

The Truth about *GOD'S CALENDAR*

Part One

By Jamie McNab

What is the truth about "God's Holy Day calendar"? It is very likely that many of you will have been challenged over the past few years about the Holy Day calendar -- and if you haven't been challenged so far, you probably soon will be!!

The story usually goes along the lines of, "The calendar that we have traditionally followed in the Church of God is a man-made calendar. God originally gave the calendar rules to Moses, but the Jews have long since perverted those rules. The Jewish calendar we use today is the result of many alterations, and is of purely human origin. If you keep the days shown in the "Jewish calendar", you will often be adrift of God's *real* Holy Days -- sometimes by a day or two, and sometimes by an entire month!" You will then usually be shown an *alternative* calendar which, you will be assured, is based entirely on the Bible, and gives the "proper" dates for God's Holy Days.

The major "splits" in the Church of God (such as the Philadelphia, United, Global, Living, International, etc.) continue to follow the Hebrew calendar. There are a number of smaller groups (Church of God in Truth, Church of God the Very Elect, and so on) who adopt different calendars.

The calendar can become a very big subject, and a huge amount has been written about it. With references to molads, conjunctions, dark moons, equinoxes, postponement rules, and so on, it can all become very technical and difficult to follow.

In the space available in this Newsletter, it will not be possible to cover all aspects of the calendar debate. However, we will look in detail at a couple of specific points which are often brought up. As we look at these points, we will hopefully see why we have chosen to hold fast to the calendar traditionally observed by the Church of God, and sanctioned for us in this generation by Mr Herbert Armstrong.

The two points we will review in these notes are: when in God's calendar do the months start, and when does the year start?

The New Moon

One of the first objections to the traditional Hebrew calendar that you are likely to hear is that the months begin "at the wrong time".

In fact, quite a *selection* of possible times are "on offer" for the beginning of the months! Various calendar writers will propose, for example, the visible crescent (sometimes based on Jerusalem time, others insist on "local" time) -- or the astronomical conjunction -- or the dark moon. The Hebrew calendar uses the molad.

Let us look more closely at one of the more "popular" of these ideas -- the visible crescent. Here we will be told that the months must always begin with the "new moon", and that the new moon is to be defined as the first faint *visible crescent* of the moon, as observed over Jerusalem. This, we will be assured, is demanded by the inspired Scriptures, and any other time of starting the month is not recognised by God and is not valid.

But what, in fact, does the Bible say?

Firstly, it can be shown quite easily that God did indeed give us the sun and moon for "signs, and for seasons, and for days and years", see Gen 1:14. In Psalm 104:19, we read of God that "He appointed the moon for seasons..."

The Hebrew word for "seasons" here is *moed*, which means *appointed time*, and is frequently used throughout the Old Testament to refer to the Feast Days.

Virtually all calendar writers acknowledge that the moon determines the beginning of the months -- usually referring to the relevant moon as the *new moon*.

What, then, is the *new moon*? Can those who want us to follow a different calendar prove from the Bible that the new moon is the first faint visible crescent?

One writer says that he cannot find any Scriptures supporting the method the Jews adopt, but "*I did find one (Scripture) demanding observation of the New Moon*" -- by which he means a visible "new moon".

Is there such a scripture?

This particular writer devotes a whole chapter of his article to *God's Sacred New Moon*. The chapter is over 4 pages long. Extensive quotes are made from a number of *external sources* (historians etc) to support the point, but only one scripture is given to "prove" a "visible" moon -- Deut 16:1 which merely states, "Observe the month of Abib ...".

The terms "month" and "new moon" are used interchangeably in the Old Testament. The writer opts to use the meaning "new moon" in this verse, then continues, "*Notice the command to observe it! ... The new moon must be observed...*". We are told that the new moon must be "observed" with the eye -- seen visibly -- as in "observe the cat about to pounce on that bird".

Yet the writer continues, "*The word observe is the Hebrew shamar (Strong's 8104) meaning to hedge about; guard; protect; mark; look narrowly, observe, preserve, regard*".

The majority of these meanings do not require us to observe physically with the eyes!

The Hebrew word "shamar" is very common in the Bible. There is no real need to even look in the dictionary for its meaning. The places where God uses the term make it very clear.

According to Young's Analytical concordance, the word is translated 284 times as "KEEP". It is translated a further 45 times as "observe", and 19 times as "preserve" -- and then a handful of times as the other words given in the definition above. Some of the over 300 usages are:

- Ex 12:17, "And ye shall observe (shamar) the Feast of Unleavened Bread..." (not "look at", but keep).
- Deut 4:40, "Thou shalt keep (shamar) therefore His statutes, and His commandments..." (not just "look at" them).
- Deut 5:20, "Keep (shamar -- observe) the Sabbath day to sanctify it..."
- Ex 31:13, "...Verily my sabbaths ye shall keep (shamar)..."

When we are driving our cars we "observe" the speed limit (hopefully!). That doesn't mean we just "look at" the road signs as we whizz by -- it means we keep, adhere to, follow and obey the instructions.

Deut 16:1 appears to be the main (and probably only) Scripture used to justify a visible crescent new moon. Yet this verse in reality refers to our keeping or celebrating the month of Abib, just as we keep, celebrate -- or "observe" -- the Sabbath.

There is, in fact, no Biblical support at all for a visible crescent moon. That is why virtually all of these writers refer to dictionaries, historical records, and calendar "experts" rather than provide us with a collection of "proof scriptures".

The Hebrew calendar uses the *molad* in calculating the beginning of the months (for those with a technical interest, the *molad* is that particular moment in each month when the moon comes directly between the earth and the sun; this occurs, on average, every 29 days 12 hours, 44 minutes and a few seconds). The molad is obtained by calculation, and has been worked out for decades to come.

You may wonder, "If the Bible doesn't command that the month begin with the visible crescent, does it then command that the month begin with the molad?" The answer, quite

simply, is NO -- the Bible itself does not give any instruction as to what, exactly, should constitute the "new moon".

As we look further into the subject we will see that the Bible itself does not contain sufficient information to set up a calendar whose rules are beyond dispute. If it did, we wouldn't see more than a dozen different "true Bible calendars" circulating among the Churches of God!

We will see why an authoritative standard must be established to ensure the safekeeping of God's Holy Days.

Some who argue for a visible crescent have said that a calculated conjunction (e.g. a molad) was an impossibility, because the ancients didn't have the astronomical skills to calculate an "invisible" conjunction. This "logic" is flawed. A Jewish rabbi, Hillel II, is generally regarded as having made public the molad calculations somewhere around 390 A.D. A number of calendar writers demonstrate that these calculations go back to at least 300 B.C. However, bearing in mind that there was no new "technology" in use in those eras (no telescopes, radar, dopplers, computers!), then if it was possible to calculate the molad in 300 B.C., it was also possible in 1,300 B.C or 3,300 B.C.

There is historical evidence that the ancient Chinese calculated the conjunctions as far back as 1,850 B.C.

Indeed, a Plain Truth article in July 1965 shows that Abraham was an outstanding scientist, astronomer and mathematician (who taught astronomy and mathematics to the ancient Egyptians), so we should not be surprised to find out that the ancients were a lot smarter than some of today's writers think!

So ... we find no Biblical proof of a "visible crescent moon". We see no reason logically to prefer a visible crescent over a calculated conjunction -- both were accessible to the ancients.

The New Year

If the Bible itself is rather quiet as to when the month begins, does it at least give us a clear starting point for the year?

Well -- not according to the calendar experts, who will give you a choice of: the date of equinox itself, the new moon *nearest* the equinox, the first new moon *after* the equinox, the new moon when the "ears are green", and one writer gives the date when the sun appears in the constellation of Aries. Not much agreement here!!

One critic, commenting on the Church of God calendar that we are following this year states, " *This year you will recognise the first day of the year in the Winter, but next year*

you will recognise it in the Spring. This year you will keep the Feast of Trumpets in the Summer, and next year you will keep it in the Fall." The writer states that he finds no scriptures for such, but that he does find a scripture "*that demands that the Festivals be observed in their seasons*".

Is this correct? Are we keeping the Holy Days in the wrong *seasons*? Are we disobeying God's scriptural instructions?

Well ...we need to be a little careful here not to read our own ideas into the scriptures.

In the context of the calendar it is easy to interpret the term "seasons" as applying to Spring, Summer, Fall, and so on. These are of course "seasons", in the agricultural sense.

We do, however, also hear of the "Yuletide season" -- or the "football season" -- or the "mating season", and similar. These are just recognised "periods of time" when certain things come about or happen.

So what is the Biblical usage of "seasons", when referring to the Holy Days?

As mentioned previously, Gen 1:14, when talking of the sun and moon, states that they are "for signs and for seasons". Psa 104:19 says, "He appointed the moon for seasons..."

The Hebrew term is mo'ed (Strong's 4150). According to Strong's the meaning is "properly *an appointment* i.e. a fixed *time* or season; specifically a *festival*... by implication an *assembly* (as convened for a definite purpose)...". It is translated as "congregation" 149 times, as "time appointed" 9 times, as "solemn feast" 9 times, as "set time" 6 times, "set feast" 5 times, "feast" 6 times, "appointed season" 4 times.

There is no implication of a direct connection to any agricultural "season" such as spring or autumn.

People often quote Lev 23:4, "These are the Feasts of the LORD, even holy convocations, which ye shall proclaim in their seasons..."

However, the Hebrew here is mo'ed -- meaning "time appointed", rather than "spring" or "autumn".

The NIV translates the verse as, " These are the LORD'S appointed feasts, the sacred assemblies you are to proclaim at their appointed times".

The Good News Bible puts it, "Proclaim the following festivals at the appointed times."

The RSV: "These are the appointed feasts of the LORD, the holy convocations, which you shall proclaim at the time appointed for them".

Perhaps a critic might use Num 9:2? In the KJV it reads, "Let the children of Israel also keep the Passover at his appointed season".

However, here again we have mo'ed. The NIV gives "Make the Israelites celebrate the Passover at the appointed time". The RSV translates as, "Let the people of Israel keep the passover at its appointed time".

So where are the scriptures that demand that the Passover be observed in the "season" of spring?

The only use in the Bible of the word "spring" is with regard to "springs of water" and so on -- there is no "Spring" season mentioned anywhere. The only agricultural seasons mentioned are summer and winter, and there is no Biblical definition as to when winter ends and summer begins.

[There is a separate Hebrew word for "seasons" as used agriculturally. Strong's 6256, "eth", as in Deut 11:14, "the rain of your land in his season", or Job 5:26, "...like a shock of corn cometh in his season", etc.. *God did not use this word in connection with His holy days.*]

What the scriptures require therefore is that Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread be kept at their appointed times. Likewise the other Holy Days. That's all the Bible says.

The Equinox

On the topic of the "seasons", some writers -- and critics -- make much of the importance of the "equinox" in producing "a true Bible calendar".

Perhaps the equinox is important -- but where do we find the clear, explicit, scriptures which tell us so -- where is the clear Biblical proof?

The word "equinox" does not appear in the Bible. One writer, commenting on the vital importance of the equinox, states that "equinox" is the "correct" translation of the Hebrew *tequwphah* (Strong's 8622), as used in Ex 34:22. However, the actual meaning given in Strong's is "a *revolution*, i.e. (of the sun) *course*, (of time) *lapse*". It is used only 4 times in the Old Testament, being translated (in the KJV) as "circuit" (2), "end" (1), "come about"(1).

It is true that a number of writers identify one of the possible meanings of *tequwphah* as "equinox" -- but others stand by its basic meaning of "revolution" or "end", meaning, for example, "the end of the growing season" or "the end of the year's activities".

In Ex 34:22 we read, "Thou shalt observe the feast of weeks, of the firstfruits of wheat harvest, and the feast of ingathering at the year's end".

One critic writes of us, "*This year you will keep the Feast of Trumpets in the Summer, and next year you will keep it in the Fall*". We agree -- by our customary definitions of summer, fall and so on, that is correct. But we cannot find any Scripture saying that that is wrong. The feast days still fall at their "appointed times".

The verse just quoted says we are to keep the Feast of Ingathering "at the year's end" (Hebrew, tequwphah). If that does mean "equinox" (although there is no biblical proof), then isn't it interesting that this year the Hebrew calendar has the Feast of Tabernacles commencing "at" the time of the equinox (within two or three days), whereas the calendar being put forward by many others -- based on the visible crescent etc. -- has the Feast commencing almost 5 weeks later than the equinox (late October, and stretching in fact into early November)? If the Hebrew in Ex 34:22 means "equinox", how can something happening five weeks later be said to be kept at the equinox?

Church History

We could look at several other points, but this article is already long enough.

One useful principle in all of this is: *we do not want to move away from something, to something else, unless we have clear and unequivocal evidence that it is better.*

Many men have put in a tremendous amount of work investigating and debating the calendar. One writer has spent more than twenty years researching the subject. We perhaps cannot doubt their sincerity.

However, despite all the work and scholarship, there is no single agreed alternative to the Hebrew calendar. That is very interesting!

I've read of at least eight different ways of beginning the New Year, and five different ways of starting each month -- and you can "perm" those any way you want to get over a dozen different calendars, all claiming to be Biblical or Sacred calendars.

And they obviously can't all be right!!

Although the Church of God lost much truth over the centuries, it seems that they generally held on to the truth of the Passover, or Lord's Supper. During some eras of the Church they also kept the Holy Days. For example, Lesson 52 of the Bible Correspondence Course, referring to the Thyatira era in the late 1500's, gives a history of the brethren in Transylvania, saying, "They also kept all the *annual* Sabbaths or holy days. They kept the true Passover with unleavened bread... Their civil New Year was the Feast of Trumpets".

Let us ask: What calendar did the Church of God use during these nearly 2,000 years?

The only calendar available to them is the calendar that we accept today -- the Hebrew calendar!

In our generation, for nearly seventy years, most of the Church of God has followed the Hebrew calendar, during which time God has given us many blessings, and much fruit has been borne.

Whilst the "novelty" of the other calendars can prove quite a fascination, and they can initially appear plausible, the end result seems to be just more division among God's people.

As we saw earlier, the Bible nowhere gives us a clear and unambiguous definition of what constitutes the "new moon", or beginning of the month. It does not give us a clear statement of what constitutes the "new year" -- either when there are "green ears" or an equinox, or whatever. It does not give us details of the various other calendar rules that are necessary for a fully functioning calendar.

So -- if we cannot find the "calendar rules" clearly stated in the Bible, where can we look to find out about the Holy Day calendar? Surely somebody must have them?!

Interestingly, Mr Herbert Armstrong came across the self-same problem some sixty years ago. Let's read his comments, taken from the Good News Letter 1940 (the full text of which can be found in the "Key of David" CD from Mr Don Tiger):

"Research reveals two basic points on this question. 1st, GOD DID NOT RECORD IT IN THE BIBLE, which gives us absolutely NOTHING more to go on than I have stated above. 2nd, History is vague on the subject, shedding little light that can be accepted and trusted.... We learn in the Bible that men of old did have understanding of the times. They knew how to figure time. 'Of the children of Issachar, which were men that HAD UNDERSTANDING OF THE TIMES, to know what Israel ought to do', 1 Chron12:32"

Mr Armstrong continues, "The true sacred calendar is no more lost than the weekly Sabbath. Then WHO HAS PRESERVED THIS TIME, this sacred CALENDAR? To whom did God give it? To whom were "the oracles of God COMMITTED"? To ISRAEL and JUDAH, of course! Israel LOST the Sabbath, LOST time, LOST even her national name and identity. But JUDAH NEVER DID. Judah has kept TIME in respect to the weekly Sabbath. The Jews rejected Christ. They apostatised in doctrine, BUT THEY WERE STRICT STICKLERS FOR THE LETTER. Would such a people have lost their CALENDAR? If so, TIME IS LOST! There is no other source thru whom God could have committed AND PRESERVED His calendar. He did COMMIT it to them. Therefore it must be thru them He has preserved it!"

Mr Armstrong adds, "In conclusion, unless God has preserved His sacred calendar thru the Jew, then WE DO NOT KNOW how to figure Passover or ANY of the holy days this year. For there is NO AUTHORITY for any other day.... There is NO BIBLE

AUTHORITY WHATSOEVER for (for example) figuring the 1st day of the month from the new moon NEAREST the spring equinox!"

It's hard to disagree with Mr Armstrong's conclusions of sixty years ago.

God has not left us with a confusion of a dozen or more "biblical calendars", and every man doing that "which is right in his own eyes."

Jesus Christ kept the Holy Days according to the Hebrew calendar when He walked the earth nearly 2,000 years ago. *We can do the same safely today!*