

THE CALENDAR

By Matthew Day

And God said, "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,
(Genesis 1:14 ESV)

The calendar that most of us are familiar with is the internationally accepted Gregorian calendar. It is based on the solar cycle—that is, a year is defined as the amount of time it takes for the earth to go around the sun once. It is arbitrarily divided into twelve months and has weeks of seven days. Since the solar year isn't exactly 365 days, an extra day is added every fourth year (with a few exceptions) in order to keep our calendar on track. A day in our calendar is defined as midnight to midnight.

However, this is not the calendar that the ancient Hebrews used. The Hebrew calendar is a lunisolar calendar—that is the year is based on the solar cycle, but a month is based on the time it takes for the moon to circle the earth. A Hebrew month begins when one can see the first sliver of the new moon. The Hebrew word for “month” (שׁוּׁׁׁׁ-Chadesh) actually means to “make new,” so the month begins when the moon is made new. It then lasts 29 or 30 days depending on when the next new moon is sighted. Last Friday night (March 27th) was the first day of the month of Nisan/Aviv which is the first month.

The Hebrew day begins at sunset. This comes from Genesis 1 where it says “there was evening and there was morning.” The evening comes first. This also fits with the sighting of the moon, because the new moon is seen right after sunset.

Twelve lunar months come up about 11 days short of a solar year, so occasionally an extra month must be added. This month is added at the end of the year. To determine if an extra month must be added, barley crops are examined. Before the new year can begin, the barley must reach a certain stage called in Hebrew *aviv*—which is why this is one of the names for the first month (see Deuteronomy 16:1). This is when the barley seeds have reached full size. If the barley is not *aviv* by the end of the twelfth month, a thirteenth month is added. Now you may be wondering why this complicated process. First, the growth of crops is connected to the seasons which is connected to the solar cycle. So, this method will always keep the calendar tied to the solar cycle whereas calculated methods slowly drift off. Second, the holiday of First Fruits occurred in the first month. In order to keep this holiday, the crops had to be ripe enough to be offered before the LORD. This method of determining the new year ensures that the barley will always be ready by this day. Thirdly, the ancient Hebrew culture was agrarian. This method would have been very natural to them. This year there was some doubt as to whether the barley would be *aviv* by the end of the twelfth month. That is why I said the Feast of Unleavened Bread would probably begin on the evening of April 10th. It turns out the barley was *aviv*, so the dates I gave before are correct.

So, the day starts at sunset; the month starts on the evening of the new moon; and the year starts on the first new moon after the barley reaches the *aviv* stage.

Now there is another calendar based on the Hebrew calendar called the Hillel calendar. This is the Jewish calendar more commonly known. It is simply a calculated version of the Hebrew calendar created in the fourth century by Hillel II. It has a 19 year cycle in which 7 of those years contain leap months. Because it is calculated, it is slowly becoming less accurate. Today it is often off by one or two days from the actual new moon. Nevertheless, it is still used by most Jews and many Messianics today.

One aspect of the Hebrew calendar has survived even into our modern Gregorian calendar. That is the seven day week established at creation. This is probably one of the most important parts of the

calendar because it is the basis for Sabbath. “Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed” (Exodus 31:16-17 ESV). The fact that we still have a seven day week is evidence of our Creator. There have been attempts to change the number of days in a week throughout history, but all have failed. The sign of the covenant between God and Israel still stands.

Midrash Newsletter
April 2009