

LIVING ACCORDING TO GOD'S CALENDAR

The great distinction between the calendars of the nations and God's way of measuring time

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In the year 1752, the people living in the American colonies went to bed on September 2nd and when they woke up, it was September 14th, which is twelve days later. That's what Benjamin Franklin wrote in his *Poor Richard's Almanack* for that year. And indeed that is true, although it wasn't a case of the entire region being in a coma or under the influence of hypnosis. It was simply an adjustment of the calendar. But how it did come to this point?

The people of antiquity around the world were aware of the solar cycle. It was widely known that there was a fixed time from one year to the next in which days are the shortest or the longest, called solstices, and when days and nights are of equal length, called equinoxes.

The challenge for many nations was trying to align 24-hour days and lunar cycles of $29\frac{1}{2}$ days with the solar cycle that was slightly under $365\frac{1}{4}$ days, so that the solstices and equinoxes were consistent on the same date each year. This has led to the development of many types of calendars over the centuries, each one with unique ways of measuring time.

The Julian Calendar (46 B.C.)

- 12 months of varying length
- Totaling 365 days plus 1 extra day every 4 years (leap year)

The first attempt toward standardization took place in 46 B.C. when Julius Caesar officially adopted what became known as the Julian calendar. In those days, it wasn't important to know what year it was in a continuous way of counting. They simply identified years according to the time when a particular consul ruled over the Roman senate. Whenever a new consul was elected, the numbering of the year started over again.

The Julian calendar was only concerned with approximating a solar year, so it had twelve months of varying lengths, totaling 365 days, and added one day every four years in order to maintain the relationship between dates and the seasons. That was the introduction of the concept of the leap year.

That calendar was adopted throughout the lands influenced by Rome, including Europe. The problem with that calendar, however, was that it was not totally accurate. Because the actual solar year is about eleven minutes less than $365\frac{1}{4}$ days, the Julian calendar gained one day every 128 years, in comparison to the sun. Consequently, over time, the dates of the equinoxes and solstices shifted considerably. By the 16th century, that error had reached ten days.

The Gregorian Calendar (1582 A.D.)

- 12 months of varying length
- Totaling 365 days
plus 1 extra day every 4 years,
except for years that are exactly divisible by 100,
but not divisible by 400

Because of the accumulated error, in 1582 Pope Gregory XIII instituted a new calendar that has become known as the Gregorian calendar. It reset the dates to conform with the spring equinox by dropping ten days from that year, and it refined the way of inserting days on leap years. Instead of strictly every 4 years, a new formula began in which a day is added every 4th year, except for years that are exactly divisible by 100, unless they are divisible by 400. So the year 2000 was a leap year, but 1900 wasn't.

But back in the day when the Gregorian calendar was being adopted, nations that were not influenced by the Roman Catholic church, like England and those in Scandinavia, resisted the reform. They considered it to be an attempt by Rome to suppress Protestant churches. So the American colonies followed suit. And that meant for much of the time before independence, American calendars were significantly different than those in most of Europe.

It was not until 170 years later in 1752, that England's parliament adopted the Gregorian calendar, which meant the American colonies followed suit. By that time, the error had reached 11 days. As a result, in September of that year, the calendar jumped from the 2nd to the 14th and the month was only nineteen days long. That also means that no American or British citizen had a birth date of September 3rd through the 13th, 1752. And some uninformed people thought that they had lost eleven days of their lives.

The Biblical Hebrew Calendar

- 12 lunar months of 29 or 30 days
- Totaling 354 days
plus 1 extra month when the barley was not ripe
by Passover

The Hebrew or Jewish calendar has faced similar issues. In biblical times, counting years was not on-going like we do today. Years were numbered according to the rule of kings. So it really wasn't important to know what year it was. But it was important to know when months began, because God decreed that the observance of feasts was according to the cycle of the moon (Lev 23:4-39; Ps 81:3). Thus, twelve times during a year, months began with the sighting of the new moon. That means months could either be 29 or 30 days long, totaling 354 days for twelve months. It also means that their way of reckoning time was observational in nature, not mathematical.

The most significant factor was making sure that the cycle of the feasts was consistent with the seasons. It was based on making sure that Passover always occurred on the full moon near or after the spring equinox. Once that was established, it assured that the rest of the feasts would also occur on certain days, including *Yom Teruah* (Trumpets) on a new moon and *Sukkot*

(Tabernacles) on a full moon. The only question was—how would they adjust the calendar in order to maintain a consistent relationship between the cycles of the sun and the moon? The Israelites did not have astronomical observatories like the Incas and the pagans of Stonehenge. But God gave them an indicator in nature.

In Leviticus 23:10-14, God commanded the people to cut the first grain to ripen, which was barley, and to offer a sheaf as a wave offering on the day after the Sabbath following Passover. So the ripening of that grain had to occur before the 16th of the month of Nisan (the first month of the religious calendar), and realistically early enough in the month so that they could cut the sheaf and bring it with them to Jerusalem for Passover.

This issue is addressed in the *Mishnah* (*Sanhedrin 12a; 10b*)¹ and is given extensive discussion in the *Talmud* (*Sanhedrin 11a-12b*), confirming that priests would go out into the barley fields during Adar, the twelfth month of the religious calendar. And if they determined that the barley would not ripen by the middle of Nisan, the first month of the religious calendar, they would add a thirteenth month to the year, called *ve'adar*, literally meaning “and *adar*” but has the sense of Adar II. That would allow barley to be the first fruit grain to ripen and to be used as a wave offering just as God commanded. But in addition, it would cause the timing of Passover to readjust consistently to the spring equinox.

In other words, they were able to observe all of the feasts from year to year at the exact same time according to the sun and the seasons, and on the same date of the lunar month, as instructed in Leviticus 23. This simple approach did not require any kind of mathematical calculations like other nations had to do, including our modern Gregorian calendar. They just had to follow the cycles that God had woven into nature. And it worked out well because it was just a matter of trusting in the Creator of the universe.

The Babylonian Calendar

- 12 lunar months of 29 or 30 days
- Totaling 354 days
plus 1 extra month 7 times over a 19-year period

Later, when the Jewish people were taken into captivity in Babylon, they were exposed to the way that the Babylonians determined the calendar. The Babylonians also added an entire lunar month occasionally to their calendar, but it was determined mathematically, not by observation alone. By adding a thirteenth lunar month seven times during a 19-year cycle, the year would always recalibrate very close to the solar year.

When the Jewish people returned from captivity, they brought the Babylonian influence with them. For the first time, they gave names to the months that had only been numbered previously.² On the other hand, many scholars believe that they did not use the Babylonian mathematical method during the second temple period. Instead, it is believed that they continued to rely on observations regarding the moon and the ripening of barley.

¹ The *Mishnah* is the oral tradition that describes how things were done in the second temple period and later written down in the second century A.D.

² The names were based on the Akkadian language that was the precursor to Aramaic, the language of Babylon.

The Rabbinical Hebrew Calendar

- 12 lunar months of 29 or 30 days
- Totaling 354 days
plus 1 extra month 7 times over a 19-year period
- Modified by rules of postponement

After the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. and as the Jewish people moved away from an agrarian economy, the rabbis stopped relying on observing barley, and they only used the mathematical method they learned in Babylon with seven leap years over a 19-year cycle. That practiced has continued until today.

So now it is possible to determine in advance whether a year will be a leap year or not. That is why Passover and all of the feasts move around within a 30 day range from year to year. Meanwhile, Easter moves around based on its own set of mathematical calculations. And from time to time Passover and Easter align themselves so that Passover coincides with Good Friday and *Bikkurim* (First Fruits) coincides with Easter, just as it was in the year when Yeshua (Jesus) died.

What if you try to project backward in time rather than forward? Some people have taught that you can determine the exact date and day of the week of biblical events like the crucifixion and resurrection of Yeshua using the algorithms of the Hebrew calendar. And there are websites that make the same claims. But there is a real problem with that kind of approach. The current algorithms in use have been manipulated so that the days of the week are distorted.

Beginning with Hillel II in 359 A.D., the rabbis refined the way that the new moon (Heb. *molad*) was determined mathematically. They created rules that could postpone *Rosh Hashanah* (New Year) one or two days. This was not done in order to keep the calendar synchronized with the solar cycle, as they did by adding extra months seven out of 19 years. The rules were designed to make sure that *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* never fall on certain days of the week. They didn't want *Rosh Hashanah* to fall on a Wednesday or a Friday, because that would mean *Yom Kippur* would occur on a Friday or a Sunday, which would mean having two consecutive Sabbath days, and in their way of thinking, that would be too inconvenient. They also didn't want *Rosh Hashanah* to fall on a Sunday because that would cause *Hoshana Rabbah*, the last day of *Sukkot* to fall on a Saturday. On that day, it was traditional for the Jews to walk around the synagogue seven times with their *lulav and etrog*,³ and that was considered to require too much exertion on the Sabbath. So in these cases, *Rosh Hashanah* is postponed one or two days and the year is lengthened by that same amount.

Later, the rabbis came up with some additional refinements, but the primary rules are all about preserving control over the way that the feasts are observed, not about staying in harmony with the sun and the seasons. That is why you cannot project the Hebrew calendar as it is observed today back to second temple times, and any assumptions that some teachers make about dates simply cannot be accurate.

The truth of the matter is that in biblical times, the beginning of the year and all of the feasts could take place on any day of the week, including the Sabbath. That fact is verified in the

³ A *lulav* consists of palm, willow and myrtle branches that are bound together and waved along with an *etrog*, which is a citrus fruit, also known as the citron.

Mishnah, which describes such occurrences, and the *Mishnah* was written long before the rabbinical rules were instituted.⁴

The postponement rules that manipulate today's Jewish calendars detract from an important biblical principle regarding inconvenience. Leviticus 25 describes how the people were to observe the sabbatical year in which they could not sow or harvest any crops:

“If you say, “What are we going to eat on the seventh year if we do not sow or gather in our crops?, then I will so order My blessing for you in the sixth year that it will bring forth the crop for three years” (Lev 25:20-21).

As this verse indicates, God made it clear that He was capable of providing for the food needs of the people by giving them an abundant harvest that covered multiple years. In biblical times, the same was true when consecutive days of rest were caused by the feasts occurring right before or after the weekly Sabbath. The postponement rules that prevent such occurrences today for the sake of convenience fail to acknowledge the faithfulness of God's provision, and have been an unfortunate addition.

The point is that the way things are done today regarding the Jewish calendar are not how they were done in biblical times. Nevertheless, for the sake of harmony with the greater Jewish community, it does seem reasonable to follow the timing of the feasts and holidays according to the Jewish calendar that is being used today. We just need to avoid assuming that this is how it has always been done.

The Islamic Calendar

- 12 lunar months of 29 or 30 days
- Totaling 354 days

In Islam, the calendar is totally based on the cycles of the moon and it does not add leap days or months to bring it back into conformity with the solar cycle. So it loses about eleven days per year, which means every eight years a particular month shifts to a completely different season, such as from spring to winter. And that explains why *Ramadan*, the month of fasting, moves throughout the year over time.

We might ask, why doesn't Islam have a corrective measure that keeps years consistent with the solar cycle and the seasons? In the Quran (9:36), Muhammad declared that it is forbidden to add months to the calendar, because Allah fixed time when He created the heavens and the earth. It doesn't matter that his reasoning was flawed and based on a false understanding of the cycle of the sun. If Allah declared it to Muhammad, then no Muslim is going to dispute it.

But since the Hebrew calendar is primarily derived as a means of observing the feasts annually, and Islam is oriented toward repudiating Judaism and Christianity in many aspects, could it be that the prohibition against adding leap months is reactionary to the biblical feasts? Since Islam rejects the feasts as being valid, there is no need to provide a means of correction for the 354 day span of twelve lunar months. Thus, while Judaism recalibrates years by adding occasional thirteenth months in order to *preserve* the seasonal observance of the feasts, Islam lets variations of the seasons to occur in order to *deny* the feasts.

Ultimately it is a spiritual battle, because Islam categorically opposes the works of

⁴ See *Menachot 99b, K'rithot 19a, Shekalim 8:3, Shabbat 148a, Pesachim 58a.*

YHWH described in the Bible, so it makes sense that it would seek to spread a different calendar around the world along with a different understanding of God, a different prophet, and a different holy book. Without question, this subtle distinction in these calendars supports the Islamic objective of replacing Judaism and Christianity with an entirely different way of worship and daily life.

God's calendar and His plan for this world

It is important to understand the nature of these calendars, for they reflect much greater issues than merely measuring time. The key point here is that God uses time in His plan for this world. He made this evident at the time of Creation, when He declared:

“Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night, and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years” (Gen 1:14).

Two verses later, these two great lights are identified as the sun and moon. They are described as having two purposes. One is practical—they “separate day from night,” which creates a rhythm of life. The other purpose is providing a structure for recognizing God's presence in the world. As we see here, that structure is evident in four ways—signs, seasons, days and years. Each of these terms has specific significance:

יום (*yom*) – “day” and שנה (*shaneh*) – “year” both are terms that relate only to the sun. In the biblical way of reckoning time, when the sun sets, a new day begins. When the earth completes a full circuit around the sun, a new year begins. So that tells us that certain days will have great significance based on God's great acts, and we are able to recognize those acts in a memorial fashion on the anniversary of those acts.

אֵת (*ot*) – “sign” is a term that indicates the occurrence of a special means of communication by God. In the context of these two great lights, the setting of the sun served as an indicator of when the weekly day of rest begins and ends—the time period when the people are to be set apart from the world (Ex 31:17). Likewise, future dramatic changes in the appearance of the sun and the moon will serve as a sign of the end of the age (Joel 2:21).

מוֹעֵד (*moed, pl. moadim*) is used in a more diverse manner in the *Tanakh* (Old Testament). Here in Genesis 1:14, this word is translated as “season.” But it is more commonly used in Scripture in the sense of a “feast, festival, or appointed time.” So what concept is being expressed in this verse? Is this a description of the climatic seasons or appointed times of the feasts? From our vantage point today, we know that the sun, not the moon, is associated with the spring, summer, fall and winter seasons on earth. So it is easy to think that the sun is the subject here and the results are the climactic seasons. But the greater context of Scripture reveals a different perspective.

English translations of Psalm 104:19 tell us that God “made the moon for the seasons.” not the sun. Astronomically that makes no sense. But when you read it in the Hebrew, it becomes clear—*asah yareah le-moadim*. Clearly *moadim* is a reference to the normal use of the word—the feasts or appointed times, not climactic seasons. Unquestionably, the feasts are all determined by the cycle of the moon. Thus contextually and grammatically, this verse is saying: “God made the moon for the feasts.” The same is true in Genesis 1:14. Here, too, the moon was established for the appointed times of the feasts. This is consistent with what we see in Leviticus 23 that the biblical feasts are to take place on specific days of the lunar month.

This does not mean the sun has no role when it comes to the *moadim*. because the feasts are to be observed annually, which involves the cycle of the sun. The point is that from the very

beginning God intended for both the sun and the moon not only to provide light that is necessary for life, but He uses them to remind us of the great things He does in this world and the importance of having an on-going relationship with Him.

That calls for acknowledging God's calendar—one in which we recognize His specific acts at specific times during the year. For Yeshua died on the eve of Passover, He lay in the grave on Unleavened Bread, He rose from the grave on the feast of First Fruits, and the Holy Spirit was sent on *Shavuot* (Pentecost, Weeks). The remaining three feasts on the annual cycle have themes that reflect the great acts of God yet to come: the return of Yeshua (*Yom Teruah*—Trumpets, also called *Rosh Hashanah*), the judgment of humanity (*Yom Kippur*—Day of Atonement), and dwelling with God in eternity (*Sukkot*—Feast of Tabernacles).

So when we have this understanding of the commemorative cycle of God's redemptive acts, the calendar doesn't just serve as a way of planning out your holiday and vacation plans. Living according to God's calendar brings into our lives a fresh passion for worship and an opportunity to proclaim God's great plan of redemption, always with a focus on Yeshua. And since this is something that God ordained from the very beginning, long before there was anything called Torah or Law, it makes sense that we should honor His way and His plan in every generation.