

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

B

Biblical Calendar

by J.K. McKee updated 20 July, 2011 www.messianicapologetics.net

What is your opinion with the various calendar issues that seem to be dividing the Messianic community?

The new month, as originally specified by the Torah, was to be determined by the changing of the moon or *chodesh* (חֹדֶשׁ). Genesis 1:14 states how God originally made the lights of the sky, as the means by which His people were to keep time: "Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night, and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years." Numbers 29:6¹ records how there were to be a variety of special offerings presented to the Lord, during the time of the New Moon.

Since the Biblical period of ancient times up until modern times, there has been a diversity of opinion present within Judaism as to how time is to be reckoned. For practical purposes, this most often concerns the days on which the appointed times are to be observed. While residing within the Land of Israel in either the First or Second Temple periods, it would be quite easy for an enclosed group of Ancient Israelites or Ancient Jews to maintain a calendrical system via a visible sighting of the New Moon, things definitely changed in history with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. and widespread expulsion from the Holy Land. How was the Jewish community, the vast majority of which was spread abroad in Diaspora, to keep the appointed times and maintain some level of cohesion and unity? George Robinson offers the following fair summation in his book *Essential Judaism*, of how the Hillel II calendar was developed in the Fourth Century C.E.:

"In the time of the Temple in Jerusalem (the First Temple was destroyed in 586 B.C.E., the Second Temple, built in 538 B.C.E. was razed in 70 C.E.), communication over long distances was problematic. It was imperative, if all Jewish communities were to celebrate at the same time, that everyone know when the new moon occurred, since the date of a festival would be based on when the first of the month fell...Until 358 C.E., when Rabbi Hillel II introduced a permanent fixed calendar, it was up to the Sanhedrin, the governing body of rabbis in Jerusalem, to decide when the new moon fell, based on eyewitness testimony. They in turn would send a signal to a man on a neighboring hilltop who would light a signal fire; another fire would be lit on a nearby hilltop and so on, until a chain of signal fires was flickering through the known Jewish world, telling the Jews that the new month had begun.

"This was, needless to say, an inexact system. The rabbis of the Sanhedrin worried that communities outside the Holy Land would not know the exact date on which to celebrate a festival. In response to this problem, they instituted a second day for each festival in the Diaspora so that there could be no mistake. The second day is preserved in the practice of Orthodox and Conservative Jews in the Diaspora of celebrating a second day of major holidays. In Israel and the Reform movement, only one day of each festival is observed."²

¹ "[T]he burnt offering of the new moon and its grain offering, and the continual burnt offering and its grain offering, and their drink offerings, according to their ordinance, for a soothing aroma, an offering by fire to the LORD" (Numbers 29:6).

² George Robinson, *Essential Judaism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs, and Rituals* (New York: Pocket Books, 2000), pp 79-80.

With a few modifications since, the Hillel II calendar—which is all *pre-calculated* for the beginning of the month and days for the appointed times—is followed by the worldwide Jewish community today, as well as the considerable majority of Messianic Judaism. One of the biggest areas of divergence, that is easily detectable between much of the independent Messianic community (*especially* the Two-House sub-movement) and Messianic Judaism, is that the former tends to reject the validity of the mainline Jewish calendar. When various independent Messianic groups gather to remember the appointed times, such as Passover, it is usually not at the same time that Messianic Jewish congregations will gather.

The issue of the calendar, in general, is often regarded as one of authority. Do the Rabbis of Judaism have *any* significant place in the *halachah* of today’s Messianic community? It is not difficult for a Messianic Jewish person, in respecting his or her heritage, to conclude that the Hillel II calendar should be followed, since it provides common dates for all Jews the world over to observe the appointed times. Believing in Messiah Yeshua does not all of a sudden make such a person un-Jewish or disconnected from the wider Jewish world, especially in matters like the calendar followed. Even if the Rabbis have been wrong in many theological areas, this does not mean that they are completely ignorant and totally devoid of wisdom.

Within much of the independent Messianic world and Two-House sub-movement, rather than the pre-calculated Hillel II calendar being followed, many instead prefer to follow the calendrical determinations by the Karaite movement. The Karaites were an ancient sect of Judaism that arose in the Middle Ages, that quantitatively rejected Rabbinical authority and the value of works like the Mishnah or Talmud. The Karaite movement in Israel, while extremely small, has its own calendar based on their visible sighting of the New Moon.

(It does have to be noted that a number of people within the broad, independent Messianic spectrum, do still follow the mainline Jewish calendar. But even in doing so, there are disagreements often present with the date for keeping *Shavuot*, or referring to the Feast of Trumpets as *Rosh HaShanah*.³)

Within popular conference events held by various people promoting Hebraic Roots, it is not uncommon to find teachers who advocate things along the lines of, “The Father is restoring the Biblical calendar to us...” Within such teachings, one does not often find that much regard expressed for the complexities of ancient Jewish history, and the need for the Rabbinic authorities to develop a calendar that *the worldwide Jewish community* could use to keep them together as a people. Unfair accusations and disgust toward the Synagogue are instead more easily detected.

Too much of the independent Messianic world has many “restored Biblical calendars” littering its ranks. While various persons have taken it upon themselves to produce their own “restored Biblical calendar,” this has tended to only cause *more confusion* and division, as one does not know which calendar is to be followed from congregation to assembly to fellowship. Not all agree with the determination of the Karaite movement in Israel, or when the New Moon begins and ends. The default calendar choice for any Messianic is understandably the mainline Rabbinical calendar used by Judaism today.

What really needs to be recognized about why there is so much diversity circulating, in the independent Messianic world about the Biblical calendar, is that a group’s so-called “restored Biblical calendar” is really not a means by which to determine the “real date” for remembering Passover or *Yom Kippur*. Many have produced their own calendars as a means to promote their own predictions and calculations regarding the end-times and Second Coming. With this, the most amount of attention focused is not upon the determination of the New Moon, but rather **the**

³ Consult the relevant sections of the *Messianic Spring Holiday Helper* and *Messianic Fall Holiday Helper* by Messianic Apologetics for a further discussion of these issues.

year. Many assumptions are made from mathematics, astronomy, chronology, and science. It is not too infrequent that someone’s “restored Biblical calendar” gets proven wrong, and suggested dates and times have to be adjusted and recalculated when predictions come and go when nothing happens.

There is likely a season coming when some of the presuppositions, that have gone into the different “restored Biblical calendars,” will need to be radically reevaluated. Recalculating and recalculating the presumed year of Yeshua’s return (2000, 2007, 2012, 2017, etc.) cannot be allowed to continue indefinitely. The severe challenge to people reconsidering the various presuppositions that are associated with highly-packaged teachings like the 6,000-year doctrine,⁴ is that it will open up areas of theological discussion that have largely remained closed to all sectors of the Messianic movement, particularly as it concerns the material of Genesis chs. 1-11.⁵ Anthropologically speaking, we see human cave paintings, such as those in Lascaux, France from an estimated 16,000 years ago⁶ (with some of the other cave paintings in France and Spain dating to as many as 32,000 years ago). One need not be an evolutionist to legitimately recognize that the popular 6,000-year doctrine has made some assumptions, about both eschatology and Biblical genealogies (i.e., Genesis 5, 11),⁷ that do not bear out in human history.

Yeshua will only return **when His people are ready**. The Apostle Peter says we “ought...to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God” (2 Peter 3:11-12). He employs the present active participle *speudontas* (σπεύδοντας)—“hastening”—to describe this action. The righteous behavior of Believers affects “the coming of the day of God,”⁸ not any human being’s mistaken calculation of it.

Messianic Apologetics sees absolutely no reason why today’s Messianic movement should not be observing the appointed times *on all of the same dates* as the rest of the worldwide Jewish community. The areas where the Rabbinical authorities should be rejected concern matters like Yeshua’s Messiahship, or Jewish and non-Jewish equality in the people of God. Matters like making sure that the assembly follows the same calendar are in a quantitatively different category. Significant, unnecessary divisions have been caused by all of the “restored Biblical calendars” out there.

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Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard, Updated Edition* (NASU), © 1995, published by The Lockman Foundation.

⁴ Consult the FAQ on the Messianic Apologetics website, “6,000 Year Teaching.”
⁵ For a worthwhile review, we recommend that you consider the views of Creationist Hugh Ross, *The Genesis Question: Scientific Advances and the Accuracy of Genesis*, second expanded edition (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2001) and *A Matter of Days: Resolving a Creation Controversy* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2004).
⁶ Information on visiting the cave of Lascaux can be accessed on the French Ministry of Culture website: <<http://www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/arcnat/lascaux/en/>>.
⁷ Consult the FAQ on the Messianic Apologetics website, “Genesis 5, 11 Genealogies.”
⁸ Consult the editor’s blog editorial, “The Hastening of Righteousness.”