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The Hebrew Calendar – Authoritative for God’s Church Today!

[Originally by Herman L. Hoeh, from *The Good News* magazine of April 1981 – the Bible Fund Editors]

Why is it that millions call the Bible the Word of God but are not willing to do what it commands?

Why is it that many of these same millions call God the Author of time but are not willing to keep holy the days God made holy time?

And why is it that even among the now numerous sects – usually miniscule by this world’s standards – that do acknowledge God’s Sabbath and His annual Holy Days, so few are willing to submit to the authority of the calendar God authorizes to measure time?

A changed world since 1930

Almost a century ago, almost no one, apart from Jewish communities, ever thought of keeping holy the annual festivals God gave His people. Oh yes, there were Sabbath keepers. But hardly any human being, apart from the Jews, was willing to acknowledge God’s command to His Church today to keep holy seven annual festivals He made holy time. Hardly any, that is, except Herbert W. and Loma D. Armstrong. For seven years – 1927 to 1933 – they had to observe God’s festivals alone – by themselves as a family – even while fellowshipping with the little remnant of God’s people in the Willamette Valley in Oregon.

Not until 1934 were others, brought to conversion by their ministry, willing to keep God’s festivals with them.

Gradually the word spread. A few others already associated with the scattered remnants of God’s church listened.

Among them was a man of some prominence. Unfortunately, he invented the false teaching that one must speak only Hebrew when using the names and titles of God and Jesus Christ. The divinely inspired Greek New Testament teaches no such thing!

But this man did set in motion a movement among the scattered remnants of God’s people. That movement, itself now terribly divided, claims to observe God’s annual Holy Days. But almost none of them has been willing to acknowledge the authority of the calendar God authorized to measure time – **the Hebrew calendar**.

The result is they are not annually keeping holy the time God authorized to be kept holy. They are deceived. And they have taken authority to themselves that God reserves for Himself!

Herbert W. Armstrong addressed this problem head-on in the *Good News Letter* of 1940. Mr. Armstrong wrote that “many of the brethren are in doubt and want the facts.” And he gave them facts – in detail. Then he added:

“In conclusion, unless God has preserved His sacred calendar through the Jews, 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 way. There is no Bible authority whatsoever for figuring the first day of the first month from the new moon nearest the spring equinox.”

After quoting various views from sources then extant, Mr. Armstrong concluded: “Surely we can see that profane history only contradicts itself, is inaccurate, cannot be depended upon and has no authority whatsoever. There is no Bible authority for any of it.

“God did not commit His oracles, or the preservation of His times, to profane history....they have been preserved by the Jews.

“After thorough study of the Bible, of the Hebrew calendar, of history and every angle – after going into the matter with all the Eugene brethren and other brethren who have made a special study of this question, we have unanimously agreed that the Hebrew calendar has been preserved correct[ly] by the Jews.”

The Church of God has followed this authoritative decision ever since. Others can go their own way – till the judgment!

Forty years have passed since this controversy came and went. Most of those in God’s Church at that time are fallen asleep in Christ. Thousands of new brethren have been added to God’s Church around the world. Three generations have grown to maturity. It is now the 21st century and most people have had little instruction from God’s Word on the authority of the Hebrew calendar, its history and preservation. It is every bit as intriguing as the story of the copying and preservation of the written Word of God, the Bible.

An uncommon year

What prompts this article is the fact that it is not common for the Passover to occur Friday night. Or, to have the Festival of Unleavened Bread correspond to a natural week [Sunday to Saturday]. Or to have the autumn festival season begin on a Tuesday. In fact, it occurred only nine times the last century. It is much more usual for the Passover to be the eve of Monday, or Wednesday, or Friday.

Why do God’s festivals fall when they do? Have we ever asked why Passover does not fall on the eve of Sunday, Tuesday or Thursday? Or why the fast of the Day of Atonement does not occur on Friday or Sunday? Or why the seventh day of the Festival of Tabernacles does not fall on the weekly Sabbath – but the eighth day commonly does?

These are all curious features of the calendar God caused the Jewish people to preserve for us. These features are lost among those who invent their own rules for their own calendars. They are lost because people have lost sight of God's authority over time.

Parallel with the Bible

To understand this authority, it is necessary to see how God has worked throughout history. In preserving the written Word, the Bible (in Hebrew and Greek), God has done something very similar to what has occurred with the development and preservation of the Hebrew calendar.

The Bible is the public literature of a people. That people was ancient Israel. It was organized as God's nation and church. To that people were committed the oracles of God – God's revelation to man of essential knowledge. The martyr Stephen, in speaking of Moses, said: "This is he, that was in the church in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and with our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us: To whom **our fathers would not obey**" (Act 7:38-39).

Paul continues the thought in Romans 3: "What advantage hath the Jew? Or what is the profit of circumcision? Much every way: first of all, that they were trusted with the oracles of God. For what if some were without faith? [Remember Stephen's words: "our fathers would not obey"] shall their want of faith make of none effect the faithfulness of God? God forbid: yea, let God be found true, but every man a liar . . . But if the truth of God through my lie abounded unto his glory, why am I also still judged as a sinner?" (verses 1-4,7, Revised Version).

Paul is here reasoning with Greek converts. The Jews, he tells them, have the advantage of being entrusted with the oracles, or divine revelation, of God. The ancient Greeks were always impressed with their oracle that came from demons!

But what if the people to whom the oracles were committed sinned – rebelled against God's authority? Did that mean God would not preserve His revelation through them? Not at all. He simply pruned off those who refused to preserve His revelation for men. That is one reason the 10 tribes of Israel were cut off and sent into exile.

The Jews of the house of Judah alone retained the oracles. And even though some of them have become atheists and liars about the revelation and refuse to obey it, does that mean the oracles are not true, that God has failed to have His revelation to man providentially preserved through all Jews in a **public** way? Not at all! [emphasis ours throughout]

Later, of course, the New Testament in Greek, which the Jews officially rejected at Jabneh, in Judea, in **public** session around A.D. 90, would be providentially preserved by the Greeks in a **public** way. And they too, like the Jews, do not as a whole follow what is written in the oracles committed to them!

But what were the oracles committed in a **public** way to the Jews? The Hebrew Bible only? By no means! The Hebrew calendar also! For without the calendar, it would be impossible to fulfill correctly what is written in the Hebrew Bible about hallowed annual times. And not only the Bible and calendar, but the week also.

These three – *Bible, calendar, and week* – are all part of the oracles committed to the Jews for all mankind.

They have been committed **in a public way, not secretly**. They have not therefore been subject to private tampering away from public scrutiny. Men indeed have lied, saying the week has been lost – that time has been lost. That the public keeping of the knowledge of the Sabbath by Jews has no meaning. Or that Jesus' agreement with and keeping of it has no meaning. As Paul wrote, "let God be found true, but every man a liar" (Rom 3:4)!

The kind of evidence men demand to prove that the Hebrew Bible – and for that matter the Greek New Testament, too – has been preserved accurately does not exist. There are **no original autographs** extant for men to peer at and criticize. God lets them criticize copies, while they lose sight of what is written in them, through disobedience.

And the kind of evidence men demand so as to prove the authoritativeness of the Hebrew calendar does not exist. God has seen to that also – so critics would have their chance to invent their own calendars. And think themselves wiser than God for having invented a calendar more accurate than what God committed to Israel as His own!

Men live by human reason. They want the original sources to criticize. They do not want secondary evidence – that is, copies of an original that have passed through the hands of men. Yet, that is exactly what God has chosen to provide them.

By faith we know we have copies, providentially preserved, of the original Word of God. *By faith* we know that the leadership in the Jewish courts did preserve the rules of the calendar God committed to them – even though they themselves have not wanted to follow those rules at all times.

It is all a question of government – whether God is capable of ruling. Whether God can intervene in the affairs of His people to correct their errors – no men are perfect. And that is a matter of faith.

Throughout history people have wanted to correct, by using their own human reason, what God may allow. They have not waited to have God lead and guide and direct those whom He has set in authority among His people. They too often want to exercise that authority for themselves.

Thus, we have critics of the text of the Bible who see it as their responsibility to determine what is the written Word of God. They are paid to find fault with the way the scribes copied the Hebrew Bible.

Though Jesus said very plainly: “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat: all things therefore whatsoever they bid you, these do and observe: but do not ye after their words; for they say, and do not. Yea, they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with their fingers” (Matt 23:2-4, Revised Version).

The scribes – copying of the text of the Hebrew Bible was one of their duties – were in authority. Jesus said so. They sat on Moses’ seat. They, not their jealous critics among modern and ancient scholars, determined for us the manner in which the Bible’s text should be preserved.

And the Pharisees, too, sat on Moses’ seat. It was their court that determined the Hebrew calendar. It was their court’s decision that determined which day was the beginning of which month. Once that was determined it was the people’s responsibility to keep holy the days God made holy – according to the dates on the Hebrew calendar, not on some other calendar.

Were the scribes perfect men, without sin? Were the Pharisees perfect men, without sin? By no means! Jesus made that plain. Yet, He also made it plain that they had a responsibility *under God* to preserve the written Word of God, the week and the calendar. It was not somebody else’s responsibility!

Could they make mistakes in executing their responsibility under God? Of course! Did the leadership in the Worldwide Church of God for years mistakenly appoint Monday, rather than Sunday, as the day of the week on which Pentecost should fall? Yes. Did God correct the matter? Indeed!

Did the Jews who were in authority under God over the oracles – the scribes and Pharisees – at times err in determining the calendar? Yes. Did God correct the matter? Indeed – as we shall now see!

God corrects those in authority under Him

Remember what Jesus said of the Pharisees? “They bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men’s shoulders” (Matt 23:4).

The later Pharisees and their rabbinic successors did exactly that for centuries when it came to determining when the Day of Atonement was to fall.

You will remember that I asked above how many readers were aware that the Day of Atonement on the Hebrew calendar does not fall on a Friday – the preparation day for the weekly Sabbath.

Do you know why this occurs? And what rule of the calendar determines this?

Think for a moment what it would be like for housewives to prepare food for the Sabbath on a Friday that is a fast day! Of course, the Day of Atonement is so important a fast that no food is

to be prepared that day at all. So housewives would have to prepare food on a Thursday for the weekly Sabbath. That would be burdensome.

The scripture plainly says: “Howbeit on the tenth day of this seventh month is the day of atonement... and ye shall do no manner of work in that same day: for it is a day of atonement... For whatsoever soul it be that shall not be afflicted in that same day, he shall be cut off from his people. And whatsoever soul it be that doeth any manner of work in that same day, that soul will I destroy from among his people. Ye shall do no manner of work: it is a statute forever throughout your generations in all your dwellings. It shall be unto you a Sabbath of solemn rest, and ye shall afflict your souls: in the ninth day of the month at ever, from even unto even, shall ye keep your Sabbath” (Lev 23:26-32, Revised Version).

If Atonement were to fall on Friday, housewives would have to prepare food for the weekly Sabbath on a Thursday. And that is exactly what the Pharisees anciently required be done!

The Pharisees put major emphasis on precise visual observation of the first faint crescent of the new moon. They overlooked Leviticus 23: 26-32. So whenever the first faint crescent of the seventh new moon of the year was seen just above the western horizon after sunset on Tuesday evening, for example, they declared that day, Wednesday (which begins the previous evening), to be the new moon.

Consequently, that new moon became the first day of the month and the Day of Trumpets. The result was the 10th day of the month – Atonement – would fall on a Friday in such a year.

They were more concerned with the visual appearance of the moon’s first crescent than they were with the spiritual requirements of the Day of Atonement.

God, of course, had to correct that – and He did!

The Romans finally put an end to visual observation of the new moons by the Jews. The Jews’ chief leader, Hillel II, whose responsibility it was to regulate the calendar, was forced to issue a decree for the years A.D. 358-359 to (re) institute the authority of the fixed calendar we know today as the Hebrew calendar. And one of the rules of that calendar is based on Leviticus 23:26-32.

Hillel II realized that these verses required that the Day of Atonement should not fall on Friday, the preparation day of the Sabbath.

The rule, therefore is, that if the new moon of a seventh month could occur on a Wednesday (beginning the previous evening), that day is not to be declared a new moon. It is to be postponed. But the day following is to be declared the new moon.

That is, a Thursday (beginning the previous evening) is the first day of the seventh month. That Thursday is consequently the Feast of Trumpets, since the Festival falls on the *first* day of the

seventh month (Lev 23:23-25). And the Day of Atonement, which is the 10th day of the month, falls in such a year on the weekly Sabbath.

The year 1927, the year Herbert W. and Loma D. Armstrong began keeping God's Holy Days, is an example of this very postponement. That year the new moon of the seventh month, by the normal rule of the Hebrew calendar, could have occurred on a Wednesday. But that day was not to be declared the first day because of the special rule based on Leviticus 23.

By authority of the Hebrew court that long ago governed the calendar, that new moon in 1927 was determined in advance to be a Thursday and the first day of the seventh month. The Armstrongs consequently celebrated their first fast of Atonement, the 10th day of the month, on the weekly Sabbath, not a Friday.

By authority of Scripture one cannot change the dates of the month that are holy once the month is determined. God hallowed the first and the 10th day of the seventh month – as also the 15th and the 22nd days. There are no others made holy. **But God empowered men to examine all the scriptures and to declare first which is to be the day of the new moon.** Once that is declared, the month is determined. And since a new moon begins a month (see Numbers 10:10; 28:11; 1 Samuel 20:5, 24-27 and 1 Chronicles 23:31 for proof that the new moon begins the month), we know how to number successive days of the month.

What those today who want to establish their own calendars and their own authority overlook is that we live on a round earth. One would have thought they knew that!

A round earth requires an international dateline – one that is universally recognized and established by authority. As it happens any dateline will cut across some major body of land or island grouping.

The one dateline that has been chosen and is authoritative is in the mid-Pacific. Since it would cut through Alaska and the kingdom of Tonga in the South Pacific, an arbitrary decision had to be made. The islands of Alaska to the west are incorporated into the day that lies to the east. And, in contrast, the islands of the eastern part of the kingdom of Tonga are incorporated into the day that begins to the west of the international dateline.

So, we have had members of God's Church in Tonga in the Southern Hemisphere who began their Sabbaths and Holy Days one day before the brethren who live to the west of them in the Aleutian Islands in the Northern Hemisphere. They kept holy the time that came to them as it has been authoritatively established for a round earth.

God intended the earth to present just such problems, so that authoritative decisions would have to be made – and people tested to see whether they are willing to come under authority of those empowered to make just such decisions.

So which day is declared a new moon is not a private matter that can override sensible requirements of the Bible. The Pharisees misjudged the matter when they allowed Atonement to occur on a Friday merely to establish a new moon in its “proper time.”

They should have realized that, if in Jerusalem the first faint crescent is barely seen after sunset in the west before it slips over the horizon, all people living to the east from Jordan to Japan and the Philippines wouldn't see the moon until the first crescent appeared in their western skies the next day anyway.

So, in most instances it is not even possible for all nations to see the first faint crescent on the same day!

It is not required that the first faint crescent visible in Jerusalem always be declared the new moon. What is important is that the authority to declare it arises from Jerusalem!

The authority of Jerusalem in the person of Hillel II did speak in A.D. 358-359 to authorize the present Hebrew calendar throughout the future until such time as a new court sitting in Moses' seat be reestablished in Jerusalem.

When is the first day of Abib?

The Bible makes plain that the Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread must fall in the month of Abib, the first month of the Hebrew calendar (Ex 12:2, Deut 16:1). The month Abib has been known, since the Babylonian Captivity, as Nisan, a word derived from the Semitic root *nesu*, meaning “to start.” It starts the months of the year. Abib is derived from *aviv*, meaning “ears” or “green ears of grain.” The first month is the month in which green ears of grain begin to ripen – barley first, then winter wheat, which is usually still in green ears when barley ripens.

Are we free to decide for ourselves when we think the month Abib – the month of green ears – should occur? Are we to decide the matter on the basis of the state of the harvest in the Holy Land today? Some sects who refuse to use the words *God* and *Jesus Christ* claim so. They have taken upon themselves the authority to determine the calendar for themselves. God lets them do so, but He has given them no authority in this matter.

Who has that authority? Did Jesus give authority to the New Testament Church to preserve God's calendar? Most certainly not! Nor did the Church ever preserve it. Nor did the Church preserve the Hebrew Bible. We use both. We have authority to teach and preach from the Bible (usually in translation), but God's Church has been given no authority to preserve the Bible in either Hebrew or Greek. **Nor have we been called to determine the rules of God's calendar.** That is a matter He has left to the Jews – hence it is proper to call it the Hebrew calendar, just as we speak of the Hebrew Bible.

How, then, is the month of Abib or Nisan determined?

It has already been determined! The matter was decided by Hillel II and his court in the fourth century A.D.

Abib is determined by the rules of the permanent calendar. For example, the year, 1981, the new moon of the seventh month was Tuesday, Sept 29, beginning the evening before. It was this new moon that determined the character of the preceding months of the year. **The new moon of Abib does not determine the character of the year.**

The rules of the permanent calendar call for each of the first six months of the year to be alternately 30 and 29 days long.

Since the Bible does not declare which months have either 30 or 29 days, it is an arbitrary decision, enacted by those who are in authority over God's calendar. God has left it to them to keep it simple.

If He had not liked their decision He would have caused them to change it. But since each month is slightly more than 29 ½ days long, the decision of the court, or Beth Din is reasonable.

That means the first half of the year is always 177 days long (three months with 30 days plus three months with 29 days equals 177 days).

And if the first day of the seventh month is on Tuesday, the first day of Abib is 177 days earlier, and on a Sunday. (These first six months are always 25 weeks and two days long. And two days before a Tuesday, is a Sunday.)

When Nisan begins on a Sunday, the 14th day is a Sabbath, as it will be in the year 2021. That is, whenever the Feast of Trumpets and the first and eighth days of the Feast of Tabernacles season fall on Tuesday, as they will that year, the Passover will be a Sabbath – more specifically, Friday evening. God has not left the matter to each person to decide for himself. God is not the author of confusion. The devil is!

So if someone were to ask, But couldn't the month of Abib that year be one month earlier according to the Bible? We answer *no!* on two counts.

First, a change in the calendar lacks biblical authorization. The Hebrew perpetual calendar is the sole authority for the Church of God today.

Second, even if it were permissible to have Passover as early as March 20 – the very beginning day of spring – the Festival of Tabernacles would fall too early.

Did you ever notice that the Bible requires the Feast of Tabernacles, commemorating the second and great harvest of human beings, to at least reach the beginning of autumn? In Exodus 34:22 we read from the English translation of the Hebrew Bible:

“Thou shalt observe... the feast of ingathering at the turn of the year” (*Jewish Publication Society* translation).

What is the “turn of the year”? The Hebrew word translated “turn” is *tequfah* meaning “revolution, circuit or end.” It is used specifically referring to the autumnal equinox – **when day and night approach equal length.**

If the seven-day Feast of Tabernacles were to occur earlier than regulated by the Hebrew calendar, the festival could possibly fall wholly in summer and plainly contrary to Exodus 34:22.

So before thinking the Hebrew calendar needs our input, think first how much we need God’s input from His written Word! He does reveal in the Bible more than we may be aware about His calendar.