

United Church of God, *an International Association*



The Hebrew Calendar Summary *Doctrinal Study Paper*

Approved by the Council of Elders
December 7, 2021

[Approved by the Council of Elders on Dec. 7, 2021 and permitted to be posted on August 18, 2022. A second and lengthier paper on the subject is in the process of being reviewed.]

All scriptures are quoted from *The Holy Bible*, New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

1 – Why a calendar?

According to the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, a calendar is “a system for fixing the beginning, length, and divisions of the year and arranging days and longer divisions of time (as weeks and months) in a definite order.” A calendar therefore *arranges days according to astronomical events* for regulating and planning everyday life, enabling one to both plan for the arrival of God’s Holy Days, and to plan our other activities around them.

It is of prime importance to God’s people to observe the specific days that God sanctified as His festivals and Holy Days on the accurate days as commanded. Believers are instructed to go to the place God has placed His name (Exodus 23:14,17; Deuteronomy 14:23; 16:23) and to meet during His seven annual holy convocations (Leviticus 23), besides attending services for the weekly Sabbath (Leviticus 23:3).

Thankfully, most of the elements of a calendar can be found in Scripture. For instance, we know from the Bible there are normally 12 months in the year: “*In the first month*, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast Pur (that is, the lot), before Haman to determine the day and the month, until it fell on *the twelfth month*, which is the month of Adar” (Esther 3:7, emphasis added throughout). We also know the month starts on the New Moon, as the Hebrew term used in Exodus 12:2 for month (*chodesh*) has the primary meaning of a new moon. “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’” (Exodus 12:1-2).

There are questions, though, about *when* the New Moon actually begins, since there are differences of opinion on how to define the start of the New Moon and other calendric adjustments such as if or when to add a thirteenth month to keep the calendar in line with the seasons of the year. So, who makes the determination about such matters?

Although much of the biblical calendar can be gleaned from the Scriptures, it is recognized that God did *not clearly and explicitly* define in His Word all the elaborate astronomical details and complexities that need to be considered to determine with certainty the beginning, length and divisions of months and what are called “leap years.” Due to the lack of some of the biblical details about the calendar, it is clear one *cannot derive a calendar directly from biblical instructions alone*. Thus, any calendar, even a so-called “biblical calendar,” has to be based at least in part on human decisions made where no clear scriptural instruction is given.

Are we then, in God’s Church, supposed to use the Hebrew calendar, or are we to follow some other humanly devised calendar? Which calendar is *God’s approved and endorsed calendar*, the calendar which accurately proclaims God’s Holy Days at His appointed times?

2 – Who is to proclaim God’s Holy Days at the proper times of the year?

From Scripture, we know God expects us to keep His Holy Days at the appointed times and the Church is prophesied to be keeping all of His commandments at the end time (Revelation 12:17; 14:12). How can we do so, unless God has left us a way to know *when* are the appointed times for His Holy Days?

Furthermore, *to whom* has God given the right *to proclaim* a calendar which correctly places God's Holy Days at their appointed times, and whose decision does God endorse? To whom has *God delegated* the responsibility to make calendric proclamations according to His will? In other words, which is the calendar that God *sets aside* as His own?

God does state *very clearly* who has the delegated authority to proclaim His Holy Days and determine a calendar as revealed in Scripture:

“Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: ‘The feasts of the LORD, which *you shall proclaim* to be holy convocations, these are My feasts . . . These are the feasts of the LORD, holy convocations which *you shall proclaim* at their *appointed times*’” (Leviticus 23:2, 4).

“*The sons of Aaron, the priests*, shall blow the trumpets; and these shall be to you as an ordinance forever throughout your generations . . . Also in the day of your gladness, in *your appointed feasts*, and *at the beginning of your months*, you shall blow the trumpets” (Numbers 10:8, 10).

The Law, the Pentateuch or Torah (in Leviticus 23:2, 4, 21, 27, 36-37 and Numbers 10:8, 10) explains that it was the sons of Aaron, the priests, who had the duly authorized responsibility *to proclaim* God's Holy Days *at their appointed times* and the authority to declare the months for any defined year through the blowing of trumpets. It was not an individual matter according to one's conscience, but *a duty of the authorized priesthood*, under the guidance of the high priest, to proclaim the Holy Days and therefore to follow the calendar which correctly locates them.

Additionally, God gave the priests under Aaron, and later the appointed judges, the responsibility and insight of making *judgments to address specific conditions not directly* stated or implied in the Bible:

“And you shall come to the priests, the Levites, and to the judge there in those days, and inquire of them; they shall pronounce upon you the *sentence of judgment*. *You shall do* according to the sentence which they pronounce upon you in that place which the LORD chooses. And *you shall be careful to do* according to all that they order you. According to the sentence of the law in which they instruct you, according to the judgment which they tell you, you shall do; you shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left from the sentence which they pronounce upon you. Now the man who acts *presumptuously* and will not heed the priest who stands to minister there before the LORD your God, or the judge, that man shall die. So you shall put away the evil from Israel” (Deuteronomy 17:9-12).

It is clear from the above scripture that not every decision regarding God's law was detailed in the Law. Therefore, in addition to the priestly responsibility *to proclaim* God's festivals at their appointed times (Leviticus 23:2, 4, 21, 27, 36-37), they also had the delegated responsibility *to make binding decisions* (Deuteronomy 17:9-12) regarding difficult matters. When calendric decisions required a judgment, the priesthood had the delegated authority by God, under the high priest, to make a God-approved determination. The congregation then had the responsibility to “*do according to all that they order you*” (Deuteronomy 17:10).

3 – The priesthood and later the Calendar Council proclaimed the calendar

One of the duties of the priesthood was to take into account the “lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to *mark sacred times*, and days and years” (Genesis 1:14, New International Version, 2015). Note that it is the *lights* (plural) which are used as signs to mark sacred times, days and years, and not just the moon alone. Genesis 1:16 specifically defines which lights God is referring to: “Then God made two great lights: the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night. He made the stars also.”

The “signs,” *owth* in Hebrew, mentioned in Genesis 1:14, are *distinguishing signs*, which would also include lunar and solar eclipses, equinoxes, as well as the “heliacal risings and settings and the intervals between [certain stars which] gave the exact length of the stellar year and the nearly exact length of the tropical year.”¹ These astronomical events can be accurately predetermined, like a carefully calibrated watch.

Once the priests authorized the dates and publicly proclaimed them, it became the official calendar which incorporated God’s Holy Days, and people were expected to honor it even when, at times, there were unintended miscalculations on the part of the priesthood. J. B. Segal writes in his book, *Intercalation and the Hebrew Calendar*, “We are told, indeed, that once fixed, the day of the New Moon remained valid *even if it had been fixed under duress*.”² Therefore, this following of the approved calendar becomes a test in one’s heart of submission to God’s appointed authority and indeed is a matter of faith.

There are a number of historical references which indicate that calendric calculations and even postponements, when warranted, were done in the first few centuries and even before Christ’s time. Such examples are:

1. “Hebrew calendar reckoning – in which the method of intercalation was based no longer on astronomical observation but on *computation* – was probably in use among the Jews in the *2nd century B.C.* They had certainly acquired proficiency in its use before the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70” (J.B. Segal, *Intercalation and the Hebrew Calendar*, p. 284).
2. “Jewish authorities of the *2nd century B.C.* [some 100-200 years *before* Christ] had achieved *precision in their computations* of the luni-solar calendar” (J.B. Segal, *Intercalation and the Hebrew Calendar*, p. 296; *BT Sanhedrin* 12a).
3. “BORNSTEIN has assembled a great number of references to *calendar computation in the Talmud*” (J.B. Segal, *Intercalation and the Hebrew calendar*, p. 284; Bornstein, *Mabloqet Rav Saadya Gaon uven Meir*, 16).
4. Rabbis insisted that those who had the *ability to compute the calendar* should not withhold their services (*BT Shabbath* 75a).
5. “*Everyone knows* that intercalation depends on *computation*” (*BT Rosh haShana* 7a).

¹ *Intercalation and the Hebrew Calendar*, J. B. Segal, p. 268, *Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. 7, Fasc. 3 (July, 1957).

² *Tos Rosh haShanah* iii. 1. Cf. JT Sh*bbi’ith x. 2. (fol. 39c) and Rosh haShanah ii. 8 (fol. 58b): “If they have sanctified and afterwards the witnesses are found to be deliberately false, the sanctification is nevertheless valid” (*Intercalation and the Hebrew Calendar*, J. B. Segal, page 260, footnote 5).

6. “The *computation* of the synodic month at the time of the Talmud *is certain*” (J.B. Segal, *ibid.*, p. 288).
7. The Mishna refers to *computation* (*BT Sanhedrin* 10b on *Mish. Sanhedrin* 1. 2).
8. “The rules of the Rabbis on *fixing of the new moon* are admirably set out by ZUCKERMANN, *op. cit.*, 7 ff.” (J.B. Segal, *ibid.*, p. 288, footnote 2).
9. “A statement is made in the Babylonian Talmud that ‘now, we know the fixing of the (new) moon’³. This meant that it is now possible, even in Babylonia, *to be certain about the dates of the new moons that had been set* by the Palestinian court [Sanhedrin]. On the strength of this statement, indeed, the Talmud goes on to question the necessity of two festival days” (Sacha Stern, *Calendar and Community*, p. 170).
10. “I am not aware of any evidence suggesting that *any observational method* was officially employed by the *Sanhedrin* to determine whether to declare a leap year or not. The probable reason is that the *Sanhedrin* had to make equinox predictions and leap year declarations sufficiently *far in advance* so that pilgrims would know when to begin their journey, *so they relied on calculations instead*” (Dr. Irv Bromberg, *The Seasonal Drift of the Traditional (Fixed Arithmetic) Hebrew Calendar*, 9/12/2017, University of Toronto, Canada, p. 7).
11. “The Babylonian Talmud frequently cites a saying attributed to Rav (Babylonian Amora, early third century), that *since the days of Ezra* [nearly 500 years before the time of Christ] *the month of Elul* [the sixth month] *had never been full* [never been 30 days long]⁴ . . . the reference to Ezra suggests, nevertheless, that this rule existed already in the Mishnaic period [before A.D. 358, the time of Hillel II], and even *long before*. This rule is also attributed to Rav [Babylonian Amora, early third century] in the Palestinian Talmud, but without reference to the days of Ezra. Similar to this is the rule that ‘*Adar adjacent to Nisan*



is *always defective*’ [that is, it is always 29 days long]. It is attributed in the same passage of Palestinian Talmud to Rabbi [Judah ha-Nasi (see footnote 5)], the redactor of the Mishnah, and elsewhere to R. Yehoshua b. Levi” (Sacha Stern, *Calendar and Community*, pp. 165-166). The implication here is of a calculated calendar.

12. “According to the Palestinian Talmud, indeed, the rule was firmly established that Yom Kippur [the Day of Atonement] *could never occur on Friday*” (Sacha Stern, *Calendar and Community*, p. 136). “. . . [T]he day of Atonement *cannot occur on a Friday or on a*

³ *B. Betzah* 4b, a statement attributed to R. Zeira (footnote 62, *Calendar and Community*, Sacha Stern, page 170).

⁴ Footnote 36 on page 165 of *Calendar and Community*, Sacha Stern, quotes: “*B. RH* 19b and 32a; *B. Betzah* 6a and 22b. For an alternative interpretation, see Wacholder and Weisberg (1971) 238.”

Sunday. This rule is mentioned in the Palestinian Talmud as well as in the Babylonian Talmud . . .” (*ibid.*, p. 166 and related footnotes 44 and 45). The implication here is again that postponements were already in place *before* Hillel II (A.D. 358).

13. “The present day *prohibition of Rosh ha-Shanah* [day of Trumpets] *on Sunday* draws its origin from another passage of the Palestinian Talmud (*Y. Sukkah 4:1 (54b)*)” (Sacha Stern, *Calendar and Community*, p. 194). The implication here is again that postponements were in existence *before* Hillel II.
14. Sacha Stern in *Calendar and Community* mentions, “. . . the existence of a *fixed calendar* in the late Amoraic period [A.D. 358 falls in that period] is *confirmed beyond doubt* in a passage of the Palestinian Talmud” (p. 171). Stern quotes R. Yose’s comments in the Talmud regarding *Mishna Megillah 1: 2*: “‘If (Purim) occurs on Monday’ (in the *Mishna*) does not apply; and ‘if (Purim) occurs on the Sabbath’ (in the *mishna*) (also) does not apply. (For) if it occurs on Monday, the great fast [Day of Atonement] will be on Sunday, and if it occurs on the Sabbath, the great fast will be on Friday.” Stern adds in footnote 67 that “R. Yose’s view that the occurrence of 14 Adar [Purim] on the Sabbath is ‘impossible’ [not permitted] is reiterated in *Y. Megillah 1:4 (70b)*.”

The implications of the above points 11 through 14 support both a *calculated* calendar and *postponements* that indicate:

- a. there was a *fixed number of days* between Purim (during the 12th month, or the 13th month in an intercalated year) and Atonement (the *following* year’s seventh month), and therefore confirms the existence of a *fixed calculated calendar*;



- b. that *postponement rules were already in place* before the time of Hillel II [A.D. 358] to ensure that the Day of Atonement would not fall on a Friday or a Sunday. Therefore, the postponement rules were *not* added *centuries after* Hillel II, as some opposing the postponement rules claim.

15. In the second century Rabbi Judah the Nasi⁵ and Rabbi Aqiba *treated witnesses* concerning the new moon with *indifference* (*Mish. Rosh haShanah 1.6*).

⁵ “Judah ha-Nasi (‘Judah the Prince’ circa 135-220), grandson of Gamaliel (at whose feet Paul had been taught, Acts 22:3) was a second-century rabbi and chief redactor and editor of the Mishnah. Judah ha-Nasi succeeded his father, Simeon ben Gamaliel II, as patriarch (head) of the Jewish community in Palestine and, consequently, of the Sanhedrin as well, at that time chiefly a legislative body (in earlier times, the Sanhedrin had been primarily a court)” (*Encyclopedia Britannica* and *Wikipedia*).

- a. This statement clearly affirms that during the first centuries of the New Testament Church, the Jews already *disregarded* observation of the New Moon. This was well before the Council of Nicaea in the fourth century (A.D. 325) and therefore before Hillel II's proclamation of the Hebrew calendar in A.D. 358.

16. Rabbi Yohanan in the third century declared: “*One does not pay over-much attention to witnesses concerning the new moon*” (*JT Sh^ebb 'ith x. 2 (fol. 39c), Rosh haShanah iii. 1 (fol. 58c).*

Arthur Spier notes: “A special committee of the Sanhedrin, with its president as chairman, had the mandate to regulate and balance the solar with the lunar years. This so-called Calendar Council (*Sod Haibbur*) *calculated the beginnings of the seasons (Tekufah) on the basis of astronomical figures* which had been handed down as a tradition of old” (*The Comprehensive Hebrew Calendar*, 1987, p. 1).

4 – The diaspora and the proclamation of the Hebrew calendar

As the Israelites spread to more remote regions, particularly during the diaspora, the proclamation of God's festivals in advance became more of a necessity. The proclamation of the *Day of Trumpets* is even more critical because it is the only Holy Day that falls on the first day of the month (the new moon). Any proclamation of the day of Trumpets done from Jerusalem on that very day, would reach any location further *east* of Jerusalem *after* the beginning of the Holy Day.

If messengers with the proclamation of when the day of Trumpets occurred was only done on that very day, how could this proclamation reach the believers in other geographical locations around the world in a timely manner? How could the actual preparation for the Sabbath-rest on the Feast of Trumpets (Leviticus 23:24) be performed around the world? And how could the preparation for the three annual pilgrimages to Jerusalem (Deuteronomy 16:16), and the pilgrimages themselves, be done before the Holy Days, particularly if the intercalated years were not known in advance?

After the temple was destroyed in A.D. 70, the Jews, many of whom were already scattered throughout the world, became even more dispersed, as the Roman Empire's pressure on the Jewish people increased. Consequently, communication from the Palestinian calendric court (the Sanhedrin) became irregular to some regions around the world. “All evidence suggests, in fact, that Diaspora communities took charge of their own calendar, without ever referring to Palestinian [the Sanhedrin] calendric authority” (Sacha Stern, *Calendar and Community*, p. 83). This is evidence of the difficulty of communications between the Jewish court and the Jews in the dispersion. At the same time, it shows how some Jews were *not* “careful to do according to all” that God instructed them through the priesthood, instead, they “acted *presumptuously* and did not heed the priesthood's decisions in matters of controversy” (Deuteronomy 17:10). Biblical and secular history indicate the Israelites were *not always faithful* in believing and submitting to the biblically delegated authority (Romans 3:3), and by extension we can conclude they took calendric decisions into their own hands, thereby adding confusion to the historical record of the timing of the observance of God's Holy Days.

The advance of traditional Christianity in the Roman world led to the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325 under the emperor Constantine to reinforce the pagan Easter tradition. It decreed that it

was “unbecoming, in Christians to follow the usage of the unbelieving, hostile Jews, and ordained that Easter should always be celebrated on the first Sunday after the first full moon succeeding the vernal equinox (March 21), and always after the Jewish Passover . . . Henceforth the Quartodecimans [those Christians who continued to observe the Passover on the 14th of Nisan] were universally regarded as heretics and were punished as such” (Philip Schaff, *The AGES Digital Library HISTORICAL, History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 2, 1997, p. 184).

The Jewish Encyclopedia states: “The persecutions under Constantius [II] finally decided the patriarch, Hillel II, (330-365), to publish rules for the computation of the calendar, which had hitherto been regarded as a secret science” (Isidore Singer, p. 500). (See also *The Comprehensive Hebrew Calendar*, Arthur Spier, p. 2.)

5 - The New Testament Church example

The New Testament Church, as a small, persecuted flock, faithfully kept the Sabbath and the biblical Feasts, but there is no record that they were ever specifically commissioned by Christ to set up and maintain a calendar. The evidence from the New Testament writings shows they followed the Jewish proclamations of the Holy Days to determine when to keep the festivals, such as the Passover on the 14th of Nisan and Pentecost (Acts 2:1; 12:4).

The observance of the New Covenant Passover on the 14th of Nisan can be verified in Scripture and in history. Anicetus, who was bishop of Rome around A.D. 155 tried, around the year A.D. 160, to outlaw the observance of Passover, apparently as a method of avoiding the charge of “judaizing Christianity.” Opposition to this effort came in the person of Polycarp, who lived in Asia Minor at that time. According to the fourth-century historian Eusebius, Polycarp was a disciple of the apostle John and was well known throughout the churches in the Roman Empire of the second century. Polycarp claimed to observe the Passover because it was taught to him by the apostle John, who got it from Christ Himself. The tradition of observing the Passover on the 14th of Nisan was held fast by Polycarp.⁶

Paul writes in Romans 3 about the advantage of being a Jew: “What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of circumcision? Much in every way! Chiefly *because to them were committed the oracles of God*” (Romans 3:1-2). God entrusted the Jews with the responsibility of preserving the Scriptures that we refer to as “the Old Testament.” These instructions were given to Moses “who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the Angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers, the one who received the living oracles to give to us” (Acts 7:38). They fulfilled that responsibility, despite the fact that most Jews did not believe and obey these divine sayings. However, the fact that the Jews did not faithfully obey what is written does not invalidate the promises of our faithful God (Romans 3:3).

6 - The modern era of the Church of God has followed the same example

The Church of God down to the modern era has followed the same example as that of the early Church, which is to use the calendar proclaimed by the Jews through the centuries.

⁶ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 5, Chap. 24.

A.N. Dugger and C.O. Dodd write that some of the Sabbatarians in America in the 17th and 18th centuries observed the Passover on the 14th of the first month: “Thus being isolated from fellowship with one another, we find companies in one place called the Church of Christ, in another place the Church of God, while in other communities they were simply called ‘*Sabbatarian Congregations*,’ but the belief was practically the same. They stood for the *commandments of God and the faith of Jesus*, observing the *true Sabbath*, keeping the Lord’s Supper yearly on the *14th of the first month*” (*A History of the True Church, Traced From 33 A.D. to Date*, 2003, p. 185).

Referring to the Sabbatarians in the late 19th century, Dugger and Dodd add: “The truth of the matter was that the church had met on the night in question, which was the *fourteenth day of the month Nisan*, in the spring time, which was the month and day which were kept as the Passover by the children of God from the night that God, by the hand of Moses, led them out of the land of Egypt. . . . In other words, the Wilbur [West Virginia] brethren were celebrating the annual observance of the Lord’s Supper. Being *on the fourteenth day*, it was the same *as when Jesus ate it with His disciples*. *Being at night, it was the same time that He ate it*” (*ibid.*, p. 230). They were obviously using the Hebrew calendar to know when the 14th of Nisan fell.

In a 1940 *Good News* letter by Mr. H.W. Armstrong titled, “How to Figure Passover,” when discussing intercalation (adding a 13th month) he states, “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 asserted and trusted. Yet we know God gave HIS PEOPLE a FIXED RULE for calculating TIME PERIODS, and for figuring WHEN to hold the Festivals of Jehovah. Otherwise, the prophecies, so full of definite time-periods, can never be understood. Otherwise God’s people could not obey Him!”

Further in the same letter, Mr. Armstrong states: “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, or to the Roman Catholics, but to the Israelites. And they have been preserved BY THE JEWS” (*Good News*, July 1940).

Today, those who reject the calendric calculations received from the Jewish authorities offer alternatives that range from keeping the current Hebrew calendar, but *without the rules of postponement*, to a variety of *alternative calendars* based on *their private interpretation* of a wide array of material. It is certainly fair to say there is little consensus when discussing a solution among those who reject the validity of the Hebrew calendar received from the Jews. It is clearly evident by the fruits that the rejection of the Hebrew calendar has been a source of division both in the Jewish community and in the Church of God.

Once the Hebrew calendar is rejected, *whose calendar does one follow?* Our past experience in the Church of God has shown that the fruits of people deviating from the Hebrew calendar has only caused division. This is contrary to the biblical principle found in the following verses: “For God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints...Let all things be done decently and in order” (1 Corinthians 14:33, 40).

7 – The decision of the United Church of God

The United Church of God (UCG) has a desire for God’s truth as expounded in the Bible, unity in sound doctrine and in the context of God’s festivals, for a common gathering of God’s people

on His annual Holy Days. Jesus Christ gave His ministry the responsibility and authority to spiritually build up the Church in the unity of faith and doctrine which knits God's people together so that we may grow in love towards one another (Ephesians 4:11-16). To worship in unity, we need an authoritative calendar which identifies God's Feasts and annual Sabbaths (Holy Days).

After extensive biblical research, and after taking into consideration the evidence available and reviewing input in hundreds of pages from dozens of authors, and most importantly, applying the biblical evidence, UCG has concluded that the *calendric rules* according to the Hebrew calendar are the ones we should use⁷. More recent evidence has only further supported the Church's decision on these matters.

The Hebrew calendar establishes God's Holy Days using calendric rules which ensure that they are observed in their "appointed times." This reflects God's spiritual meaning of the harvest seasons and reminds us annually of His plan of salvation. By using the Hebrew calendar, a unity of worship during God's Holy Days and festivals is maintained and the Church's ministry and members can plan in advance and book halls, facilities, flights, etc., for the Feast and God's Holy Days.

⁷ The Hebrew calendar's rules identify for us the days of the month and when the years start according to Genesis 1:14. Additionally, Leviticus 23 tells us which days of the month we are to observe. Therefore, we observe the Passover on the 14th of the first month (Leviticus 23:5; 1 Corinthians 11:23), and count 50 days from the day of the wave sheaf to determine the day of Pentecost (Leviticus 23:15-16).