

The History of The Biblical Calendar

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A Historical and Comparative Study of Qumran, Essene, Hillel, Solar, Lunar, and Karaite Calendar Practices

Introduction

The reckoning of time and the observance of festivals are central to Biblical and Jewish religious practice. Throughout history, various groups have followed different calendar systems, each believing theirs to be the most accurate reflection of divine intention.

This article explores and compares the calendar practices of the Qumran community, the Essenes, the Karaites, and the revised Jewish calendar during the time of Hillel, focusing on the differences between solar and lunar calendars and the Biblical basis for each. Special attention is given to the Karaite method, which emphasizes the importance of the aviv barley stage in determining the timing of festivals without the need for calculated leap years.

Qumran Community Calendar Practices

The Qumran community, often associated with the Essenes, is known for its distinctive calendar practices, preserved in the Dead Sea Scrolls. They followed a solar calendar, which

they believed was a pure and consistent reflection of divine order. This 364-day calendar was divided into 12 months of 30 days, with four additional days marking the transitions between seasons

(1).

The Qumran community viewed this solar calendar as untainted by external influences, in contrast to the lunar calendar used by the mainstream Jewish community (2). Their interpretation of Genesis 1:14-18 emphasized the role of the sun in governing the yearly cycle, leading them to adopt a solar calendar (3).

This calendar differed significantly from the lunar calendar used in the Jerusalem Temple, leading to a theological and ideological separation (4). Key texts from the Dead Sea Scrolls, such as *Jubilees* and *1 Enoch*, support this solar calendar, critiquing the lunar calendar as corrupt (5).

Essene Calendar Practices

The Essenes, a Jewish sect during the Second Temple period, shared many practices with the Qumran community, including their use of a solar calendar (6). This calendar was aligned with the Qumran calendar, emphasizing consistency and divine order. The Essenes believed that maintaining the correct calendar was essential for being in sync with God's will, particularly given their eschatological focus (7).

Their separation from mainstream Judaism was partly due to these calendrical differences, as they celebrated festivals on different days

(8). Texts like *1 Enoch* and *Jubilees* were influential in shaping their views, advocating for a solar calendar and criticizing the lunar calendar used by other Jewish groups

(9). Karaite Calendar Practices

The Karaites are a Jewish group that adheres strictly to the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh) for determining religious practices, including the calendar. Unlike the Qumran community and the Essenes, the Karaites follow a system that closely ties the calendar to the agricultural cycles in Israel, specifically the ripening of the barley crop (10).

Aviv Barley and Calendar Determination

The Karaite method hinges on the observation of the barley crop, specifically the aviv stage, which signals the start of the new year and the month of Nisan (or Aviv) (11). If the barley is in the aviv stage by the end of the 12th lunar month, the next new moon marks the beginning of Nisan. If the barley is not yet aviv, they wait another month, ensuring the festivals align with the harvest cycle (12).

This method is deeply rooted in Biblical instructions. Exodus 9:31 describes the barley being aviv during the plague of

hail, while Leviticus 23:10-11 commands the offering of the wave sheaf (omer) from the firstfruits of the barley harvest

(13). The wave sheaf offering, which occurs during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, must be the first sheaf of the harvest, making the timing critical (14). The Karaite method ensures that this offering is timely and aligns with the agricultural reality in Israel (15).

Elimination of Leap Year Calculations

One of the most significant advantages of the Karaite method is its elimination of the need for calculated leap years (16). In the traditional Jewish lunar calendar, a leap month (Adar II) is added periodically to realign the lunar year with the solar year (17). However, by observing the aviv barley, the Karaite method naturally aligns the calendar with the solar year. If the barley is not in the aviv stage, the start of the new year is delayed by a month, removing the need for human calculations and adjustments (18).

This approach ensures that the festivals, particularly the wave sheaf offering, are observed at their Biblically appointed times without relying on complex calendrical calculations (19). The Karaites believe that this method more faithfully adheres to God's instructions, as it directly ties the religious calendar to the agricultural cycle ordained by God

(20). Lunar Calendar Practices

The lunar calendar has been the traditional Jewish calendar for determining months and religious observances. This calendar is based on the phases of the moon, with each lunar month lasting approximately 29.5 days. The lunar year, consisting of 12 months, totals about 354 days, which is about 11 days shorter than the solar year (21).

Consideration of Conjunctions and Equinoxes in Calendar Determination

It is essential to address whether scriptural backing exists for the use of astronomical conjunctions (when the moon is not visible) or equinoxes to determine the new moon or the start of the month (22). The Bible does not explicitly endorse these methods for determining the start of a month. Instead, the traditional practice, as observed in the Hebrew Bible, involves the sighting of the first visible crescent of the new moon to mark the beginning of a new month (23).

Verses such as 1 Samuel 20:5 and Psalm 81:3 suggest that the New Moon was recognized as a visible event, likely the first crescent (24). The Bible does not reference the use of

conjunctions (which occur when the moon is entirely invisible) or equinoxes for this purpose.

The use of these astronomical methods emerged later, particularly within the Rabbinical or Hillel calendar, differing from the observational practices likely used during biblical times (25).

This point underscores the importance of aligning modern calendar practices with those found in the scriptures, emphasizing the historical and biblical basis for observing the first visible crescent rather than relying on astronomical calculations (26).

To keep the lunar calendar in sync with the solar year, an extra month is added every two to three years (27). This process, known as intercalation, ensures that the festivals remain in their proper seasons (28). The lunar calendar is strongly supported by Biblical texts, including Genesis 1:14-18, Leviticus 23, and Psalm 104:19, which emphasize the role of the moon in marking seasons and religious observances (29).

In the Temple and Jewish practices, the lunar calendar was central, with the Sanhedrin responsible for declaring the new month based on the sighting of the new moon (30). The

festivals, which are covenantal signs between God and Israel, are all tied to the lunar calendar (31).

Comparative Analysis

Scriptural Basis

The lunar calendar has direct Biblical references, particularly in Leviticus 23, where the timing of festivals is tied to specific days of the lunar months (32). The solar calendar, while emphasized by the Qumran community and Essenes, lacks direct scriptural support for religious observance (33).

The Bible does not provide direct support for using astronomical conjunctions or equinoxes to determine the new moon or the start of a month (34). Instead, scriptural references point to the observation of the first visible crescent of the moon as the traditional method for determining the beginning of a new month (35). This method, observed during the time of the Hebrew Bible, contrasts with the calculated approaches developed later, particularly in the Rabbinical calendar (36).

The Karaite method, on the other hand, is deeply rooted in Biblical instructions, particularly in ensuring that the wave

sheaf offering is the first of the barley harvest, aligning the calendar naturally with the agricultural cycle without the need for calculated adjustments (37).

Conclusion

The study of these different calendar systems reveals that both the lunar calendar and the Karaite practice of observing the aviv barley have strong Biblical support (38).

The lunar calendar is directly tied to the timing of Biblical feasts, while the Karaite method ensures that these festivals align with the agricultural cycle, particularly in the offering of the firstfruits (39).

The Karaite emphasis on the aviv barley naturally eliminates the need for calculated leap years, making it a robust and biblically supported practice (40). While the solar calendar has historical interest, it lacks the direct scriptural basis that underpins the lunar and Karaite systems (41).

In conclusion, the lunar calendar and the Karaite method of determining the start of the year and festival dates are both Biblically correct approaches, with the Karaite practice offering a compelling model that ties the religious calendar directly to the agricultural cycles ordained by God (42).

Writer's Remarks

As shown in this study, there were many different groups in ancient Israel, most of which had differing systems and practices in the reckoning of YHVH's instructions on how to keep the calendar. Some have said that it should be simple enough that a grade-schooler could figure it out, and based on this study, I believe it is. After the destruction of the Second Temple and the subsequent dispersion of the people, Jewish leaders saw fit to change what had been the correct Hebrew/Biblical calendar to a calculated one. Their reasoning at the time may have seemed necessary, but it was a decision made by man and not in accordance with the instructions laid out in scripture—God's written word (43).

As pointed out in this study, the Karaites believed that the Jewish community had corrupted the calendar and they chose to continue with the sighting of the new moons and the barley being in the aviv stage. In other words, they adhered to the sighting of the new moons and the agricultural season, which is, once again, laid out in scripture (44).

With today's technology, there are many websites that not only monitor the barley to see if it is in the aviv stage in Jerusalem but also provide pictures and videos of the fields. I believe that when YHVH and Christ return to this earth, the Temple will be rebuilt, and we will all once again look to Jerusalem. So, if we have the ability to use the sighting of the New Moon and the Agricultural season in Jerusalem now, and that's how YHVH instructed us to do so, wouldn't it make sense for us to do it? (45)

References

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