

A New Look at Pentecost in Light of the Calendar Adjustment in the Second Century

[Bible Study by Herman L. Hoeh at Ambassador College Pasadena, California, April 20, 1973.]

A number of people have, over the years, questioned how Pentecost is counted. The mistakes stem from a misunderstanding of the events concerning the wave sheaf and a lack of knowledge of the Hebrew calendar.

The Jews Knew!

Even though traditional Rabbinic Judaism regards the Sabbath of Leviticus 23:15 as the high day of the Days of Unleavened Bread, when the Jews translated the passage, they were forced to render it correctly: "And ye shall count unto you from the morrow after the day of rest, from the day that ye brought the sheaf of the waving; seven weeks shall there be complete." Verse 16: "even unto the morrow after the seventh week shall ye number fifty days" So the Jews were well aware of how it ought to be translated.

While the Rabbis observed Pentecost differently, they knew what the original truth was. They knew that Pentecost was a *spring* festival¹ (see Note 1 at end of article), not a summer festival, and that the calendar had to be regulated by a Pentecost on Monday, not Sunday or Sivan 6. We shall shortly see why Pentecost's being a *spring* festival is so important.

Calendar Rules

A well-known calendar rule (see *The Jewish Encyclopedia*) limits how early Passover may fall. Passover, Nisan 14, must be no earlier than two days before the spring equinox. That is, spring must have arrived on or before Nisan 16. This was to provide that when Passover fell on Friday and the wave sheaf was cut the following Sunday, Nisan 16, that Sunday would occur in spring. Otherwise the harvest would have begun in winter.

There is no rule determining *how* late in spring Passover can be.² However, there is a rule which indirectly limits the lateness of Passover. The rule is that Pentecost must be observed in the spring, not the summer. The Passover of A.D. 31 was remarkably late (the spring equinox at that time took place on March 23). The year of the crucifixion, A.D. 31,³ was intercalary⁴ and Passover of that year occurred, according to the sacred calendar, on Wednesday, April 25, not a Monday, March 26, the fourteenth day of the previous month. Now jump to our day. The year 1931 is one hundred 19-year cycles from A.D. 31, so it, too, one might expect, would be intercalary. Yet the year 1931⁵ was not intercalary by the calendar the Jews use today. Why not? The answer is that *the sacred calendar was adjusted*.

Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong long ago brought to the attention of the Sardis Era of the Church, headquartered at Stanberry, Missouri, in an article in *The Bible Advocate*, that the Jews have correctly preserved the calendar. (See Romans 3:2.) Then what rule governed the calendar adjustment so that the tenth year of the 19-year cycle in Jesus' day was intercalary but is not intercalary today? God ordained that the sacred festivals should be kept not only on specific days in the year, but in the proper seasons. Notice Leviticus 23:4 in the Jewish Publication Society translation:

"These are the appointed seasons of the Lord, even holy convocations, which ye shall proclaim in their appointed season."

The basic reason for a calendar adjustment is that God's law requires that the annual holy days occur in the correct seasons. This means that the lunar months (Nisan, Tishri, etc.) must coincide with the right seasons. Genesis 1:14 shows that God provided man with *both* the sun and moon "for signs, and for seasons, and for days and years." Thus, the Hebrew calendar is lunar-solar. The duration for an average solar year in the sacred or Hebrew calendar does not quite correspond with the true astronomical value.⁶ Though this difference is small, it amounts to a one day's variation in 216 years. After a thousand years, a given Hebrew month will be approximately 4.6 days behind actual sun time,

which governs the seasons. Without a calendar adjustment, God's holy days would eventually get out of synchronization with the seasons.

The six-minute difference in the Hebrew calendar's solar year and the true astronomical value causes Passover to occur one day later every 216 years. Sooner or later Pentecost would be in the beginning of the summer. But that's not permitted! From the days of Moses through the first century A.D., there was no calendar adjustment required. Pentecost was always celebrated in the spring.

The Year of the Adjustment

In the Patriarchate of Simon III, between A.D. 140 and 163, a great controversy arose pertaining to the intercalary years and the Holy Days. As we count it, Pentecost would have fallen, for the first time in summer, June 23, 161 A.D.⁷ In A.D. 161 June 23 was the beginning of summer, the solstice occurring about 3 P.M., [see P.V. Neugebauer, *Hilfstafeln zur Berechnung von Himmels-Erscheinungen* (Tables for the Calculation of Heavenly Phenomena) Leipzig, 1925]. So the intercalary month that would have been added that year needed postponement in order that Pentecost would not fall in summer.

In A.D. 161, if the calendar used at Jesus' time had not been adjusted by Simon III, a Monday Pentecost would have been observed on the beginning of summer. The Jewish Patriarch Simon III imposed a needed postponement of the intercalated year from the seventh year (A.D. 161) to the eighth year.⁸

What is significant is that in A.D. 161, Pentecost would have been in the summer only if it were observed as we do today -- on a MONDAY! If Pentecost were observed on a Sunday, June 22, it would not have been in summer and the postponement of intercalary years would not have occurred until the time of Constantine. One would then face an unanswerable enigma: why in the late A.D. 160's was Passover suddenly observed earlier in the spring than ever before? Simon III determined this calendar postponement not according to the Pharisees' Sivan 6 Pentecost, but by a true Monday Pentecost. This was a controversial decision. Simon III knew how Pentecost was originally counted.

Counting Incorrectly

The Jewish *Talmud*, a very remarkable Bible commentary, shows that the Sadducees observed Pentecost on a Sunday⁹ counting inclusively, from the morrow after the weekly Sabbath. They counted the 50 days wrongly, but from the right day.

The Pharisees did not want the priestly Sadducees to determine which day to offer the wave sheaf. So the priests who were Pharisees changed the custom and offered it on Nisan 16, the day after the first high day, and counted 50 days from the date.

Jewish tradition preserved by Rabbi Jose declares that in the year of the Exodus, Nisan 15 occurred on a Thursday, and Nisan 16 on a Friday. Thus the Pharisees initially came to the conclusion that the Pentecost on which the law was given was on Sivan 7, and on the seventh day of the week. Unlike the Sadducees they counted 50 days correctly (not inclusively) but from the wrong date.

Later the Pharisees became divided on how to count Pentecost. The argument is in the Talmud. Some Pharisees began to conclude falsely that the Passover of the Exodus was on a Thursday (which it can never be) and the Exodus on a Friday (which Nisan 15 cannot be). They continued to conclude that the wave sheaf was offered on a Saturday. The counting was for these Pharisees inclusive and Pentecost was in the year of the Exodus assumed to be Sivan 6, a Saturday. The period of this mixup was between the time of Alexander the Great and Antiochus Epiphanes.

How could both Sadducees and Pharisees justify counting inclusively? Originally the wave sheaf *was* offered Sunday morning, but the Sadducees later adopted the custom of offering it Saturday night. The Talmud shows that the wave sheaf also came to be offered by the Pharisees, not in the morning, but at the end of the first holy day at the going down of the sun. The Pharisees did the Sadducees one better in their heresy by offering it at the end of the wrong day, the first Holy Day. By this means they, too, could justify counting the first day when the wave sheaf was offered as day one out of fifty.

In Deuteronomy 16 we read that the Israelites were to reap their fields from the time the sickle was put to the barley. If the sheaf was reaped on Saturday night, the people could not start reaping their fields -- it was still night. So if one had only the Old Testament to go by, he would have to conclude that the wave sheaf would have to be offered on Sunday morning¹⁰ and one could not count inclusively as the Jews now do.

In Conclusion

The calendar we are using today is the same calendar Jesus used -- except the rule governing Pentecost has necessitated a postponement, by one year, of the intercalary months. The fact that this change would not have occurred at the time it did, if Pentecost were on a Sunday is proof that Pentecost occurs on a Monday! The calendar thus becomes just one more witness to a Monday Pentecost.¹¹

FOOTNOTES

Note 1 In a note to the Sanhedrin Tractate (section 12b) of *The Babylonian Talmud*, the translator, Rabbi Epstein states, "Though according to Biblical tradition our months are to be lunar (cf. Ex. XII, 2), yet our Festivals are to be observed at certain agricultural seasons; Passover and Pentecost in the spring; Tabernacles, or Feast of Ingathering, in the autumn."

Note 2 For several years in Theological Research, it had been assumed that Passover could occur over a 38-day span around the equinox, one day before, on, or 36 days after. This was a historic deduction and is now superseded by the new information contained in this paper.

Note 3 Spring of A.D. 31 was the 10th year of the 19-year cycle, which began in the fall of A.D. 30 and had 385 days.

Note 4 Intercalary means that the year had 13 months, instead of twelve. The extra month was added prior to Nisan and was called V'Adar.

Note 5 The tenth year of the 19-year cycle started in the fall of A.D. 1930 and had 354 days.

Note 6 The average length of each year in a 19-year cycle is 365 days, plus 5 hours, 55 minutes, and 25.438 seconds. But the actual astronomical magnitude for the tropical sun year is 365 days, 5 hours, 48 minutes, and 46.069 seconds. (A. Speier, *The Comprehensive Hebrew Calendar*, 1952, page 226). The duration of an average tropical solar year in the Hebrew calendar is 6 minutes and 39.371 seconds longer than the true astronomical magnitude.

Note 7 The pattern of common years and leap years in any 19-year cycle results in the Hebrew solar-lunar calendar being slightly ahead or behind sun time. This is normal variation. In the pattern of intercalary years used in Jesus' day, years 2, 5, 7, 10, 13, 16, and 18 of a 19-year cycle were intercalary. In a 19-year cycle with that pattern, Passover would be earliest (with respect to the spring equinox) in the fifteenth year of the cycle and the latest in the seventh. The accumulated variation in the Hebrew calendar (one day in 216 years) would be most serious in the seventh year of the 19-year cycle, when Pentecost would tend to be pushed closest towards summer. During the jurisdiction of Simon III, the spring of the seventh year of the 19-year cycle occurred in A.D. 142 and again in A.D. 161. With no change in the pattern of leap years, Pentecost was on Monday, June 19 in 142. But in 161, with Pentecost on a Monday, it would have been on June 23.

Note 8 The cycle during transition was 2, 5, 8, 11, 14, 17, 19 and then the cycle thereafter continued as we have today: 3, 6, 8, 11, 14, 17, 19 (except when certain festivals fell too early). Beginning in A.D. 167 we have the first evidence of controversy over the earliness of the Passover in the Christian community, in the writing of Melito of Sardis, titled *On the Passover*. The Jews were accused by some of observing Passover too early. Before A.D. 70, however, Passover was never observed at the beginning of spring, but always after the beginning of spring; hence, the adjustment in this time period.

Note 9 See the Hagigah Tractate (section 17a) of *The Babylonian Talmud*. In a note to that section, the translator, Rabbi Abrahams states, ". . . the Sadducees . . . understood the word 'Sabbath' in Lev. XXIII, 11, 15 literally, and hence maintained that Pentecost must always fall on a Sunday But the Pharisees

explained the word 'Sabbath' to mean 'day of rest', i.e. 'holy day' (cf. Lev. XXIII, 32, 39 . . .) and referred to the first festival day of Passover."

Note 10 Sometime after sunrise Sunday morning, Jesus ascended to Heaven, Matthew 28 [John 20:17, 19]. The wave sheaf offering does not picture the time of the resurrection, but the presence of Christ at the throne of God in heaven, on the first day of the week. The antitypical meaning of the wave sheaf cutting is the resurrected Christ cut off from (leaving the earth) Sunday morning prior to appearing before the Father.

Note 11 Since the festivals are again occurring later each succeeding century, another postponement of intercalary months will occur in approximately five centuries. Or Pentecost once again would occur at the beginning of summer. This future adjustment of the Hebrew calendar is discussed in *The Jewish Encyclopedia* and in Speier's *Comprehensive Hebrew Calendar*.