

September 2000

Frank W. Nelte

WHEN IS THE TIME OF 'THE NEW MOON'?

For some time there has been for some people some confusion about exactly WHEN the "new moon" is. Is it at the time of the invisible conjunction? Or is it at the time of the "full moon"? The Jewish understanding is that it is at the time of the invisible conjunction, but in recent years a number of people have claimed that the biblical "new moon" is really the time of "the full moon". What is the truth?

The Hebrew word in the Old Testament that is translated into "new moon" is "CHODESH". So what does this word mean? What does GOD refer to as "the new moon"?

BEWARE OF RELYING ON "SYMBOLISM"

The correct approach in establishing the meaning of "new moon" in the Bible is to carefully examine the word thus translated into English, and to examine the root word from which this word "new moon" is formed.

A WRONG APPROACH to establishing the meaning of "new moon" is TO LOOK FOR THE "SYMBOLISM" ATTACHED TO "NEW MOONS" IN THE BIBLE, AND TO THEN REASON FROM THAT SYMBOLISM!

"Reasoning" can never be used to establish the meaning of a word, when the word ALREADY has a very clearly known meaning to the people speaking that language (i.e. to the Jews who spoke Hebrew in biblical times). Thus: no matter how neatly or "perfectly" full moons fit into THE SYMBOLISM of what "new moons" could picture, the meaning of "chodesh" cannot be based on REASONING FROM SUCH SYMBOLISM! The meaning of "chodesh" MUST be established based on FACTS, and not on reasoning. We cannot assign meanings to words ourselves.

HERE ARE SOME FACTS TO CONSIDER:

1) The masculine noun "chodesh" is used 276 times in the Old Testament, and in the KJV it is translated 254 times as "MONTH", 20 times as "NEW MOON", 1 time as "MONTHLY", and 1 time as "another" (in Isaiah 66:23 which reads: "from chodesh to chodesh" and which is translated as "from one new moon to another"). These uses show us that EACH MONTH STARTS WITH A "NEW MOON", since the word "chodesh" REALLY means "new moon" and only by extension does it mean "month", since the new moon determined the start of a month.

2) This noun "chodesh" has been formed from the verb "chadash", and this verb is used 10 times in the Old Testament. It is in the KJV translated 7 times as "RENEW" and 3 times as "REPAIR". Here are the 10 verses in which "chadash" is used; in each case I have rendered its translation into English into capital letters for easier recognition.

Then said Samuel to the people, Come, and let us go to Gilgal, and RENEW the kingdom there.
(1 Samuel 11:14 AV)

And when Asa heard these words, and the prophecy of Oded the prophet, he took courage, and put away the abominable idols out of all the land of Judah and Benjamin, and out of the cities

which he had taken from mount Ephraim, and RENEWED the altar of the LORD, that [was] before the porch of the LORD. (2 Chronicles 15:8 AV)

And it came to pass after this, [that] Joash was minded TO REPAIR the house of the LORD. (2 Chronicles 24:4 AV)

And the king and Jehoiada gave it to such as did the work of the service of the house of the LORD, and hired masons and carpenters TO REPAIR the house of the LORD, and also such as wrought iron and brass to mend the house of the LORD. (2 Chronicles 24:12 AV)

Thou RENEWEST thy witnesses against me, and increasest thine indignation upon me; changes and war [are] against me. (Job 10:17 AV)

Create in me a clean heart, O God; and RENEW a right spirit within me. (Psalm 51:10 AV)

Who satisfieth thy mouth with good [things; so that] thy youth IS RENEWED like the eagle's. (Psalm 103:5 AV)

Thou sendest forth thy spirit, they are created: and thou RENEWEST the face of the earth. (Psalm 104:30 AV)

And they shall build the old wastes, they shall raise up the former desolations, and they SHALL REPAIR the waste cities, the desolations of many generations. (Isaiah 61:4 AV)

Turn thou us unto thee, O LORD, and we shall be turned; RENEW our days as of old. (Lamentations 5:21 AV)

The above Scriptures give us EVERY SINGLE USAGE OF THE VERB "CHADASH", FROM WHICH THE NOUN "NEW MOON" IS FORMED! These 10 verses, more than anything else, give us a clue as to what GOD wants to convey to us with the noun "chodesh". And in all of these 10 verses the verb "chadash" is VERY EASY to understand correctly; in none of these verses is the meaning of "chadash" ambiguous or uncertain.

Very clearly God has used "chadash" to mean: to RESTORE or to REPAIR buildings and towns that had either been razed to the ground completely or else they had been destroyed by lack of use and lack of maintenance. In each case the verb "chadash" conveys A TURNAROUND in the condition of the building or town in question. It is also used to refer to A CONDITION OR A STATE OF BEING THAT IS TURNED AROUND.

Note the following: There is no hint or indication of any kind that the state or condition in question HAD ALREADY STARTED TO TURN AROUND BEFORE the word "chadash" was applied!

3) People in biblical times were very physically oriented and their ways of speaking were based on very practical and observable occurrences. The language did not develop based on SYMBOLISM. It was practical, closely tied to the observable reality around them.

AS FAR AS THE MOON WAS CONCERNED: people way back into antiquity observed the different phases of the moon. They saw THE FIRST NEW CRESCENT; THEN it continued to grow until THE WHOLE MOON was visible at the time of the full moon; THEN it started to diminish until only THE TINIEST CRESCENT was visible; THEN THE MOON DISAPPEARED ALTOGETHER (at the time of the new moon); THEN once again THE FIRST NEW CRESCENT became visible, and the whole cycle repeated itself. So the question is: WHEN would the Jews in Old Testament times have thought that the

moon was "chadash", i.e. RESTORED or REPAIRED?

This simply had to be AFTER IT HAD DISAPPEARED COMPLETELY! If anyone wants to claim that it would be correct to apply the Hebrew verb "chadash" to what happened between the one day before the full moon and the day of the full moon, then let them acknowledge that "chadash" applies A HUNDRED TIMES MORE SO to what happens when the moon again FIRST BECOMES VISIBLE after a period of time when it had not been visible at all! How can anyone deny that for a practical-minded and physically oriented people the moon was RESTORED when it again re-appeared after having not been visible for a few days?

4) History shows that all the calendars in the ancient Middle East (i.e. the Babylonian calendar, the Jewish calendar, the Macedonian calendar, the Old Persian calendar, the Achaemenid Elamite calendar, etc.) were based on the months starting with FIRST VISIBILITY OF THE NEW CRESCENT! The Jewish calendar was in agreement with all of these others in this regard! And in Old Testament times "the calendar" was never a problem, whether people lived in Palestine or in Babylon.

The present Jewish calendar derives the names of the months from THE BABYLONIAN calendar, which God's servant Ezra approved for use by the Jews, and which was still in use by the Jews at the time of Christ's ministry here on earth. Thus the Jewish name "Nisan" is derived from the Babylonian name "Nisanu"; the second month "Iyyar" is derived from the Babylonian name "Aiaru"; the third month "Sivan" is derived from the Babylonian name "Simanu"; the fourth month "Tammuz" is derived from the Babylonian name "Duzu"; the fifth month "Ab" is derived from the Babylonian name "Abu"; the sixth month "Elul" is derived from the Babylonian name "Ululu"; the seventh month "Tishri" is derived from the Babylonian name "Tashritu"; the eighth month "Heshvan" is the equivalent of the Babylonian month "Arahsamnu"; the ninth month "Kislev" is derived from the Babylonian name "Kislimu"; the tenth month "Tebeth" is derived from the Babylonian name "Tebet"; the eleventh month "Shebat" is derived from the Babylonian name "Shabatu"; and the twelfth month "Adar" is derived from the Babylonian name "Addaru".

AND GOD'S SERVANT EZRA AUTHORIZED THE USE OF THIS CALENDAR!

Now the Babylonian calendar was based on FIRST VISIBILITY of the new crescent for the start of each month. I have lying before me a table of over 8500 new moons that were VISUALLY OBSERVED IN BABYLON over a period of 700 years, starting with the new moon of Nisanu (i.e. Nisan) in 626 B.C. on April 5, and going through to the new moon of Addaru (i.e. Adar) in 75 A.D. on February 25.

It is a very simple matter to establish that all of these dates express FIRST VISIBILITY of the new crescent. They are totally at odds with the full moon dates, which are about 14 days later in each case. And the Jews followed the same calendar throughout that period.

AND JESUS CHRIST KEPT GOD'S FEASTS AND HOLY DAYS BASED ON THAT CALENDAR, AS DID ALSO ALL OF THE ORIGINAL APOSTLES!

5) We should at least give the Jews credit for knowing what the Hebrew word "chodesh" means! When the moon has disappeared completely, and then re-appears as a first faint crescent, then this is most assuredly something that can be called "NEW moon". But when you look at the moon on the day of the FULL moon, there is really NOTHING THAT IS "NEW" from what you could see the previous evening!

Bear in mind that the moon is at least 98% full for a period of three consecutive days at the time of the full moon, and often there will be two consecutive days where the moon is over 99% full. And it is not that easy for most people with average eyesight to discern the difference between a moon that is 100% full, and one that is only 98% full. So it is not really that easy to visually distinguish the one correct full

moon night from either the previous night or the following night, which will also be over 99% full.

6) The Jewish Talmud, also known as "the Oral Law", is not in any way inspired. But it is a historical document, showing what the Jews believed and taught at a certain time. Specifically, it shows us the beliefs of the Jews at the time of Christ's ministry and of the early New Testament Church. And so here is a quotation from the Talmud, from SECTION 133b of the part known as "SHABBATH":

Talmud - Mas. Shabbath 133b

"Abba Saul interpreted, and I will be like him:9 be thou like Him: just as He is gracious and compassionate, so be thou gracious and compassionate.) — Rather said R. Ashi, Which [Tanna] is this? It is R. Jose. For we learnt: Whether it is clearly visible or it is not clearly visible,10 the Sabbath is desecrated on its account.11" [The numbers 9-11 refer to the footnotes that follow this section.]

Here is Footnote 10, in reference to the statement "WHETHER IT IS CLEARLY VISIBLE OR IT IS NOT CLEARLY VISIBLE":

"(10) Viz., the crescent of the New Moon, which had to be seen and attested by two witnesses before the Beth din could sanctify the beginning of the month, v. R.H. 21b."

THIS IS A COMMENT ON A HISTORICAL JEWISH RECORD, which shows that each month was pronounced to start AFTER two witnesses had attested to having seen the first new crescent. And this is how the calendar was determined during Christ's life and ministry, the calendar that determined when the Feast of Tabernacles in John chapter 7 was observed by the Jews in general and also by Jesus Christ Himself.

At no stage did Jesus Christ during His life and ministry EVER observe God's Feasts and Holy Days based on a calendar that started each month with THE FULL MOON!

7) For people VISUALLY looking at the moon (and that is certainly what you would do at FULL moon time):

THE FULL MOON IS AN EXTREMELY IMPRECISE TIME!

For most places on earth the moon appears "FULL" for 2 or even 3 consecutive days! You may today MATHEMATICALLY calculate the precise moment of time that you can call "the time of full moon", BUT for people looking at the moon, it appeared equally FULL 24 hours earlier, and for many people it will STILL appear equally FULL 24 hours later (thus covering at least 48 hours). By contrast, FIRST VISIBILITY of the new crescent is only possible at ONE specific time for each location on earth (thus it covers a 24-hour time span to get to every place on earth). Any given location on earth can only have ONE DAY of first visibility for each new moon; there cannot be 2 or 3 days of "FIRST visibility".

[Technically, a total lunar eclipse is the precise time of "full moon". For the year 2001 A.D. there will be a partial lunar eclipse on January 9. The maximum of the eclipse will be at about 8:19 p.m. Greenwich Mean Time, and the official time for the new moon is January 9, 8:24 p.m. GMT. In many areas on earth this eclipse will not be visible at all. But, for those concerned with "full moons" it might be interesting to observe the moon on the nights of January 7-11, and to note on which of those nights it appears to us as "full", specifically in relation to when the precise full moon actually occurs.]

So, irrespective of where you are (i.e. in the Middle East, in Europe, or in America): you can only have ONE specific evening of first visibility, but you will always have 2 and sometimes even 3 consecutive days when the moon will appear FULL. This makes full moons very unreliable.

8) THE OBSERVABLE PROCESS that leads to the FULL moon starts when the new crescent first becomes visible. It does NOT start on the day before the day we call "full moon". Thus "the restoring" (which is what the noun "chodesh" formed from the verb "chadash" means) does NOT start with "the full moon"; it starts with the first new crescent.

IF ANYTHING, the full moon is really THE START OF THE MOON GETTING SMALLER! The process of the moon diminishing STARTS with the full moon, and this is actually the opposite of what the noun "chodesh" refers to.

It is not logical to apply the word "chodesh" (which refers to something being repaired or restored) to a day that marks THE START OF THE MOON GETTING SMALLER (though this may not be observable for another day or two).

9) THE WHOLE WORLD understands the term "new moon" to refer to the time of the invisible conjunction. The meaning of this term has always been understood quite clearly, going back into antiquity, where it referred to "first visibility of the new crescent", which immediately follows the invisible conjunction. There is nothing "pagan" in this meaning of "new moon".

10) Now let's examine one verse that people will frequently refer to in this type of discussion, and that is Psalm 81:3.

This verse reads as follows in the KJV:

Blow up the trumpet in the new moon, IN THE TIME APPOINTED, on our solemn feast day.
(Psalms 81:3 AV)

This verse contains an error in translation. The expression "in the time appointed" is totally incorrect; it should really read: IN THE FULL MOON! This is recognized by many other translations. For example, the Jewish Publication Society translation of this verse is:

(81 -4) Blow the horn AT THE NEW MOON, AT THE FULL MOON for our feast-day. (Psalms 81:3 JPS)

This is a correct rendering of this verse, and this is also correctly translated in the following translations amongst others: ASV, NAS, RSV, NRSV, NIV, Green's Literal Translation, Bible in Basic English, two Afrikaans translations, the Dutch Leidse Vertaling, etc., to name just a few. It is very well known that "in the time appointed" is a mistranslation.

We need to understand that Psalm 81:3 (or Psalm 81:4 in the JPS) is actually speaking about TWO DIFFERENT OCCASIONS! The conjunction "and" is not supplied in the Hebrew text, as is frequently the case, because in a correct understanding of this verse IT IS IMPLIED!

When we understand this verse correctly:

PSALM 81:3 IS SPEAKING ABOUT TWO DIFFERENT TYPES OF OCCASIONS WHEN THE TRUMPET IS TO BE BLOWN.

Firstly, it is to be blown AT EVERY NEW MOON in the year. But then it is ALSO to be blown on EVERY Holy Day, two of which were always AT THE FULL MOON: the first day of the FEAST of Tabernacles, and the first day of the FEAST of Unleavened Bread. The specific statute and law of God that Psalm 81:4 refers to is Numbers 10:10.

Also in the day of your gladness, and IN YOUR SOLEMN DAYS (the Hebrew here is "mow'ed" which specifically means HOLY DAYS), and IN THE BEGINNINGS OF YOUR MONTHS, ye shall blow with the trumpets over your burnt offerings, and over the sacrifices of your peace offerings; that they may be to you for a memorial before your God: I am the LORD your God. (Numbers 10:10 AV)

So Numbers 10:10 commanded the trumpets to be blown, amongst other days, on the 1st Day of Unleavened Bread, the 7th Day of Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, the Day of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, the 1st Day of Tabernacles, the Last Great Day, and the 1st Day of every month in the year.

Applied to Psalm 81:3 we have: the Holy Day of Trumpets and also the 1st days of the 11 other months were all "new moon days", and the 1st Day of Unleavened Bread and the 1st Day of Tabernacles were both "full moon days". So the blowing of trumpets that is spoken about in Psalm 81:3 refers specifically to these 14 days, 12 new moon days and 2 full moon days.

Getting back to Psalm 81:3, a key words in this context is "our feast day" (Hebrew is "chag"). A careful study of this word shows that "chag" only refers to THREE SPECIFIC OCCASIONS in the year: the CHAG of Unleavened Bread, the CHAG of Pentecost, and the CHAG of Tabernacles. For none of the other days is "chag" ever used. The Hebrew word "mow'ed" means HOLY DAY, and this word is used for Trumpets, Atonement, the Last Great Day, the two holy days during Unleavened Bread, and the one holy day during Tabernacles. Pentecost is both, a "chag" and a "mow'ed".

So a correct translation of Psalm 81:3 is:

"Blow the horn at the new moon (i.e. on the first day of every month, including on the Day of Trumpets, the first day of the seventh month) AND at the full moon (on the First Day of Unleavened Bread, and on the First Day of Tabernacles), on our feast-day (Hebrew "chag")."

This point, that TWO different types of occasions are being referred to in this verse, is also captured in the 1984 edition of the NIV, which reads:

Sound the ram's horn at the New Moon, AND when the moon is full, on the day of our Feast; (Psalm 81:3 NIV)

The NIV has here CORRECTLY supplied the conjunction "and" to show that two different occasions are being spoken about. This translation is probably the one that best captures the intended meaning of this specific verse in English. However, the psalm does NOT indicate one specific "new moon day" in the year, and neither does it indicate whether the "full moon" in this verse should apply to Unleavened Bread or to Tabernacles, since BOTH of those days are a "chag" occasion, each being the first day of a seven day Feast.

Thus for example, Psalm 81:3 can apply equally well to the 1st day and the 15th day of the FIRST month, as it can to the 1st day and the 15th day of the SEVENTH month. The psalm simply does not spell out which specific applications of Numbers 10:10 it is speaking about.

[Comment: Number 62 in our old Hymnal, 1974 revision, titled "PRAISE THE ETERNAL WITH A PSALM" is in fact based on a misunderstanding of this verse. The third line in the first verse reads "Blow on the trumpet, sound the drum ON OUR SOLEMN FEAST DAY", and this erroneously implies that the Day of Trumpets is "A FEAST DAY", which it is not. It is only A HOLY DAY, but not a feast day! The reference to "FEAST DAY" should really refer to the First Day of Tabernacles or the First Day of Unleavened Bread. If this creates a conscience problem for you with this song, I suggest that you simply sing: "On our solemn HIGH day" instead of "On our solemn FEAST day" in both, verses 1 and 4.]

So Psalm 81:3 does not in any way support the idea that God supposedly wants the months to start with the full moon.

For the above-mentioned reasons I believe that the Jewish understanding, that "chodesh" refers to the new moon and not to the full moon, is correct.

Strictly speaking, the time of the invisible conjunction is the new moon. But throughout much of human history people have taken first visibility of the new crescent to be the time of the new moon. But THE FULL MOON has never been referred to as "the new moon".

Frank W. Nelte