

The Hebrew Calendar – What’s Wrong with It?

Is the Jewish calendar really for God’s people
Today? What do the Jews themselves say about
the currently used Jewish calendar? What does
God say about it? Should individual Christians
decide for themselves what calendar to follow?
What calendar did Christ and the apostles use?

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The Jewish people themselves readily admit that the original Jewish calendar used in Bible times was a calendar based on observation of the new moons. There is no controversy over that fact. Jewish authorities confess candidly that each month was determined to begin at the sighting of the new moon crescent by reliable observers in Israel, when confirmed by the authorities of the Sanhedrin – the Jewish supreme court.

Famed educator, scholar and calendar expert, Arthur Spier tells us,

“In the early times of our history . . . [the] beginnings of the months were determined by direct observation of the new moon. Then those beginnings of the months (Rosh Hodesh) were sanctified and announced by the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court in Jerusalem, after witnesses had testified that they had seen the new crescent and after their testimony had been thoroughly examined, *confirmed by calculation*, and duly accepted” (*The Comprehensive Hebrew Calendar*, p.1).

Spier also declared:

“This method of observation and intercalation was in use throughout the period of the second temple (516 B.C.E. -- 70 C.E.), and about three centuries after its destruction, *as long as there was an independent Sanhedrin*. In the fourth century, however, when OPPRESSION AND PERSECUTION THREATENED THE CONTINUED EXISTENCE OF THE SANHEDRIN, *the patriarch Hillel II took an extraordinary step to PRESERVE the UNITY OF ISRAEL. In order to prevent the Jews SCATTERED ALL OVER THE SURFACE OF THE EARTH from celebrating their New Moons, FESTIVALS and holidays at DIFFERENT TIMES, HE MADE PUBLIC THE SYSTEM OF CALENDAR CALCULATION WHICH UP TO THEN HAD BEEN A CLOSELY GUARDED SECRET.* It had been used in the past only to check the observations and testimonies of witnesses, and to determine the beginnings of the spring season.

“In accordance with this system, Hillel II formally sanctified all months in advance, and intercalated all future leap years UNTIL SUCH TIME AS A NEW, RECOGNIZED SANHEDRIN would be established in Israel. This is the PERMANENT CALENDAR according to which the New Moons and Festivals are calculated and celebrated today by the Jews ALL OVER THE WORLD” (p.1-2).

The Original Beginning of Months

Alfred Edersheim in *The Temple, Its Ministry and Services*, declares further:

“THE DETERMINATION OF THE NEW MOON”

“. . . For the new moon was reckoned by actual personal observation, not by astronomical calculation, with which, however, as we know, many of the Rabbis must have been familiar, since we read of astronomical pictures, by which they were wont to test the veracity of witnesses. So important was it deemed to have faithful witnesses, that they were even allowed, in order to reach Jerusalem in time, to travel on the Sabbath, and, if necessary, to make use of horse or mule (*Mish. Rosh ha Sh. i. 9; iii. 2*). While strict rules determined who were not to be admitted as witnesses (*Mish. Rosh ha Sh. i. 8*), every encouragement was given to trustworthy persons, and the Sanhedrin provided for them a banquet in a large building specially destined for that purpose, and known as the *Beth Yaazek* (*Mish. Rosh ha Sh. ii. 5*).”

Says Emil Schurer, “[The Jews] at the time of Jesus Christ [did not] as yet possess any fixed calendar, but on the basis of purely empirical observation, on each occasion they began a new month with the appearing of the new moon...” (*History of Jewish People in the Time of Christ*, first division, vol. 2, p. 366, by Emil Schurer; Hendrickson; 2009, emphasis mine).

Says the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, “The Sanhedrin was assembled in the courtyard (“bet ya’azek”) of Jerusalem on the 30th of each month from morning to evening, waiting for the reports of those appointed to observe the new moon; and after the examination of these reports the president of the Sanhedrin, in the presence of at least three members, called out: ‘The New Moon is consecrated’; whereupon the whole assembly of people twice repeated the words: ‘It is consecrated’ (R. H. ii. 5-7; Sanh. 102).” (see *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1901–1906 ed., “New Moon,” [http:// www.jewishencyclopedia.com/](http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/)).

The Mishnah describes how they would authenticate witnesses in order to determine if their testimony was accurate or not (*Rosh Hash 2:6ff*). One of the questions that leaders would ask the witnesses was, ‘How did you see the moon?’ (*Rosh. Hash 2:6c*). Also according to the Mishnah, Gamaliel (Acts 5:34), actually showed pictures of the shape of the moon (probably hand-drawn facsimiles) to determine the accuracy of their testimony (*Rosh Hash 2:8*).

The Jewish Encyclopedia (1901–1906 ed., s.vv. “History of the Calendar,” <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/>, emphasis added) states the following: “In the times of the Second Temple it appears from the Mishnah (R. H. i. 7) that the priests had a court to which witnesses came and reported. This function was afterward taken over by the civil court (see B. Zuckermann, ‘Materialien zur Entwicklung der Altjüdischen Zeitrechnung im Talmud,’ Breslau, 1882). The fixing of the lengths of the months and the intercalation of months was the prerogative of the Sanhedrin . . . The entire Sanhedrin

was not called upon to act in this matter, the decision being left to a special court of three. The Sanhedrin met on the 29th of each month to await the report of the witnesses. . . .

“The country people and the inhabitants of Babylonia were informed of the beginning of the month by fire-signals, which were readily carried from station to station in the mountain country. These signals could not be carried to the exiles in Egypt, Asia Minor, and Greece, who, being accordingly left in doubt, celebrated two days as the new moon.”

Says Jacob Neusner, “When the Temple stood, this was a festival proclaimed by the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem after witnesses testified to *observing the new moon*.” (*Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*, p. 454, by Jacob Neusner, Hendrickson, 2002).

Louis Finkelstein adds, “[T]he ancient Jewish calendar depended not on mathematical calculations and arrangements, but was set from month to month according to the physical appearance of the new moon. Witnesses who had seen the first sign of the crescent on the horizon after sunset were expected to report the fact to the authorities, who thereupon published throughout the country the fact that the new month had begun” (*The Pharisees*, by Louis Finkelstein, p. 601, Jewish Publication Society, 1938, Philadelphia).

All this testimony should be conclusive. The history and facts are clear.

It should be perfectly clear that the Jews began the months with the sighting of the new moons by witnesses. Yet some insist on arguing that the Jews always calculated the calendar – and that the Hillel II calendar really goes back to the beginning, and that even the “postponements” added in his time were nothing new.

However, the evidence shows that the Jewish calendar was not pre-determined by calculation or mathematical rules! As the apostle Paul wrote, we are to “PROVE ALL THINGS; hold fast that which is good” – and true! (I Thess.5:21).

Further Testimony

Says the *Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion*, “until Hillel II instituted a permanent calendar based on calculations (358-359 A.D.), the fixing of the new moon was determined by observation and the evidence of witnesses. During the earlier period, the practice of adding a second day to festivals . . . was introduced for communities lying at a distance from Palestine, because it was doubtful on precisely which of the two days the new moon occurred” (*Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion*, p. 78; Massada-P.E.C. Press Ltd, 1965).

The *Chumash* adds, “The Torah provides that *Rosh Chodesh* can be proclaimed only by the rabbinic court, on the basis of two witnesses who testified that they *observed the re-appearance of the moon*. The members of such a court must have the *semichah*, or

ordination that as conferred by teachers upon their students, generation after generation, from the time of Moses” (*The Chumash, The Stone Edition*, by Rabbi Nosson Scherman, p. 349, Mesorah Publications Ltd, 2000).

You would be hard-pressed to find any information to the contrary, that the Jews before, during, and after the time of Yeshua observed the new moon any other way than the visible first crescent, until Hillel II released the fixed calendar changes in 358-359 A.D.

Today, even the religious Jews in Israel realize there are problems with the currently used Hillel II calendar. Although it has been used since 358-59 A.D., they realize that it is gradually going astray and eventually – if not corrected or replaced – Passover would be celebrated in the summer and not spring!

A Special Court Set Up in Israel on Sighting the New Moons

A special court has been established to accept evidence concerning the sighting of the New Moon, as required by Jewish Law. This court is made up of various justices who are assembled to hear evidence as the opportunity permits. The purpose of the court is to increase awareness, develop skills, and resolve halachic issues that arise when determining the Jewish Calendar according to testimony by witnesses.

At this point there is no intention to supercede the mathematical calendar currently in use and fix the calendar on the basis of the testimony, such a step should be unacceptable to the public and spiritual leadership. Nevertheless, witnesses appear before the court and are investigated with precision according to what they saw. Sometimes the witnesses may also bring photographic evidence to support their testimony. Evidence is already being collected by the *yiresh shomaim* volunteers throughout the Land of Israel, with the intention that testimony can be presented before the court in a full legal fashion when the peoples’ hearts are ready for it.

Mathematical Calendar of Hillel II

It should be noted that the mathematical calendar of Hillel II has been in use since the year 4119 (359 CE), and it has functioned for approximately 1600 years without major difficulty. However, in recent years, a situation has been created where more and more frequently the onset of spring does not coincide with calendar currently in use. This means that the calendar is beginning to drift noticeably. Albeit, the rate of drift is very slow, much slower than other lunar calendars (such as the Islamic calendar). However, if continued unchecked, we will be celebrating Pesach in the summer, rather than the spring. Jewish rabbis say the current calendar will exceed halachically acceptable limits and they will be celebrating Biblically commanded holidays at times other than when Scripture requires them to be celebrated.

Jewish rabbis admit that one could argue that if a change is necessary in any event, it would be *most correct according to Biblical and Jewish Law to once again use the system of witnesses*. But, they conclude, it is certain that we will not longer be permitted to use the mathematical calendar of Hillel II in the near future.

Torah Requirements

There is a requirement from the Torah (*deOraisa*) that Pesach come out two weeks after the first new moon of spring. The first day of spring according to the Solar Calendar is always March 21. The Jewish Calendar has a discrepancy of about one day every century. This means that by the year 6000, Pesach will come out two new moons (Sivan) after the first day of spring. The *Natziv* was one of the first *poskim* to bring up this question about a hundred and fifty years ago. Some *poskim* replied that Mashiach would come by the year 6000, so there was nothing to worry about. Others said this would become an halachic question that will eventually require the re-establishment of the Sanhedrin to universally authorize a change in the calendar.

But why put it off? Shouldn't we do as God says when He says to do it? Should His calendar not be regulated today by the New Moon sightings as it was in ancient times? The Jewish people are back in their homeland – shouldn't they return to God's calendar principles, as He gave them to Israel?

True Worship

The Word of God says, “Bring no more offerings of vanity (emptiness, falsity, vainglory, and futility); [your hollow offering of] incense is an abomination to Me; the New Moons and Sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot endure –[it is] iniquity and profanation, even the solemn meeting. *Your* New Moon festivals and *your* [hypocritical] appointed feasts My soul hates. They are an oppressive burden to Me I am weary of bearing them” (Isaiah 1:13-14, Amplified Parallel Bible).

“I will cause to cease all her mirth, her feast-making, her New Moons, her Sabbaths, and all her solemn feasts and appointed festival assemblies” (Hosea 2:11). “Behold, I will rebuke your seed [grain – which will prevent due harvest], and I will spread the dung from the festival offerings upon your faces, and you shall be taken away with it” (Malachi 2:3).

“And I will turn *your* feasts into mourning and all *your* songs into lamentation, and I will cause sackcloth to be put upon all loins and baldness [for mourning] shall come on every head; and I will make that time as the mourning for an only son, and the end of it as a bitter day” (Amos 8:10).

“My people are *destroyed* for lack of knowledge; because you [the priestly nation] have rejected knowledge, I will also reject you that you shall be no priest to Me; seeing you have forgotten the law of your God, I will also reject your children” (Hosea 4:6).

“In vain (fruitlessly and without profit) do they worship Me, ordering and teaching [to be obeyed] as doctrines the commandments and precepts of men. You disregard and give up and ask to depart from you the commandment of God and *cling to the tradition of men* [keeping it carefully and faithfully]. And He said to them, You have a fine way of rejecting [thus thwarting and nullifying and doing away with] the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition (your own human regulations)!” (Mark 7:7-9).

God is not happy with our continued disobedience, self-will, and stubborn pride! As the apostle Paul wrote, “What advantage then has the Jew . . .? For what if some did not believe [they altered the calendar and made uninspired changes to it in 357-358 A.D.]? Will their unbelief make the faithfulness of God without effect? Certainly not! Indeed, let God be true but every man a liar” (Rom.3:1-4).

Some insist that since the Jews were given custodianship of the oracles of God, the Torah and Scriptures and the calendar, that we should follow them regardless. But Christ Himself said to the Jewish religious leaders of His day, “Why do you also transgress the commandments of God *by your tradition?* . . . Thus have you made the commandment of God of none effect by *your tradition*. You hypocrites, well did Isaiah prophesy of you saying, ‘This people draws nigh unto me with their mouth, and honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. But *in vain they do worship me*, teaching for doctrines the *commandments of men*’ Matthew 15:3-9).

Isn’t it time we got back to God’s original commandments?

As God told Cain, “If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, SIN lies at the door” (Gen.4:7).

The apostle Paul declared, “But let a man examine himself. . . For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged” (I Cor.11:28-31).

Isn’t it time we “earnestly contend for the faith which was ONCE [and for all] delivered to the saints” (Jude 3)? How can we observe God’s Holy Days at the RIGHT TIME unless we follow His ORIGINAL, God-inspired, God-breathed, TRUE CALENDAR?

The time for excuses is past. The time for repentance, and seeking the truth, has come. Isn’t it time we all return to the true Biblical calendar, repent of our pride and foolishness, and once again use the original calendar God gave His people, and celebrate His holy days at the correct appointed times?

“And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men everywhere to REPENT” (Acts 17:30). “For the time has come that Judgment must begin at the house of God. And if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?” (I Pet.4:17). It’s time. Prepare yourself. “Prepare to meet your God, O Israel!” (Amos 4:12).