

The Biblical Calendar & The New Moon

Traditions of Men Versus the Word of Elohim

Ya'acov Natan Lawrence

Waters in the Wilderness, A Teaching Ministry of Hoshana Rabbah Messianic Discipleship Resources

AS MORE AND MORE CHRISTIANS BEGIN TO RETURN to the Hebrew roots of their faith they find themselves having to make difficult choices. Whose Hebraic traditions are we to follow? Which choice lines up with the truth revealed in the Word of Elohim? What do we do when different “experts” claim biblical authority for what they do and teach, yet hold opposing viewpoints? Many Believers feel they have been lied to in traditional Christianity (Jer 16:19) as they begin to learn about the unbiblical and even pagan roots of many “sacred cow” Christian traditions. Many are turning to the Jewish rabbis for the answer. After all, they have remained immovably faithful to the Torah-law of Elohim for thousands of years, right?

The subject of the biblical calendar is of great concern to many Believers who are first learning about YHVH's appointed times (*moedim*) or set-apart feast days including the weekly seventh-day Sabbath (*Shabbat*). After all, how can one properly observe these commanded assemblies, which are central to properly understanding YHVH's plan of salvation (or redemption), of which the work of Yeshua the Messiah is a central part, if one cannot even determine when to keep them?

The calendar issue can be a very technically involved subject and a daunting task to understand for even the most astute students of Scripture. Yet did YHVH intend this to be the case? Didn't Yeshua teach that the basic Gospel message and plan of salvation should be so simple that even a child could comprehend it (Matt 18:1-5)? Shouldn't even the children among us easily understand something so crucial to the basic Gospel message and plan of salvation as the feast days and Sabbath of YHVH including when to observe them?

This simple stream of logic can easily get lost in the flurry of controversy surrounding the calendar forcing many to throw up their hands in confusion defaulting to the concept that “if it's good enough for the Jews then it must be okay.” To back this notion up some will even quote (out of context, to boot) Paul in Romans 3:2, which says, “[U]nto [the Jews] were committed the oracles of Elohim” (Greek: *logion*, from *logos* meaning the *Word of Elohim*), so therefore, it is reasoned, whatever calendar the Jews use today must be the divinely inspired one. The concept that ignorance is bliss never helped the proverbial ostrich who buried his head in the sand, and it is doubtful that such a mentality will help anyone to uncover the truth of Scripture, and hence the perfect will of the Creator for their lives.

Perhaps the major flaw in the argument that the Jews must be right is this: Is what the Jews do today the same as in Paul's day—especially regarding the calendar? Furthermore, can we *carte blanche* accept what they say if it does not line up with the Word of Elohim? After all, most religious Jews deny the deity and Messiahship of Yeshua. Are we to follow them in this? Obviously not, unless our model to follow in returning to our Hebrew roots is Rabbinic Judaism, and not Scripture. After all, if Yeshua accused the Jewish religious establishment of his day of making of none effect the Word of Elohim through various man-made laws and traditions (Matt 15:6-9; Mark 7:7-9), then, one must logically ask, how much more is this the case 2000 years later? Furthermore, it may be reasoned, if Christianity has strayed from its Hebraic roots over the millennia perhaps the same has happened with our rabbinic Jewish brothers. Indeed, this is the case. History and the writings of the Jews prove it and the unchanging and infallible Word of Elohim undeniably confirms it.

A very simple illustration of this fact is the start of the Jewish new year. Look at any Jewish calendar and the first day of the Jewish new year is on the first day of the seventh month (or *Tishrei*) and is a festival known by the

non-biblical term *Rosh Hashana* (meaning, *the Head of the New Year*). Yet, the astute observer should immediately ask why should not the first rather than the seventh month begin the new year? After all, does not YHVH plainly state in Exodus 12:2 that the first day of the year falls in the month when the Passover is observed, which by the way is what Scripture calls the first month (usually in March or April)? Assuredly, the Jews have all kinds of reasonings for the incongruence of their traditions with the truth of Scripture. In the *Mishnah* (which is a partial precursor to the *Talmud* and was committed to writing by ca. A.D. 200 and contains Jewish oral legal tradition) the Rabbinic Jews have four new years (*Rosh Hashanah 1:1*). They speak of civil versus religious calendars and of their tradition that the earth was created in the seventh month, not in the first month, and so on. But the fact remains, for them the new year starts in the late summer or early fall, and not in the spring as YHVH clearly instructed Moses.

The simple truth is that the calendar the Jews use today is but a modified version of the one used at the time of Yeshua and the Apostles in the first century and originates from ca. A.D. 360 and is the work of a Jewish rabbi named Hillel II (A.D. 330-365) (*Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion*, p. 78). Up until that time the entire Jewish Diaspora (Jews living outside the Holy Land) depended upon the Judean Sanhedrin (the ruling Jewish body of elders in Jerusalem) to determine the calendar and legal observance of the biblical feast days. Yet because of the persecution in the Roman world against the Jews, the messengers from Judea were often menaced or threatened as they attempted to convey calendric rulings from Judea to Jewry elsewhere. This presented a perplexing problem for synagogues in distant lands that depended upon news from Judea to determine their calendar, and hence feast day observances. "But as the religious persecution continued, Hillel determined to provide an authorized calendar for all time to come, though by doing so he severed the ties which united the Jews of the Diaspora to their mother country and to the patriarchate" (*Dictionary of Ancient Rabbis*, p. 200).

Central to the establishment of the calendar was the sighting of the new moon (*Rosh Chodesh*) each month from Jerusalem. Scripture states that, "out of Zion shall go forth the Torah-law, and the Word of YHVH from Jerusalem" (Isa. 2:3), yet after the Second Jewish Revolt (A.D. 132-135) the Jews were expelled from Jerusalem and the surrounding region by the Romans and were told to stay out on pain of death, so how could they properly sight the new moon? (*Our Father Abraham*, p. 82). Therefore, obtaining biblically accurate new moon sightings was difficult if not a life-threatening activity, not to mention the dangers involved in getting word out about the new moon through hostile territory to the dispersed Jews in distant regions.

The Torah-Word of Elohim states that the new year should start on the month when the barley was green in its head (i.e., *abiv*) at the sighting of the crescent new moon (Exod 9:31; 12:1-2; 13:4) thus determining the entire calendar for the upcoming year including when to observe YHVH's commanded annual feasts (Lev 23). In an effort to be faithful to YHVH's Word, the rabbis of the Second Temple era established elaborate rituals and protocols to determine when the new moon had occurred. Edersheim notes that credible eyewitnesses were relied upon to provide this information for the Jewish religious leaders. "To supply this want the Sanhedrin sat in the 'Hall of Polished Stones' to receive the testimony of credible witnesses that they had seen the new moon." The *Mishnah* attests to this, as well, in *Rosh Hashanah 2:6ff*. When it was determined that the new moon had been sighted by several witnesses Edersheim writes, "Immediately thereon men were sent to a signal-station on the Mount of Olives, where beacon-fires were lit and torches waved, till a kindling flame on a hill in the distance indicated that the signal had been perceived. Thus the tidings, that this was the new moon, would be carried from hill to hill, far beyond the boundaries of Palestine, to those of the dispersion 'beyond the river.' ... But these early fire-signals opened the way for serious inconvenience. The enemies of the Jews lit beacons to deceive those at a distance, and it became necessary to send special messengers to announce the new moon" (*The Temple—Its Ministry and Services*, pp. 156-157; see also *Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 2:1-4*). And as noted above, for this and other reasons the Jews devised a calendar not dependent on observing the new moon from Jerusalem or from examining the ripening of the barley.

To the credit of Hillel II who devised a very accurate calendar that was not dependent upon having to be physically present in the land of Israel, the Jews have been able to keep YHVH's feast days in a manner that is still surprisingly accurate biblically 1640 years later. However, as those who have learned to sight the new moon each month will confirm, there are times when the rabbinic calendar or Hillel II calendar, as it has been named, does not coincide with the Torah-Word of Elohim. For example, the Torah-law states that the fourth of YHVH's appointed times (*moedim*), the Day of Trumpets (*Yom Teruah*), is to be celebrated on the first day of the seventh month (Lev 23:24) (which falls during our month of September), but there are times when *Yom Teruah* on the Hillel II calendar is a day or two earlier or later than when the actual crescent new moon is visible from Jerusalem

or environs. When this occurs Bible Believers have to choose either to follow Jewish traditions or the Word of Elohim. My position on this matter is clear, “As for me and my house, we will serve YHVH” (Josh 24:15).

Thankfully, in our age of instant communications this information is readily available to those who are seeking to align their lives not with man-made traditions that often negate YHVH’s written Word, but with the actual Word itself. Doing such is one more step in the restoration of all things that the Gospel writer stated under the inspiration of the Spirit of Elohim must occur before Yeshua the Messiah can return (Acts 3:21).

The Feast Days and New Moon In More Detail

What does the Word of Elohim say about the relationship between the biblical appointed times (*moedim*) or feast days and the new moon (*Rosh Chodesh*)? Psalm 104:19 states, “[YHVH] appointed the moon for seasons [*moedim*]; the sun knows his going down.” The purpose of the moon is to determine seasons or *moedim*. Keep this in mind.

In Genesis 1:14 YHVH Elohim said, “Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons [*moedim*], and for days, and years.” Here we see the linking of the astrobodies with the sacred seasons and feast days of YHVH Elohim. The word *signs* in *Strong’s* Hebrew dictionary is number 226 and is the Hebrew word *owth* meaning *a distinguishing mark, banner, a remembrance, a proof, an omen, a warning, a token, an ensign, or a miracle*. The heavenly bodies were created as signs or signals of something. The word *seasons* (*Strong’s* H4150 is *moed* or plural, *moedim*) means *a congregation, feast, season, appointed time, assembly*. What is being taught here is that the sun, moon and stars are signals which set the appointed times, sacred assemblies or feast days of YHVH for his people. In Leviticus 23:4 we see further proof of this point: “These are the feasts of YHVH, even set-apart convocations, which you shall proclaim **in their seasons** [*moedim*]” (emphasis added). Please note the possessive pronoun *their* indicating that the feast days “own” or “possess” the seasons and thus predate the seasons that are determined by the astral bodies. In other words, YHVH created the heavenly bodies and seasons for his appointed times or set-apart (holy) feast days, which are a shadow-picture of his plan of salvation or redemption for the world. It could be said that the entire physical creation was made in order to have a place wherein to implement and showcase YHVH’s glorious plan of salvation. The moon is central to the process of determining the feasts of YHVH, which are central in understanding the seven steps, as outlined in the seven *moedim*, of YHVH’s plan of salvation.

What does the word *Rosh Chodesh* mean? *Rosh* (spelled רֹאשׁ; *Strong’s* H7218) is a common word meaning *head, top, beginning or first*. *Chodesh* (spelled חֹדֶשׁ; *Strong’s* H2320) means *the new moon, monthly, the first day of the lunar month*. In the KJV it is translated as *month* (254 times), or *new moon* (20 times). This is its primary meaning. The root of the word *chodesh* is *chadash* (*Strong’s* H2318) and means *to be new, renew, or repair*. It is translated in the KJV as *renew* (seven times) and *repair* (three times). This is its primary meaning. The word *chodesh* meaning *new moon* and translated as such in the KJV is found in many places in Scripture (e.g., 1 Sam 20:5,18,24; 2 Kngs 4:23; Ps 81:3; Isa 66:23; Ezek 46:1,6; Amos 8:5).

According to the Karaite (non-rabbinic Orthodox) Jews who have been studying the new moons for hundreds of years, “The Crescent New Moon is called Hodesh because it is the first time the moon is seen anew after being concealed for several days at the end of the lunar cycle. At the end of the lunar month the moon is close to the sun and eventually reaches the point of ‘conjunction’ when it passes between the Sun and the Earth. As a result, around the time of conjunction very little of the moon’s illuminated surface faces the Earth and it is not visible through the infinitely brighter glare of the sun. After the moon moves past the sun it continues towards the opposite side of the Earth. As it gets farther away from the sun the percentage of its illuminated surface facing the Earth increases and one evening shortly after sunset the moon is seen anew after being invisible for 1.5-3.5 days. Because the moon is seen anew after a period of invisibility the ancients called it a ‘New Moon’ or ‘Hodesh’ (from *Hadash* meaning *new*)” (http://www.karaite-korner.org/new_moon.shtml).

What Is the Connection Between the Abiv Barley and the New Moon?

Earlier I mentioned that the Torah dictates that the new year should start on the month when the barley is green in its head (i.e., *abiv* or *abib*) at the sighting of the crescent new moon (Exod 9:31; 12:1-2; 13:4) thus determining the entire calendar for the upcoming year including when to observe YHVH’s commanded annual feasts (Lev 23). What does the *abiv* barley have to do with the beginning of the new year and the new moon?

In Exodus 13:4 we see that YHVH makes a connection between the barley and the first month of the year, for we read, “This day you came out in the month of the *Abiv*.” The word *month* here is *chodesh* and the word *abiv*

(אֲבִיב; *Strong's* H24) means *fresh, young barley ears* or literally *green in the ears*. So literally, when YHVH called the first month by the name *Abiv* he was calling it the month of the *green barley ears*. This marks very clearly in which season the new year was to begin. The new moon immediately following this agricultural occurrence marked the beginning of the new year. In Deuteronomy 16:1 YHVH issues this command to the Israelites, “Observe the month of the *Abiv*, and keep the Passover unto YHVH your Elohim, for in the month of the *abiv* YHVH your Elohim brought you forth out of Egypt by night” (see also Exod 23:15 and 34:18).

As to the technicalities of the meaning of *abiv* and how it relates to barley I will now quote directly from a teaching on this subject found on the Karaite Jewish website (<http://www.karaite-korner.org/abib.shtml>), which succinctly and expertly discusses this subject:

Abib indicates a stage in the development of the barley crops. This is clear from Exodus 9:31-32 which describes the devastation caused by the plague of hail:

And the flax and the barley were smitten, because the barley was *Abib* and the flax was *Giv'ol*. And the wheat and the spelt were not smitten because they were dark [*afilot*].

The above passage relates that the barley crops were destroyed by the hail while the wheat and spelt were not damaged. To understand the reason for this we must look at how grain develops. When grains are early in their development they are flexible and have a dark green color. As they become ripe they take on a light yellowish hue and become more brittle. The reason that the barley was destroyed and the wheat was not is that the barley had reached the stage in its development called *abib* and as a result had become brittle enough to be damaged by the hail. In contrast, the wheat and spelt were still early enough in their development, at a stage when they were flexible and not susceptible to being damaged by hail. The description of the wheat and spelt as “dark” (*afilot*) indicates that they were still in the stage when they were deep green and had not yet begun to lighten into the light yellowish hue which characterizes ripe grains. In contrast, the barley had reached the stage of *abib* at which time it was no longer “dark” and at this point it probably had begun to develop golden streaks.

We know from several passages that barley which is in the state of *abib* has not completely ripened, but has ripened enough so that its seeds can be eaten parched in fire. Parched barley was a commonly eaten food in ancient Israel and is mentioned in numerous passages in the Hebrew Bible as either “*abib* parched (*kalui*) in fire” (Lev. 2:14) or in the abbreviated form “parched (*kalui/kali*)” (Lev 23:14; Jos 5:11; 1 Sam 17:17; 1 Sam 25:18; 2 Sam 17:28; Ruth 2,14).

While still early in its development, barley has not yet produced large enough and firm enough seeds to produce food through parching. This early in its development, when the “head” has just come out of the shaft, the seeds are not substantial enough to produce any food. At a later stage, the seeds have grown in size and have filled with liquid. At this point the seeds will shrivel up when parched and will only produce empty skins. Over time the liquid is replaced with dry material and when enough dry material has amassed the seeds will be able to yield “barley parched in fire.”

So the barley being in its *abiv* state eliminates the guesswork out of determining which new moon begins the new year. It is the new moon that immediately follows the *abiv* barley that Scripture determines is the beginning of the year.

After the *abiv* barley is found and the crescent new moon is sighted marking the first day of the first month of YHVH's biblical calendar, 14 days later is the day of Passover (*Pesach*) with the Feast of Unleavened Bread (*Hag HaMatzot*) following that on the fifteenth day of the first month. Then on the day after the Sabbath that occurs during the seven-day Feast of Unleavened, a sheaf of now-ripened barley was cut and waved heavenward by the High Priest to be accepted by YHVH as a first of the first fruits of the upcoming harvest season. I have written extensively on this subject in other teaching papers relating to the spring feast days, which can be found on our website. Suffice it to say, this barley that was lifted and waved was a prophetic picture of Yeshua the Messiah after his resurrection ascending to heaven where he was accepted by the Father as the perfect sin offering covering the sins of mankind. Fifty days later to the day is the Feast of Pentecost (*Shavuot*) picturing the ripening of the larger wheat harvest, which was a prophetic picture of all Israel and the peoples of the nations coming to faith in Yeshua from the first century until the present time.

Again, for more teachings on the spring feast days and their prophetic implications and how it they relate to the life of the Believer see my articles on these subjects on our website.

Bibliography

- Edersheim, Alfred, *The Temple Life: Its Ministry and Service*, Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., Peabody, MA: 1994
- Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion, first edition*, Massada- P.E.C. Ltd. Jerusalem: 1965, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc. N.Y.: 1966
- Neusner, Jacob. ed., *Dictionary of Ancient Rabbis—Selections from the Jewish Encyclopedia*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2003.
- Wilson, Marvin R., *Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith*, Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI, 49503: 1989
- <http://www.karaite-korner.org/> (This most informative website presents additional information on the subject of the new moons, the *abiv* barley, and a monthly update on the new moon sightings in Israel.)

