.** describes how the annual **presentation of the first fruits** has to be done. Vv. 2-3 read:

<p>... מִרִאשִׁית אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן  ... תָּבִיא מֵאֶרֶץךָ</p>	<p><sup>2</sup> ... you shall take <u>some of the first of all the produce of the ground</u> which you bring in from your land that the LORD your God gives you, and you shall put <i>it</i> in a basket and go to the place where the LORD your God chooses to establish His name. <sup>3</sup> You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time and say to him, ‘I declare this day to the Lord my God that I have entered the land which the Lord swore to our fathers to give us.’</p>
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From the above-presented texts it is clear that first fruits had to be presented **(1.) in spring, at the beginning of the barley harvest** (although the exact temporal relation to the Feast of Unleavened Bread is not clear), **(2.) seven weeks later at the Feast of Weeks, and (3.) in autumn, at the end of the harvest (at the Festival of Shelters).** We lack clarity about what was demanded of the individual farmer, and when (see Remarks on the table), but it included giving “according to the blessing”, and there was a place for giving voluntarily.

### 3. Terminology and translation

#### 3.1. Words for “fruit(s)”:<sup>8</sup>

##### 3.1.1. The term תְּבוּאָה *tʿbūʾā*

The word תְּבוּאָה *tʿbūʾā* (as in Lev 23:39) is a general word for ‘produce / yield’ of the earth (BDB, HALOT, ISBE s.v. Fruit, vol. 2, p. 364).

##### 3.1.2. The term פֶּרִי *pʿrî*

The word פֶּרִי *pʿrî* ‘fruit’ occurs in our texts only in Deut 26:2/10. The *Handbook* comments:

**Take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground:** this means crops, of course, and the word **fruit** (also NRSV) should be understood in the general sense of “crops” or “produce,” not just what grew on fruit trees. Other ways to express this are “the first part of each crop that you harvest” (TEV) or “when you begin harvesting each of your crops, the first things you pick...” (CEV).

Interpreting *pʿrî* in this general sense is possible, but some better arguing would be desirable, because it is not so evident from the data that this conclusion is right.

***pʿrî* is foremostly the fruit from trees.**<sup>9,10</sup> (It can also be used of the fruit of the womb – in both humans and animals, and can be used figuratively.) References to trees begin with Gen 1:11-12, continue with the tree of knowledge (3:2ff.), concern fruit trees in general (Lev 19:23-24), and in particular fig trees (Prov 27:18), olive trees (Jer 11:16), and cedars (Ezek 17:23). **Vines are included as well** (Zech 8:12).

ISBE states (s.v. Fruit, vol. 2, p. 364):

This general term denotes the edible product of a tree or woody plant, i.e., the succulent tissue that envelops the seeds ... On occasion *pʿrî* is also used to refer to vegetables or general produce as the “fruit of the ground” (Gen 4:3, *pʿrî hāʾādamā*) or “fruit of the land” (Nu. 13.20, 26, *pʿrî hāʾāres*).

Gesenius / Donner agree with this latter sentence, when they list as one meaning “allg. v. allem, was die Erde trägt” (= generally of everything that the earth grows), and mention Gen 4:3 and Deut 26:2 here.

But the fruit which the explorers brought back (Num 13, mentioned in ISBE; also Deut 1:25) was the famous cluster of *grapes*, thus not field crops!

As to the phrase אֲדָמָה (הָ) פֶּרִי *pʿrî (hā) ʾādamā* “fruit of the ground” (Gen 4:3 of Abel’s offering; etc.), that is a frequent one and might suggest that field crops are in view, or included. That is not necessarily required though. Abel’s offering might well have been just fruit from trees.

One other argument for thinking primarily of fruit from trees is the mentioning of the basket in Deut 26:2. For grain, a sack would be more suitable (unless the offering comes in the shape of breads).

That the Pentateuch in other places talks very specifically of grain, flour and bread makes it all the more conspicuous that in Gen 4:3 and Deut 26 none of these are mentioned.

Further, sometimes *other* vegetation is mentioned next to *pʿrî* (Gen 1:11[?]; Ex 10:15; Lev 26:4/20; 27:30[?]; Ps 105:35). This speaks against *pʿrî* comprising all sorts of produce.

One the other hand, there are the following places that suggest that *pʿrî* does indeed have a broader meaning than just “fruit from trees”.

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<sup>8</sup> In English, “fruit” means fruit like mulberries and grapes, but in a wider sense can mean “any product of plant growth useful to humans or animals” (Dictionary.com).

“Crop” is “the cultivated produce of the ground, while growing or when gathered” (Dictionary.com).

<sup>9</sup> I checked the whole Pentateuch and several dictionaries.

<sup>10</sup> The most important kinds of fruit in Israel were figs, olives and grapes; others include dates, pomegranates, mulberries.



Lev 25:19: Then the land will yield its produce, so that you can eat your fill and live securely on it.

Deut 28:4 (and similarly throughout the chapter, and in 30:9): Blessed shall be the offspring of your body and the produce of your ground and the offspring of your beasts [3x *p<sup>o</sup>rî*], the increase of your herd and the young of your flock.

Ps 107:37 (NRSV): they sow fields, and plant vineyards, / and get a fruitful yield.

Jer 29:5: ... plant gardens and eat their produce.

It seems pressing the evidence if *p<sup>o</sup>rî* in these verses should be taken to *only* refer to fruit from trees.

There are some other places which can be read in two ways: In Deut 7:13 (“He will also bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, your grain and your new wine and your oil) “grain” *could* be taken as apposition to *p<sup>o</sup>rî* (thus equating the two), but it works equally well to take the two as complementing each other (thus “grain” would not be included in *p<sup>o</sup>rî*). – In Jer 7:20 (“on the trees of the field and on the fruit of the ground”), the two items could stand in parallel (defining each other, i.e. again *p<sup>o</sup>rî* is taken in the narrower sense as fruit from trees only), or the second item expands on the first (i.e., the text speaks of trees *and* other fruit); but we know that “fruit of the ground” at least *includes* trees. In Mal 3:11 (“so that it will not destroy the fruits of the ground; nor will your vine in the field cast its grapes,”) the vine could be an example for the “fruits of the ground”, no matter whether that is taken in the narrower or wider sense. – Thus these places are ambiguous.

**In summary**, *p<sup>o</sup>rî* is foremostly the fruit from trees. That a variety of fruit trees are mentioned, but words for grain hardly ever occur in connection with *p<sup>o</sup>rî* suggests that it *only* refers to fruit from trees. The phrases “fruit of the ground” and “fruit of the land” do not by themselves prove otherwise. However, some references, like Lev 25:19 and Jer 29:5 support a broader interpretation of *p<sup>o</sup>rî* as “crops / produce”.

The question remains whether this is what is intended in Deut 26. Since this text must refer mainly to the Festival of Ingathering in the fall (see discussion above), I would say that fruit from trees is at least in focus, if it is not in view exclusively. While other texts speak in detail about the first fruits from grain, this chapter draws attention to the fruit from trees.

**Translation:** Several versions go the same way as the *Handbook* suggests (NIV11R: all that you produce from the soil of the land / NET08: all the ground’s produce you harvest from the land / NLT07: each crop you harvest). That is alright. – Luther’s “Feldfrüchte” reduces the items to field crops, *to the exclusion* of fruit from trees. That misses the point. – On the other side, a translation with “(tree) fruits” would convey the right focus, but is probably too restrictive.

### 3.2. The terms בְּכוֹרִים *bikkûrîm* and רֵאשִׁית *rē’sît*

Both terms mean “first fruits”.

ISBE says (s.v. First Fruits):

No absolute distinction can be made between *rē’sît* and *bikkûrîm*, but *rē’sît* seems generally to mean what is prepared by human labor and *bikkûrîm* the direct product of nature ... *bikkûrîm* refers specially to things sown.”

ABD (s.v. First Fruits) is in agreement (details below).

Milgrom (Leviticus) succinctly distinguishes *bikkûrîm* and *rē’sît* like this (vol. 3, p. 1984, on Lev 23:10):

The former is designated as first-ripened fruits; the latter, as first-processed fruits.

#### 3.2.1. The term בְּכוֹרִים *bikkûrîm* ‘first-fruits’

As far as our texts are concerned, *bikkûrîm* occurs in Ex 23, Ex 34, Lev 2, Lev 23, Num 18, and Num 28.

*bikkûrîm* is related to the word for ‘firstborn’. HALOT translates “early fruits, first-fruits”.

NIDOTTE gives “firstfruits” as a gloss (# 1144) and says: “only pl. nom. to denote early harvest or firstfruits” (# 1137).

ABD (*ibid.*) says on *bikkûrîm*:

... it may refer generally to the first produce of the soil (Exod 23:16, 19; 34:26; Num 28:16; Neh 10:35; 13:31) or specifically to wheat (Exod 34:22), or the products of grain (dough, Ezek 44:30, or loaves of bread, Lev 23:17; 23:20), to fruits in general (Num 18:13; Ezek 44:30), to figs (Nah 3:12), or to grapes (Num 13:20); sometimes it simply indicates “early ripe” (Lev 2:14; 2 Kgs 4:42).

*bikkûrîm* is used of both what grows on the ground and of fruit from the trees, as Neh 10:36-37 [English 35-36] shows:

<sup>35</sup> and that they might bring the first fruits of our ground and the first fruits of all the fruit of every tree to the house of the LORD annually, <sup>36</sup> and bring to the house of our God the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle, ...

### 3.2.2. The term רֵאשִׁית *rē'sît* ‘beginning, first, choicest’

*rē'sît* occurs in almost all of the above-quoted passages (Ex 23, Lev 2, Lev 23, Num 15; Num 18, Deut 18, and Deut 26).

*rē'sît* is related to the word for ‘head’. HALOT lists the following meanings:

1. what comes first, beginning; ... 2. beginning, starting point; ... 3. the first and best; ... 4. in the context of ritual, first-fruit, choicest portion as a tithe ...

NIDOTTE’s glosses are “beginning, starting point, first, best, firstfruits”.

ABD (*ibid.*) says on *rē'sît*:

... with specific reference to processed produce rather than produce in the raw state. This term specifically refers to dough (Num 15:20, 21; Ezek 44:30; Neh 10:38 [37]) or grain (Lev 23:10; Deut 18:4; 2 Chr 31:5), to new wine (Deut 18:4; 2 Chr 31:5), to oil (Deut 18:4; 2 Chr 31:5), to honey (2 Chr 31:5), to “all the produce of the land” (2 Chr 31:5), to “the fruit of every tree” (Neh 10:38), and even to wool (Deut 18:4).

As we see from the listings, a strict distinction between *bikkûrîm* as natural fruit and *rē'sît* as processed fruit cannot be made.<sup>11</sup>

In Lev 23:10, Milgrom translates “the first sheaf of your harvest” and comments:

“First” has a temporal connotation (Gen 1:1) – that is, when you first begin to harvest. ... the ‘*ōmer* ... must be the very first sheaf.

### 3.2.3. Discussion

In Num 18:12-13, a third term occurs together with *rē'sît*, namely חֵלֶב *hēleb* ‘fat; best/choice’. The *Handbook* explains: “The Hebrew term for **best** is literally “fat.” It is used here as a figure of speech, meaning “best part.”” The versions agree on this and find different wordings for it (NRSV: the best / NIV: the finest / REB: the choicest).

Since *rē'sît* stands in apposition to the items that are characterized as *hēleb*, it must mean the same or there must be an overlap in their meaning. Thus, *rē'sît* might also mean “the best”, not just “the first”. But if this is so, it would apply to *bikkûrîm* in v. 13 as well. That stands in parallel, and includes items that were not mentioned before (like oil, wine and grain were). **So we can hardly argue that *rē'sît* is “more choice” than *bikkûrîm*.**<sup>12</sup>

But there is another hint as to the meaning of *bikkûrîm*: The word בִּכּוּרֵי *bikkûrâ* (Isa 28:4 etc.) is defined and translated by the SDBH (sdbh.org) as

= fruit of the fig tree, of the variety that ripens early (in June); ► appreciated because of their fine flavor – early fig.

That *bikkûrâ* is used of the early figs could be taken as one argument for saying that the similar word *bikkûrîm* also refers to just the first fruits, without necessarily implying better quality. In Hos 9:10, *bikkûrâ* occurs together with *rē'sît*.

<sup>11</sup> On the distinction, cf. Milgrom (Numbers), Excursus 43 “First Fruits”, pp. 427-428.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Ashley (NICOT, 1993), who says:

The question is whether *first* (*rē'sît*) here indicates quality or time, since it may indicate either. That the word many times means “first fruits” does not help to decide the issue here. Perhaps it is used intentionally because of its ambiguity as a term for “the best” (*hēleb*) in v. 12a and “the first” (*bikkûrîm*) in v. 13.

Perhaps, in Num 18, it is assumed that from a certain amount of first crops – say what was harvested on the first day – the best items were chosen as an offering.

### 3.2.4. The combination of בְּכֹרִים *bikkûrîm* and רְאִשִׁית *rē'sît*

Variations of the construct phrase רְאִשִׁית בְּכֹרִים *rē'sît bikkûrîm* occur in Ex 23:19; 34:26; Ezek 44:30. ISBE (*ibid.*) concedes:

The phrase “the first of the first fruits” ... is not quite clear. It may mean the first ripe or the choicest of the first fruits.

Houtman (HCOT, 2000) presents the possibilities perfectly (vol. 3, p. 268, on Ex 23:19; slightly shortened):

רְאִשִׁית, derivative of ראש, ‘beginning,’ ‘first(fruits),’ ‘the best/choicest’; it is not always clear whether רְאִשִׁית is a designation of time or of quality. Also in 23:19; 34:26, where רְאִשִׁית is used in construct chain with בְּכֹרֵי אֲדָמָתְךָ, multiple interpretations are possible: (a) ‘the first of the first products (the very first products) of your land;’ (b) ‘the best of the first products ...’ The first interpretation finds support in LXX 23:19, where the expression is applied to the fruits, which are the first to be ripe and harvested. In these interpretations, the genitive is understood as a partitive genitive. It is also possible that an exegetical genitive is meant: (a) ‘the first, the firstfruits ...;’ (b) the best, the firstfruits ...’ To my mind, it is quite well possible that רְאִשִׁית and בְּכֹרִים here are no more than synonyms, and that רְאִשִׁית is added to express that רְאִשִׁית in Deuteronomy, where the term בְּכֹרִים does not occur, means the same as בְּכֹרִים in other passages.

Houtman’s preference for the exegetical genitive seems uncommon. But T4T takes it the same way when it condenses both terms to “the first part of what you harvest”.

Most seem to favor the first option (b) above: HALOT renders the phrase as “the best of the first fruits of your land”. Stuart (NAC, 2006) also translates “Bring the best of your first fruits ...”. He sees this command as addressing the danger

that Israelites would be tempted not to bring the proper portion (if it were a tithe) or the proper quality (if it were either a tithe or any other grain/oil/wine offering).

He concludes:

Accordingly, both the first and the best of one’s harvest was due to God – from any of the various harvests that the festivals followed.

Whether it was really necessary to emphasize this point is debatable though. Nevertheless, most English versions follow this, and the *Handbook* endorses the same translation.<sup>13</sup>

NET differs in that it follows the first option (a), which also makes good sense.

### 3.2.5. Translation

Both בְּכֹרִים *bikkûrîm* and רְאִשִׁית *rē'sît* mean “first fruits”. But the word “fruit(s)” in English can be misleading in focussing on fruit from trees. Other languages might have the same problem (German does).

The word choice for *bikkûrîm* has to take into regard the fact that it can refer to harvested grain as such, but also – at least sometimes – to grain in processed form, namely dough or bread, and finally also to fruit from trees.

Likewise, when choosing a word for *rē'sît*, it has to be fitting for produce as diverse as grain, dough, wine, oil, honey, fruit from trees, and wool.

Put differently, the word choices for *bikkûrîm* and *rē'sît* need to match the specific objects that they refer to, and this can differ according to context. For instance, in Lev 23:17 NASB says “You shall bring in ... two loaves of bread ... as first fruits ...”. Unless someone is familiar with “first fruits” as a technical term, it is a rather strange collocation to call bread “fruit”. Some better options are these:

<sup>13</sup> ABD mentions, but does not discuss this construct phrase.

GNT: “Each loaf shall be ... presented to the Lord as an offering of the first grain to be harvested”.

NLT: “They will be an offering to the LORD from the first of your crops.”

T4T: “That bread will be an offering to me from the first wheat that you harvest each year”.

One can try to distinguish *bikkûrîm* and *rē'sît* by speaking of first-ripened and first-processed produce respectively – where this really applies. In Num 18:12-13, for instance, NIV translates both terms as “firstfruits”, but REB calls *rē'sît* “firstfruits”, and *bikkûrîm* “first-ripe fruits”.

*rē'sît* could imply the idea “best / choicest”, but from what I have read so far it seems safer to me to not use that as the default term, but to hold on to “first fruits” as primary meaning. One reason is that it is not evident to me that first fruits exhibit the best quality necessarily (except perhaps when it comes to pressing oil).<sup>14</sup>

Another potential problem with a short phrase like “first fruits” is that it could suggest that the crop is not fully ripe yet – edible perhaps, but still sour. There could be a need for a paraphrase like “first-ripe fruits”.

Strictly speaking, “first-harvested / first-gathered fruits” is more appropriate than “first-ripe fruits”, because what the law requires of the people pertains to their actual harvest, not to any fruit out on the field.

Regarding the combination *rē'sît bikkûrîm* (Ex 23:19 etc.), the choice is difficult. One may go with the majority and convey the meaning “the best of the first products”. But “the very first products” is also possible, and the interpretation as synonyms cannot be ruled out either (see comments above).

### 3.3. Remarks on individual references

#### 3.3.1. Ex 23:16

While Ex 23:16 is the first place where we read about first fruits, and encounter the “Festival of Harvest” and the “Festival of Ingathering”, translators need to be aware that later they are more commonly called “Festival of Weeks” and “Festival of Shelters” respectively.

The “Festival of Harvest” and the “Festival of Ingathering” need to be clearly distinguished in the receptor language. For the first one, Houtman (vol. 3, p. 258/266) suggests “Feast of Reaping” and explains: “קציר denotes the harvest of the crops standing in the field, such as barley ... and wheat ...” The second one he calls the “Feast of Harvest” – which in the traditional English versions denotes the first one!

Another issue in this verse is the phrase “end of the year”. For readers who compare this with other texts, that is a mismatch (see Remark # 6 after the table further above). GNT tries to avoid this by saying “in the autumn”. Even less ambiguous is NLT07 when speaking of the “end of the harvest season”.

#### 3.3.2. Lev 2:11-12

The verses read:

<sup>11</sup> ‘No grain offering, which you bring to the Lord, shall be made with leaven, for you shall not offer up in smoke any leaven or any honey as an offering by fire to the Lord. <sup>12</sup> As an offering of first fruits you shall bring them to the Lord, but they shall not ascend for a soothing aroma on the altar.

As to v. 12, the translator needs to decide **what “them” refers to**. Option (a) is to read “them” as referring to *normal grain offerings*, but this cannot work because the sentence continues “... , but they shall not ascend for a soothing aroma on the altar” – and the memorial portion of the grain offerings *was* burned on the altar (v. 2). Option (b): The *Handbook* says:

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<sup>14</sup> Also, when the New Testament uses “first fruits” as a metaphor, what matters is the aspect of time or initial position, not of best quality. It is hard to know, of course, whether the New Testament writers had *rē'sît* or *bikkûrîm* in mind when they were applying this metaphor. Anyhow, the two words are closely related.

**Them:** this pronoun seems to refer to the grain offerings made with yeast or honey mentioned in verse 11. They are acceptable as first fruits but are not to be burned on the altar.

This is Milgrom's view (referring to Dillmann and Ryssel 1897, but without reproducing any arguments).

(c) Alternatively, "them" refers to *leaven and honey*. This is how Hieke understands the text when in his translation of v. 12 he explicates as follows:

Als Erstlingsdarbringung sollt ihr sie (Sauerteig und Honig) für JHWH darbringen, aber auf dem Altar sollen sie nicht zum Duft der Beruhigung aufsteigen.

Judging by their brief comments, both Levine and Hartley understands it the same way. Since "leaven and honey" are the closest possible antecedent, I prefer this view.

As another related matter in v. 11, we need to note that the Hebrew text speaks first of חֲמֵץ *ḥāmēš*, then of סֹדֵר *ś'ōr* – a distinction that almost no English versions represents; they translate both terms with either "leaven", or both with "yeast". But *ḥāmēš* is the way of preparation, *ś'ōr* is the leavening agent.<sup>15</sup> *ḥāmēš* is "something leavened" (SDBH, cf. BDB, HALOT). *ś'ōr* is "leaven (BDB) / sour (leavened) dough (HALOT) / sourdough (Milgrom, referring to TDOT) / yeast[?]" (Wenham)".

Hartley's translation takes this into account:

"You are not to prepare any grain offering which you present to Yahweh with leaven, because you must never burn any yeast or any honey as a gift for Yahweh.

<sup>12</sup> As an offering of firstfruits you may present them to Yahweh, but they are not to be offered up on the altar as a soothing aroma.

Notwithstanding, logically speaking, it makes more sense to speak of "leavened stuff" being offered as first fruits [of grain, that is] than of "yeast/sour dough" being offered as "first fruits".<sup>16</sup>

Further, the English versions show a surprising diversity and some odd interpretations.

NRSV and NJPS speak of "choice products". Perhaps this is their way of avoiding of speaking of yeast/sour dough as first fruits, but if the referent is clarified as *bread* made with yeast/sour dough, I see no reason to move away from "first fruits/products" and for emphasizing the idea of high quality (Levine makes the same point).

NLT07 says "You may add yeast and honey to an offering of the first crops of your harvest, ..." – but although "adding" could apply to the yeast, regarding honey the Hebrew text probably has honey in view as a separate item among the first fruits, not as an ingredient[?].

T4T says: "You may bring to Yahweh an offering of the first part of your harvest, but that is not to be burned on the altar ...". This rendering relates the pronoun "them" *neither* to the grain offerings, *nor* to leaven and honey. It also wrongly suggests that the offering of first fruits was voluntary.

GNT says:

<sup>11</sup> None of the grain offerings which you present to the Lord may be made with yeast; you must never use yeast or honey in food offered to the Lord. <sup>12</sup> An offering of the first grain that you harvest each year shall be brought to the Lord, but it is not to be burned on the altar.

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<sup>15</sup> Rendtorff (BKAT, 2004) states: "Dabei bezeichnet jeweils, wie in Lev 2,11, חֲמֵץ die verbotene Art der Zubereitung, סֹדֵר hingegen das Säuerungsmittel ..." [with reference to ThWAT]. So also Milgrom, who translates "... shall be made leavened ... any leaven or any honey ..."

<sup>16</sup> Examples come from the German Elberfelder, and from Rendtorff (BKAT, 2004):

<sup>11</sup> Alles Speisopfer, das ihr dem HERRN darbringt, darf nicht aus Gesäuertem gemacht werden; denn von allem Sauerteig und allem Honig sollt ihr für den HERRN nichts als Feueropfer in Rauch aufgehen lassen.

<sup>11</sup> Kein Speisopfer, das ihr für Jhwh darbringt, soll gesäuert zubereitet werden; denn jeglicher Sauerteig und jeglicher Honig, von denen sollt ihr keine Gabe für Jhwh in Rauch aufgehen lassen.

11b is rendered wrongly, or at least easy to misunderstand (see NASB and the whole discussion). V. 12 completely shifts the focus of the Hebrew text.

CEV, after speaking of “yeast and honey” in v. 11, says “You may offer either of them separately, when you present the first part of your harvest ...”. “Separately” is unsatisfying, because to my knowledge there is no indication that yeast was offered as an item by itself.<sup>17</sup>

This last point also applies to GCLNR00, but otherwise it is quite elegant and clear:

<sup>11</sup> Kein Speiseopfer, das ihr dem Herrn darbringt, darf mit Sauerteig zubereitet sein; ihr dürft auch keinen Honig verwenden. <sup>12</sup> Wenn ihr die ersten Früchte eurer Ernte zum Herrn bringt, dürfen Sauerteig und Honig nicht fehlen; aber als Opfer, das auf dem Altar verbrannt wird, sind sie ausgeschlossen.

*English:* <sup>11</sup> No meal offering which you offer to the Lord must be prepared with sour dough; you must not use any honey either. <sup>12</sup> When you bring the first fruits of your harvest to the Lord, sour dough and honey must not be missing; but they are excluded from the offerings that are burned on the altar.

But like with NLT above, honey seems to be understood as an ingredient, which is questionable.

As to “**shall**” *versus* “**may**” in v. 12, “may” is sufficient. The prescription to bring leavened stuff is not in focus. The way of presenting is, and it refers only[?] to those two loaves of bread.

### 3.3.3. Lev 23:10

Lev 23:10 speaks of the עֹמֶר רֵאשִׁית *‘ōmer rē’sīt*. *‘ōmer* is a ‘sheaf’, i.e. a “bundle of harvested ears of grain” (SDBH), cf. *Realia Handbook* (s.v. sheaf, § 1.1.7, pp. 12f.). *‘ōmer* is also the name for a dry measure occurring in Ex 16. Theoretically, this could be in view here as well, but none of the common English versions takes this meaning.

However, according to Milgrom (Leviticus 23-27, AB, p. 1983), the rabbinic tradition did. And in his commentary on Numbers (JPSTC, p. 245, 1990), Milgrom does not refute this when he simply states: “A measure, called “omer,” of the barley harvest is brought as a first fruits offering seven weeks earlier (Lev 23:10).” Interestingly, NIDOTTE (s.v. שָׁבִיעַ *šābū(a)* ‘week’, # 8651, vol. 4, pp. 20-24) also says (21): “The firstfruits of the barley harvest was a measure called an omer (Lev 23:10); ...” – without further discussion.

### 3.3.4. Lev 23:16-17

In the translation of Lev 23:16, the word for מִנְחָה חֲדָשָׁה *minhâ ḥ<sup>a</sup>dāšâ*, lit. ‘new grain offering’, has to be one that is fitting for a loaf of bread, because that is what it was – see the next verse. In v. 17, one could add “You shall bring it in from your dwelling places as/ in the form of two loaves of bread”.

### 3.3.5. Num 15:19-20

The words “lift up an offering” (Num 15:19-20) are better translated “set aside a levy / contribution” (see separate paper).

### 3.3.6. Num 18:12-13

There is an exegetical issue with the two **relative clauses** in Num 18:12-13. The question is whether they should be understood as restrictive or as appositive ones. The details cannot be presented here. Although some grammarians would argue for the first, the context seems to suggest the second – as e.g. NRSV has it.

The next question is how this whole clause governed by רֵאשִׁיתָם *rē’sītām* in v. 12 relates to what precedes. It is an apposition: “the best” *is* “the first fruits”. I think several versions have this wrong and should not be followed (ESVUS16 “the firstfruits of what they give”; NET08 “the first fruits of these things that they give”; GNT “the best of the first produce”).

### 3.3.7. Num 28:26

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<sup>17</sup> Milgrom, referring to TDOT, says *š’ōr* is “probably “sourdough,” a leaven consisting of yeast and lactic acid, which itself is not eaten”.

The phrase “a new grain offering” should be translated identically here and in Lev 23:16.

### 3.3.8. Deut 26:2

GCLNR00 and HFA both just say “die ersten Früchte” (= the first fruits), which means that “all” is dropped. Perhaps “all” was felt unnecessary, and the command taken as a general rule applying to all kinds of fruits; but clearer is Einheitsübersetzung 2016 with “von den ersten Erträgen aller Feldfrüchte” (= of the first crops of all field crops). The problem with this phrase is the word Feldfrüchte (field crops) (see § 3.1.2, at the end).

### 3.4. First fruits in the New Testament

The Greek New Testament uses the word ἀπαρχή in the senses “first offering / first portion / first”. A detailed discussion of its meaning and translation is not part of this paper, but the entry in ISBE (s.v. First Fruits) will be quoted. It summarizes the usage:

In the NT *aparchē* is applied figuratively to the first convert(s) in a particular place (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:15); to the Christians of that age (Jas. 1:18; 2 Thess. 2:13), and to the 144,000 in heaven (Rev. 14:4); to Christ, as the first who rose from the dead (1 Cor. 15:20, 23); as well as to the blessings which we receive now through the Spirit, the earnest of greater blessings to come (Rom. 8:23).

This shows how important the concept of “first fruits” is in the New Testament.

Some issues could not be dealt with here. I restricted myself to texts from the Pentateuch. I did not include the precise definitions of words like דָּגָן *dāgān* (as in Num 18:12), כַּרְמֶל *karmel* (as in Lev 23:14), or different types of bread, nor did I pursue the question whether “honey” is honey from bees or fruit syrup (see *Handbook* on Lev 2:11). The relation between first fruits and the first-born could be examined more closely, and so could the relation between first fruits and the tithe.