

TWO New Years on God's Calendar?!

For a number of years now, God's calendar has been a favorite study topic of mine. It's also one of the most controversial and hotly debated topics. So today, let's take a gander at another topic of calendar controversy.

When does a year begin on God's calendar? Some say it begins in the spring; some say it begins in the fall. Who's right?

Surprisingly, both are right — but it depends on what type of year we're talking about. God's Word documents two different types of years, as we'll see momentarily. Just as we have both civil and fiscal years today, so they did in Bible days, too.

Nisan: The Religious and Civil Year

How do we know that a Biblical year begins in the spring? Simple. We know that Passover is in the spring, and in Exodus 12:1-2, God gave these instructions for the Passover month: "Now the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying, 'This month shall be your beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year to you.'"

So the month of Passover marks the beginning of months and stands as the first month of the year. Now, if a certain month is the first month of the year, then obviously that's when the year begins! Again, in v. 18, God said, "In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month at evening, you shall eat unleavened bread, until the twenty-first day of the month at evening."

Ex. 34:18, among other verses, labels this month "Abib": "The Feast of Unleavened Bread you shall keep. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, as I commanded you, in the appointed time of the month of Abib; for in the month of Abib you came out from Egypt."

In Hebrew, Abib (Strong's # H24) means "green, a young ear of grain." Brown-Driver-Briggs' and Gesenius' Hebrew lexicons agree that barley is the type of green grain implied.

Over and over, God's Word repeats that Abib, the month of green ears and the month of Passover, is the first month of the year. The beginning of months. Lev. 23:5; Num. 9:5; 28:16; 33:3; 2 Chron. 35:1; Ezra 6:19; and Ezek. 45:21 all describe it as "the first month."

Later, after the Babylonian exile, the Jews adopted the name Nisan for this month. As we read in Est. 3:7, “In the first month, which is the month of Nisan...”

So Nisan and Abib are different names for the same month: the first month. According to Gesenius, Nisan (Strong’s # H5212) means “the month of flowers.”

Throughout the Bible, God numbers months from this month. The fall Holy Days — Trumpets, Atonement, and Tabernacles — fall in the seventh month, which today is called Tishri. The seventh month, not the first.

The ninth month, or Kislev, is a winter month. As we read in Jer. 36:22, “Now the king was sitting in the winter house in the ninth month, with a fire burning on the hearth before him.”

But if all this isn’t enough, God’s Word provides additional evidence that years begin in the spring, in the same month as Passover.

In Ex. 40:1-2, we find, “Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ‘On the first day of the first month you shall set up the tabernacle of the tent of meeting.’” V. 17 adds, “And it came to pass in the first month of the second year, on the first day of the month, that the tabernacle was raised up.”

What was this second year? The second year after Israel came out of Egypt. And when did Israel come out of Egypt? In the month of Abib, the first month of the year.

In Num. 33:38, near the end of Israel’s wandering in the wilderness, we learn, “Then Aaron the priest went up to Mount Hor at the command of the LORD, and died there in the fortieth year after the children of Israel had come out of the land of Egypt, on the first day of the fifth month.”

A few months after this, Deut. 1:3 tells us, “Now it came to pass in the fortieth year, in the eleventh month, on the first day of the month, that Moses spoke to the children of Israel according to all that the LORD had given him as commandments to them.”

Both Moses and Aaron died in the fortieth year after Israel had come out of Egypt. Aaron died in the fifth month; Moses in the eleventh. Had a new year begun in the seventh month, or any other month between the fifth and eleventh, then they couldn’t have both died in the fortieth year.

Let’s look at one final example. In Jer. 28:1, we discover this: “And it happened in the same year, at the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the fourth year and in the fifth month, that Hananiah the son of Azur the prophet, who was from Gibeon, spoke to me in the house of the LORD in the presence of the priests and of all the people....”

Now, Hananiah was a false prophet, so God struck him down. We read in v. 17, “So Hananiah the prophet died the same year in the seventh month.” Again, if a new year had begun in the seventh month, then it couldn’t have been the same year as the fifth month!

So God begins a year in the spring, in the month of Passover. This Feast of Passover / Unleavened Bread is the first annual feast of the year, just as listed in Lev. 23 and Num. 28. All of God’s other annual Holy Days proceed from this point.

In the New Testament, Jesus Christ died on Nisan 14, “the Preparation Day of the Passover” (John 19:14). When He died, He died as our Passover Lamb (1 Cor. 5:7). Without Jesus’ sacrifice, we’d still be under the death penalty for our sins. Thus, this marks the beginning of God’s plan of salvation for mankind, and everything else proceeds from this point.

Tishri: The Agricultural and Fiscal Year

So why, then, do we find other passages indicating that a year begins in the seventh month? The month that’s today called Tishri?

For example, we read in Lev. 25:9-10, “Then you shall cause the trumpet of the Jubilee to sound on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement you shall make the trumpet to sound throughout all your land. And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a Jubilee for you....”

Would it make any sense to proclaim a Jubilee if it’s already half over? Or to consecrate a year that’s already half over? Of course not! Thus, the Jubilee years must begin in the seventh month.

Again, in Ex. 23:16, in the *Concordant Literal Version*, we find, “And observe the celebration of ingathering at the going forth of the year, when you gather your yields from the field.” The “celebration of ingathering” is the Feast of Tabernacles, as Deut. 16:13 tells us: “You shall observe the Feast of Tabernacles seven days, when you have gathered from your threshing floor and from your winepress.”

It’s important to remember that the Feast of Tabernacles happens in the seventh month, a few days after the Day of Atonement. The Day of Atonement falls on the 10th day of the seventh month (Lev. 23:27); the Feast of Tabernacles begins on the 15th day of the seventh month (Lev. 23:39).

So the Feast of Tabernacles in the seventh month happens “at the going forth of the year.” Adding to this, Ex. 34:22 (CLV) describes it as “the celebration of the ingathering at the revolution of the year.”

If the Feast of Tabernacles happens “at the going forth of the year” and “at the revolution of the year,” then it has to be around the time one year ends and another begins!

Again, in Deut. 31:10, we discover this: “And Moses commanded them, saying: ‘At the end of every seven years, at the appointed time in the year of release, at the Feast of Tabernacles....’” The year of release is the seventh, or Sabbatical year, when all debts must be forgiven, as explained in Deut. 15:1, 9.

So not only did the Jubilees begin in the seventh month, but so did the Sabbatical years. Of course, they must, for the Jubilee year, the fiftieth year, comes at the end of seven Sabbatical cycles, “seven times seven years,” or forty-nine years (Lev. 25:8-9). You can’t have Sabbatical years reckoned one way and Jubilees another, when they’re part of the same cycle!

But now, we have a conundrum. How can a year begin in both the first month and the seventh month?

Simple. They’re two different types of years. The year that begins in the first month is the civil and religious year. The year that begins in the seventh month is the agricultural and fiscal year.

In the Middle East, an agricultural cycle begins and ends in the fall. The early rains begin around the eighth month, corresponding to October-November on the Roman calendar. This is also when plowing and planting begin. This continues into the winter, rainy season.

The early crops of flax and barley begin ripening in the spring. Wheat and spelt ripen over the summer. Grapes, olives, and figs are ready for harvest in late summer and early fall. Thus, the hot months are the months of harvesting. This is finished in the fall.

This agricultural cycle, known to those who live in the Middle East, is also confirmed in the Bible.

In Gen. 8:22, seedtime, cold, and winter are contrasted with harvest, heat, and summer. Isa. 18:4 speaks of the heat of harvest.

Several verses speak of the “former rains” and the “latter rains.” For example, Jer. 5:24 says, “They do not say in their heart, ‘Let us now fear the LORD our God, who gives rain, both the former and the latter, in its season. He reserves for us the appointed weeks of the harvest.’” Joel 2:23-24 adds that the latter rains happen “in the first,” that is, the first month.

Ex. 9:31 shows that, in the time leading up to Passover, God's seventh plague on Egypt, the plague of hail, destroyed the barley in the head and the flax in the bud. Verse 32 adds that wheat and spelt are late crops.

Ex. 34:22 tells us that the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost, is at "the firstfruits of wheat harvest." Pentecost always lands in the third month, the month of Sivan.

As we've already seen, all harvesting must be completed before the Feast of Tabernacles in the seventh month. Lev. 23:39 says, "Also on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the fruit of the land, you shall keep the feast of the LORD for seven days; on the first day there shall be a sabbath-rest, and on the eighth day a sabbath-rest."

As they gathered in their harvests, God commanded His people to set aside tithes from their increase. They would then journey to God's sanctuary and rejoice before Him for all the good that He had done for them. We read in Deut. 14:22-26,

22 You shall truly tithe all the increase of your grain that the field produces year by year.

23 And you shall eat before the LORD your God, in the place where He chooses to make His name abide, the tithe of your grain and your new wine and your oil, of the firstborn of your herds and your flocks, that you may learn to fear the LORD your God always.

24 But if the journey is too long for you, so that you are not able to carry the tithe, or if the place where the LORD your God chooses to put His name is too far from you, when the LORD your God has blessed you,

25 then you shall exchange it for money, take the money in your hand, and go to the place which the LORD your God chooses.

26 And you shall spend that money for whatever your heart desires: for oxen or sheep, for wine or similar drink, for whatever your heart desires; you shall eat there before the LORD your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your household.

2 Chron. 31 gives us a few more details. As part of restoring Godly worship in Judah, King Hezekiah commanded the people to bring their tithes to the temple once more. In vv. 4-7, we read,

4 Moreover he commanded the people who dwelt in Jerusalem to contribute support for the priests and the Levites, that they might devote themselves to the Law of the LORD.

5 As soon as the commandment was circulated, the children of Israel brought in abundance the firstfruits of grain and wine, oil and honey, and of all the produce of the field; and they brought in abundantly the tithe of everything.

6 And the children of Israel and Judah, who dwelt in the cities of Judah, brought the tithe of oxen and sheep; also the tithe of holy things which were consecrated to the LORD their God they laid in heaps.

7 In the third month they began laying them in heaps, and they finished in the seventh month.

Notice that they began in the third month and finished in the seventh month. In the third month is the Feast of Pentecost, or the Feast of Weeks, a pilgrimage festival when God commanded His people to appear before Him (Ex. 23:14-17; 34:22-23). In the seventh month is the Feast of Tabernacles, God's third and final pilgrimage festival, at which time all the harvesting had been completed.

Not long after the Feast of Tabernacles, the agricultural cycle would begin all over again. Plowing and planting in the fall and winter would give way to harvesting in spring and summer. And in the summer and early fall, as God's people gathered in their harvests, they would once again bring the tithes of their increase to rejoice before Him.

Thus, the agricultural and fiscal year of the Bible begins and ends in the fall.

It cannot be any other way, for the Jubilee and Sabbatical cycles tie directly to the agricultural cycle. God told the Israelites, when they came into the Promised Land, to plow, plant, tend their crops, and harvest for six years (Lev. 25:3). The seventh year, God told them to let the land lie fallow; they must neither plant nor harvest (vv. 4-5).

Now, if the Jubilees and Sabbatical cycles had been reckoned from the spring, this would pose a problem. The people could've planted in the fall of the sixth year, but they couldn't harvest what they planted because the Sabbatical year would arrive before harvest. Nor could they plant in the seventh year, which means they would've had no harvest in the eighth year. And if they had no harvest in the eighth year, they would only have five harvests in the years leading up to the next Sabbath year, not six.

No, God meant exactly what He said when He told His people to proclaim the Jubilee year in the seventh month on the Day of Atonement; when He spoke of the Feast of Tabernacles as being "at the revolution of the year"; and when He again spoke of the Feast of Tabernacles as falling "at the end of every seven years." The seventh month begins a new year — the agricultural year.

God has two “New Years.” His calendar likewise has two “New Years.” New Year’s Day comes twice a year on God’s calendar.

Why did He do that? Because they both illustrate His plan of salvation!

Why the Seventh Month?

Now, before getting into the details of how both “new years” tie into God’s plan, there’s another interesting aspect to all this. The calculated Hebrew calendar reckons the whole year from the first day of the seventh month, the Day of Trumpets.

Why calculate from the seventh month and not the first month? As noted previously, it makes no difference which of the first seven months you calculate from, because they never vary in length. The Hebrew calendar’s first seven months always have 207 days. The first six months always have 177 days, and the Day of Trumpets is always the 178th day of the year. If one day moves, all the others move with it.

But the question remains, “Why?” If the calculated Hebrew calendar is inspired and ordained by Almighty God, as I believe it is, then why did He design it to be calculated from the Day of Trumpets?

First, the Day of Trumpets is the only time the first day of any month is a Holy Day. Thus, it’s only sensible to calculate the calendar from a Holy Day.

Secondly, what happens in the seventh month? The fulfillment of God’s plan. The Holy Days of the seventh month represent the time when Jesus Christ will return to this earth and set up His Kingdom.

God’s plan begins in the first month, when Jesus died as our Passover Lamb. This is the beginning, and all the other Holy Days follow from this point. But since the Holy Days of the seventh month picture God’s Kingdom, they, too, represent a beginning.

Thirdly, the seventh month — just like the seventh day and the seventh year — corresponds to the Sabbath. As Heb. 4 shows us, the Sabbath represents God’s Kingdom — which is to be established in the seventh month.

God’s Kingdom, His eternal Sabbath rest, is the goal of His entire plan. It’s what we strive for. As Heb. 4:11 tells us, “Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest.” Because this is the whole purpose, the whole point of God’s plan, then His calendar and His Holy Days are calculated from this point.

Finally, who determines the Holy Days? God or man? Obviously, God does!

And where does God rule from and make this determination? From His throne, where He sits as King over His whole creation. The Holy Days of the seventh month picture this Kingdom. So calculating the calendar from the Day of Trumpets is an earthly symbol and shadow of God determining the Holy Days from His throne in His Kingdom.

However, the religious year continues to begin at the same time it always has, in the first month. This is the beginning of God's plan, and the beginning of our journey to His Kingdom — the seventh month.

Conclusion

Hopefully, we can now understand God's calendar a little more fully. God's calendar, the Hebrew calendar, encloses two different types of years. The religious year begins with Jesus Christ's death as our Passover Lamb. But we calculate from the beginning of the culmination of God's plan, from the goal and purpose of His plan, in the seventh month.

Thus, even though we no longer live in an agrarian society, both new years, each representing a key part of God's plan, continue on His calendar to this day. The new year of the first month represents the beginning of God's plan. The new year of the seventh month represents the beginning of the fulfillment of God's plan.

Written by Brett Gray (2023)