

The Truth about *GOD'S CALENDAR*

By Jamie McNab

Part One (of 3): Updated 2017

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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 divisions in the Church of God (such as United, Living, Philadelphia, International, etc.) continue to follow the traditional Hebrew calendar. There are a number of smaller groups who adopt different calendars.

The calendar can become a very complex 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 article 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 most often brought up; these will be KEY POINTS. 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.

The two key points we will review are: WHEN in God's calendar do the MONTHS start, and when does THE YEAR start? In assessing how valid any calendar is these are pretty fundamental points!

The Month and the New Moon

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

If you look around, quite a *selection* of possible times are "on offer" for how to establish the beginning of the months! Various calendar writers will propose, for example, the visible crescent (sometimes based on Jerusalem time, but others insist on their local time) – or the astronomical conjunction – or the dark moon. The Hebrew calendar uses the molad. So straightaway that gives us around four or five possibilities to identify the start of the month! Which one is correct?

Let us look more closely at one of the most popular of these ideas – that the months start with the VISIBLE CRESCENT of the moon. 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 clearly 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, 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 an *appointed time*. It is frequently used throughout the Old Testament to refer to the Bible Feast Days or assemblies of the congregation.

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

So far, so good. But 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 demanding observation of the New Moon.*"

Is there such a scripture – that says we must physically SEE the faint crescent of the young moon in the sky? Which Scripture is the writer referring to?

This particular writer devotes a whole chapter of his article to what he calls *God's Sacred New Moon*. The chapter is over 4 pages long. Extensive quotes are made from a number of *external sources* (historians, calendar experts) to support his point, but strangely ONLY ONE SOLITARY SCRIPTURE is given to "prove" there must be a "visible" moon – Deut 16:1. However this verse merely states:

"Observe the month of Abib ... for in the month of Abib the LORD thy God brought thee forth out of Egypt by night."

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."*

He tells us that the new moon must be OBSERVED with the eye – seen visibly. In the sense that we might say: "observe that cat about to pounce on that bird."

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."*

Agreed. But 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. It has a number of related meanings. According to Young's Analytical concordance, the word is translated 284 times as "KEEP" – which is its most common meaning. 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 ... therefore ye shall **observe** this day in your generations by an ordinance for ever." Obviously we don't just look visibly at the Feast days – we keep or celebrate them!
- Deut 4:40: "Thou shalt **keep** (shamar) therefore His statutes, and His commandments..." We don't just visibly "look at" them.
- Deut 5:20: "**Keep** (shamar) the Sabbath day to sanctify it..." We don't just look at the Sabbath day with our eyes – we KEEP IT holy.
- Ex 31:13: "...Verily my sabbaths ye shall **keep** (shamar)..."

This verse in Deut 16:1 appears to be the main Scripture (possibly the only one) used to justify a visible crescent new moon. Yet the English word

"observe" has here the sense of "keeping" as in hopefully most of us "observe" the laws of our land. And hopefully also "observe" the laws of God – i.e. DO THEM! Not just LOOK AT them!

So, if Deut 16:1 is the *only verse* they've got then there is, in reality, NO BIBLICAL SUPPORT at all for a visible crescent moon. That is why virtually all of its supporters refer to dictionaries, historical records, and other calendar "experts" rather than provide us with a collection of clear and convincing scriptures. There aren't any.

Rather than anything that needs to be physically seen, the Hebrew calendar uses what's called the *molad* to determine 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, "Well then, 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" or new month.

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 were 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.

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. So, WHO gets to choose? Do we all get to select the one we prefer?

Refer also to part 2 of this series, on *The Visible Crescent*, for further information.

The New Year

If the Bible itself is essentially silent as to when the months should begin, 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 numerous starting points – for instance, the date of the equinox ... or the new moon *nearest* the equinox ... or the first new moon *after* the equinox ... or the new moon when the “barley 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 standard Hebrew calendar kept by the majority of the Church of God a few years ago stated: “*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 practice, 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” as used commonly in conversation and generally referring to astronomical or meteorological periods of time.

We do, however, also hear of the “Yuletide season” – or the “football season” – or the “mating season,” and similar. By “seasons” we just mean 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?

Gen 1:14, when talking of the sun and moon, states that they are given “for signs and **for seasons.**” Psa 104:19 says God “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 in the KJV as "congregation" 149 times, as "time appointed" 9 times, as "solemn feast" 9 times, as "set time" on 6 occasions, "set feast" 5 times, "feast" 6 times and "appointed season" 4 times.

As we can see, none of the uses of *mo'ed* relate to what we might refer to as our agricultural or weather "seasons," 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* – and simply means that the Feasts are to be kept at the "time appointed." There is no instruction regarding 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 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." So doesn't that demand a specific season such as Spring?

However, here again we have the Hebrew *mo'ed*. The NIV gives us: "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.

[For clarity, there is a separate Hebrew word for "seasons" when we're referring to agricultural activities. The Hebrew word is "eth." It appears 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." *However 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. We don't have to attempt to shoe horn them into some particular agricultural season.

The Equinox

On the topic of "the seasons," some writers make much of the importance of the "equinox" in producing "a true Bible calendar." We are told that the Feast of Tabernacles MUST be kept in the Fall season.

Perhaps the equinox is important? But, once again, where do we find the clear, explicit, scriptures which tell us so – and that it forms a calendar rule? Where is the clear BIBLICAL PROOF?

The word "equinox" does not appear in the Bible. One writer, commenting on his view of the vital importance of the equinox, states that *equinox* is the "correct" translation of the Hebrew *tequwphah* as used in Ex 34:22.

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* (tequwphaw)."

The word 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, in this context, "the end of the growing season" or "the end of the year's agricultural activities."

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."

Recent 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. Some writers have spent more than twenty years researching the subject. We perhaps cannot doubt their sincerity.

However, despite all the decades of hard 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 the authentic Biblical or Sacred calendars.

And they obviously can't all be right!!

Although the Church of God seems to have lost much truth over the centuries, it appears that they generally held on to the truth of the Passover. During some eras of the Church they also kept the Holy Days. 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 past nearly 2,000 years since the time of Jesus?

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

In our recent history, for nearly 90 years, most of the Church of God has followed the Hebrew calendar.

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

As we saw earlier, the Bible nowhere gives us a clear and unambiguous definition of what constitutes a “new moon,” or how to begin a month. It does not give us a clear statement of what constitutes the “new year” – either when there are “green barley ears” or an equinox, or whatever other idea someone is suggesting. The Bible does not give us details of the various *other rules* that would be 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 seventy-five years ago in his early days among the Church of God. Let's read his comments to the brethren, taken from a Good News Letter 1940:

"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."

As we've already covered in this article, we can't know purely from the Bible how to identify a new month or a new year! And calendar experts disagree with each other, so which one of those are we going to go with?

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 seventy-five years ago.

It would seem most unlikely that God would have left His people with the almost hopeless task of sifting among the confusion of a dozen or more "biblical calendars," with every man doing that "which is right in his own eyes."

I believe we can trust God to have faithfully provided His people over the centuries with access to the correct dates to keep His appointed times. And that standard has been the *Jewish calculated calendar*, as kept by the majority of the Churches of God today.

See parts 2 and 3 of this series for further information.