

January 1999

Frank W. Nelte

THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH AND THE CALENDAR

The calendar which was used by the New Testament Church of God has a major influence on the calendar question that we are faced with today. Now it is easy to show that the Jews themselves in the 1st century A.D. did not use a calendar with postponement rules. The records show that they used a calendar where the start of each month was determined by the reports from witnesses who had seen the first new crescent. The records also show that Atonement fell on both, Fridays and Sundays.

It should be obvious that ANY calendar which depends for the start of every single month on the reports of witnesses, who had seen the first new crescent, simply CANNOT accommodate any "postponements"! Postponements are based on the timing of the new moon (really the invisible molad) of ONE month in the year (Tishri, the 7th month). How would you convince people, who had "witnessed the first new crescent" of the moon, to "postpone" all TWELVE of their sightings for the year, to accommodate postponing all TWELVE months by one or by two days? So it should be immediately apparent that the Jewish calendar in the 1st century A.D. simply did not have any "postponement rules".

It is equally easy to show that when Hillel II made his calculated calendar, with its pattern of leap years for each 19-year cycle, public in 358/9 A.D., that calendar included GROSS VIOLATIONS of the intrinsic requirements for a right calendar! Hillel's calendar repeatedly placed the Passover into the winter and the entire Feast of Tabernacles into the summer. Both of these things violate basic requirements for a correct calendar: Passover MUST be in the spring, and all of the Feast of Tabernacles MUST be in the autumn.

But the question still remains:

WHAT DID THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH ACTUALLY DO, AS FAR AS A CALENDAR WAS CONCERNED?

Specifically: Did the Christians of the 1st century A.D. actually look to the Jews for a calendar? Since this was before the time when Hillel II made the calendar public, did the Christians go to the Jews each year to find out when the new year should start, so that they might observe the annual Holy Days at the correct times?

Let's ask the question another way:

Did the first century New Testament Christians use "THE JEWISH CALENDAR", or did they use a calendar that, in practical terms, simply happened to be THE SAME as the Jewish calendar, but without in any way being "Jewish"? For that matter: is it right for us to assume that any calendar that starts each month with a new moon must be of "Jewish" origin?

What about the calendar of the New Testament Church?

ANCIENT CALENDARS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Ancient Old Testament Israel used a calendar which started each new month with the time of the new moons. But this was not a unique calendar by any means.

Prior to the time of the Roman Empire ALL the nations in the Middle East followed calendars that were based on the appearance of the new moon crescents. So differences in calendars were never much of a problem. They also ALL tried to keep the seasons relatively constant. Even though they were based on visual observations of the new moons, IN PRACTICE this worked out to be a pattern that was repeated every 19 years.

To illustrate this:

I have before me a table of the VISUALLY OBSERVED new moons in the area of Babylon. Here are the new moons for years exactly 19 years apart. This includes ALL the new moons every year, not just one new moon, which might be used in calendar calculations. The years I have chosen are: 594, 575, 556, 537, 518 and 499 B.C.

594 B.C.	575 B.C.	556 B.C.	537 B.C.	518 B.C.	499 B.C.
APR 12	APR 12	APR 11	MAR 12	APR 11	APR 11
MAY 11	MAY 11	MAY 11	APR 10	MAY 10	MAY 10
JUN 9	JUN 9	JUN 9	MAY 10	JUN 9	JUN 9
JUL 9	JUL 9	JUL 9	JUN 9	JUL 9	JUL 8
AUG 7	AUG 7	AUG 7	JUL 8	AUG 8	AUG 7
SEP 6	SEP 6	SEP 6	AUG 7	SEP 6	SEP 6
OCT 6	OCT 5	OCT 5	SEP 6	OCT 6	OCT 5
NOV 4	NOV 4	NOV 3	OCT 5	NOV 4	NOV 4
DEC 4	DEC 3	DEC 3	NOV 3	DEC 4	DEC 3
JAN 2	JAN 2	JAN 1	DEC 3	JAN 2	JAN 2
FEB 1	JAN 31	JAN 30	JAN 1	JAN 31	JAN 31
MAR 2	MAR 2	MAR 1	JAN 30	MAR 1	MAR 2
			MAR 1		

[Comment: 594 B.C. was the 11th year of Nebuchadnezzar II, 575 B.C. was his 30th year, 556 B.C. was the 4th year of Nergal-Shar-Usur, 537 B.C. was the 2nd year of Cyrus, 518 B.C. was the 4th year of Darius I, and 499 B.C. was the 23rd year of Darius I.]

As can be seen from the above data for years that are exactly 19 years apart: even though they were based TOTALLY ON VISUAL OBSERVATIONS, yet you have a very predictable repetition every 19 years. And it is not dependent on the specific years I happen to have chosen above. I could demonstrate the same pattern with any years that are 19 years apart: e.g. 618 & 599 B.C. or 617 & 598 B.C. or 616 & 597 B.C., etc. The occasional one to two day fluctuations with some of the months are to be expected, and they do not negate the general overall picture of a repetition every 19 years.

As can also be seen from the above data, the Babylonian calendar did NOT at that time have a fixed sequence of leap years. This data is all for years before Meton discovered 19-year cycles. Thus we see that for the year 537 B.C. the year started one new moon earlier than the years in previous cycles. This was an error, as it placed the start of the year far too early; and this error was recognized and thus in subsequent cycles this year was again started one new moon later.

The above data is all taken from the book "Babylonian Chronology 626 B.C. - A.D. 75" by Richard A. Parker and Waldo H. Dubberstein, published in 1956 by Brown University Press, Providence, Rhode Island. This book presents the new moon dates that have been preserved in "the Venus Tablets of Ammizaduga". The authors acknowledge that in some places their translations of the preserved data into the Julian calendar may be wrong "BY ONE DAY" (page 25). Since this data is only presented for historical purposes, a possible error of no more than one day is not really important. The tables certainly show the trends.

This book presents ALL the visually observed new moons in Babylon for a period of 700 years, from 626 B.C. up to and including 75 A.D., the 386th year after the start of the Seleucid era.

Around 450 B.C. the Greek astronomer Meton discovered "19-year cycles", this phenomenon that the new moons occur "basically" on the same day in the solar year every 19 years. From then onwards, even though people could still "depend on" visually observed new moons, it was possible to predict new moons far into the future or into the past ... by using Meton's calculations for 19 solar years being equal to 235 lunations.

In addition to the Old Testament Jewish calendar, the other calendars in the Middle East that were based on the appearance of new moons included: the Babylonian calendar, the Macedonian calendar, the Old Persian calendar, and the Achaemenid Elamite calendar. Since ALL of these calendars started each month with the appearance of the new moon, they were all in basic agreement, with perhaps very minor fluctuations now and then.

THE BABYLONIAN CALENDAR

When the High Priest Ezra returned from Babylon to Jerusalem in the 450's B.C., he instituted the Babylonian calendar for use in Jerusalem. He changed the old Hebrew names for the months and replaced them with the Babylonian names for the twelve months of the year.

In the Babylonian calendar the days began at sunset. The Babylonian year also began in the spring. And in order to retain the first month of the year in the spring, the Babylonian calendar added a 13th month for 7 years in every 19-year period. And since Ezra lived at the time when the astronomer Meton discovered "19-year cycles", from Ezra's time onwards it was easy to recognize that the pattern for which years had to receive a 13th month repeated itself very predictably every 19 years. The people in Babylon who controlled the Babylonian calendar (by then a part of the Medo-Persian Empire) would also, after the time of Meton, in most cases have recognized this predictable pattern of repetitions for leap years.

The point is this:

AS FAR AS BIBLICAL REQUIREMENTS ARE CONCERNED, THERE WAS ABSOLUTELY NOTHING WRONG WITH THE BABYLONIAN CALENDAR!

If Ezra had for some reason decided to follow his own calendar (retain the old Hebrew names, etc.), IN PRACTICE irrespective of whatever calendar he had come up with, it would have ended up looking identical to the Babylonian calendar in use throughout the Persian Empire. This is because the

Babylonian calendar incorporated all the correct features and it did not include any wrong features. The only possible objection could have been to the use of "pagan" names for the months, though the names have no effect of any kind on the timing of each month. No wonder Ezra simply retained the Babylonian calendar he had always used in Babylon before going to Jerusalem. There was nothing wrong with it. This can also be seen from the data I have presented above.

If we think of the world empires that are depicted in the prophecies of Daniel, we basically have: Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome. It might be good to note that the first three of these world empires all followed the same calendar, a calendar in which each month started with the appearance of the new moon and where the year started in the spring. A thirteenth month was added to certain years in order to ensure that the start of the year did not drift backwards into winter. In practice this amounted to adding a thirteenth month to seven years for every 19 years that passed (the pattern of a 19-year cycle).

So from the time when Israel and Judah were still independent kingdoms, before their respective captivities, right down to the end of the Greco-Macedonian Empire there was never a difficulty in knowing when a year should start, or in knowing when the various annual Holy Days should be observed. Throughout that period of time the nations of the Middle East followed the same basic calendar.

Then came the Roman conquests.

ENTER THE ROMAN EMPIRE

After the Roman conquests Julius Caesar decided that a "more efficient" calendar was needed. The calendar that was based on the new moons contained too many fluctuations for his liking. He wanted a calendar in which the seasons would ALWAYS be kept constant; in other words, a calendar in which the two equinoxes and the two solstices would remain on the same days of the year every year.

And so the "Julian calendar" was born.

Even though the Julian calendar still contained a small error --- compared to the solar year it was 1 day too long for every 128 years --- it was basically the first attempt at keeping the seasons constant from one year to the next. It achieved this goal by totally ignoring the movements of the moon around the earth, even though it retained the concept of dividing the year up into twelve "months". It focused exclusively on the movements of the earth around the sun. The result is that in the Julian calendar the new moon can and does fall on any day of the month.

The error in the Julian calendar of still being one day too long for every 128 years was later addressed by the Gregorian calendar reform of 1582 A.D., when 10 days were dropped from the Julian calendar and the number of leap years for every 400 years was altered; the Gregorian calendar has only 97 leap years in a 400-year period.

THE RESULT of the introduction of the Julian (and later the Gregorian) calendar was as follows:

In the Roman calendar it was impossible to know when God's annual Holy Days should be observed!

Where there had never before been a problem with knowing the dates of the annual Feasts and Holy Days (the Babylonian and Persian and Greek empires had never changed THE WAY the calendar functioned), NOW anyone who wished to observe the Holy Days commanded in the Bible WAS FORCED to retain some kind of private calendar based on the movements of the moon around the

earth. It forced people (i.e. first Jews and later Christians) to keep their own separate lunar calendar for religious purposes, while at the same time having all secular activities regulated by the Roman calendar imposed on the whole empire.

[Comment: This is not to say that the Jews were not keeping calendar records all along prior to the introduction of the Julian calendar. But in practice that always happened to be the same as the calendar that was in use throughout the empire that happened to currently be controlling that part of the world. But from the introduction of the Julian calendar onwards it became imperative, especially for members of God's Church, to keep careful records for the start of each year, in order to retain the Holy Days of the Bible.]

By now you may be thinking of a prophecy in the Book of Daniel.

HE SHALL THINK TO CHANGE TIMES AND LAWS

In Daniel chapter 7 we find a prophecy that starts with the Babylonian Empire and then progresses down to the Roman Empire. The ten resurrections of the Roman Empire are depicted by "ten horns". The Roman Catholic Church is represented as "another little horn" (Daniel 7:8).

In Daniel 7:25 we are told:

"And he shall speak great words against the Most High and ... THINK TO CHANGE TIMES AND LAWS: and they shall be given into his hand until ..." (Daniel 7:25)

It was the Roman Empire that changed THE WAY the passage of time is recorded, by imposing the Julian calendar on the world. This calendar was later further refined by the Roman Catholic Church, by imposing the Gregorian calendar. The Roman Empire also imposed "Roman Law" upon the western world, which is still the basis of most legal systems in the developed world.

I am here not debating whether Roman Law and the Julian/Gregorian calendar are good or bad. I am merely making an observation that this is what has happened, even as God predicted through Daniel that "they SHALL be given into his hand".

In the Roman calendar new moons mean nothing at all. From the time that the Roman calendar was implemented onwards it became more difficult for God's people to keep an accurate record of the passage of new moons.

So a consequence of the Roman conquests was that in order to continue observing God's annual Feasts and Holy Days, God's people were FORCED to keep their own calendar.

AT THE START OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

By the time we get to the start of the New Testament we find a world under the control of the Roman Empire. The Julian calendar was already in use throughout the empire.

For religious purposes the Jews carefully kept "THEIR" calendar. It wasn't really "their" calendar any more than it was, and always had been, the calendar of the Babylonian Empire and its successors. In Babylon, which was not a part of the Roman Empire, this calendar was STILL in use, and continued to be in use until at least 75 A.D. And Babylon also had a fairly large Jewish community.

The Jews in Palestine were, for religious purposes, keeping a calendar that depended on the sightings of

the new moon crescents in the area of Jerusalem. The High Priests pronounced the start of each new month based on the eyewitness reports of two or more people who professed to have seen the first new crescent. That's the way it had been done for centuries.

If we go back to a millennium or so earlier, we find the following situation:

1) In 1 Samuel 20 we find that both, David and Jonathan, make the statement: "TOMORROW IS THE NEW MOON" (see 1 Samuel 20:5, 18). This appears to indicate that at that time the changes in the heavens had not yet taken place, and months were in all likelihood still all exactly 30 days long, with years still being exactly 360 days long. That's the way it had been in Noah's time. But that changed at some point before Judah went into the Babylonian captivity.

2) From the Book of Ezekiel we can extrapolate that some years at Ezekiel's time already had 13 months. So clearly by then the circuits of the earth around the sun, and of the moon around the earth had been altered to their present state. From then onwards the determination of the start of each new month depended on visual observations of the new crescents. All the nations around Judah followed the same basic calendar, so there was no clash between the calendars of neighbouring countries in the Middle East.

3) When Babylon took Judah into captivity in the 580's B.C., Babylon did NOT impose any kind of calendar change. In captivity the Jews were able to keep track of the passage of time by using the calendar in use in Babylon. When the Medo-Persians conquered Babylon, they retained the Babylonian calendar. It was, after all, efficient and met all the needs and requirements the Medes and Persians expected of a calendar.

4) So when Ezra returned from Babylon, he clearly instituted the calendar of Babylon amongst the Jewish community in the area of Jerusalem. It was the same calendar that they had used prior to going into captivity, except that the months now had Babylonian names. Ezra followed the same calendar used throughout the empire, much like people in Dallas and in Los Angeles use the same calendar that is used in New York. There was no stress of any kind upon the small Jewish community under Ezra, as far as being forced to accept some "WRONG CALENDAR" was concerned. There simply wasn't any "wrong calendar" around anywhere in the empire at the time of Ezra. And that calendar of the empire was based on visual observations of the new moons at Babylon.

So when Ezra used a calendar based on the visually observed new moons in Jerusalem, then most the time he was going to be in agreement with the calendar of the empire. Occasionally a new moon might be visible in Jerusalem one evening BEFORE it would be visible in Babylon; and in those cases Ezra and the Jews in Jerusalem might have started that particular month one day earlier than the empire's official calendar. But by the following new moon they would again be in line with the Medo-Persian calendar, because the next new moon became visible on the same evening in Babylon and in Jerusalem. So yes, occasionally Ezra's calendar might have had two consecutive months with 29 days followed by 30 days, where the Medo-Persian calendar might have had those two months with 30 days followed by 29 days. But then the calendars would again be identical for a long time.

5) When the Greeks conquered the Medo-Persian Empire, they also kept the Babylonian calendar intact, because it was in agreement with their own calendar. It was, after all, the Greeks who had "discovered" 19-year cycles. This continued into the time of the Seleucids. Throughout this period there was never a need for the Jews to have a calendar that differed from the calendar in use by the nations around them. Starting a month with each new moon was the only way calendars were constructed in that part of the world, and they all were based on visual observations of the new moons, even when they had reasonably accurate calculations for predicting future new moons.

6) THEN came the Roman Empire. And it decided "to change times and laws".

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN THEIR HISTORY THE JEWS WERE THREATENED BY A CALENDAR THAT WOULD OBSCURE THE DATES FOR THEIR RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCES!

So even though the Julian calendar was imposed on the whole Roman Empire, it now became absolutely essential for the Jews to maintain their own calendar, in order to correctly date the Feasts and the Holy Days.

In secular life the Jewish calendar was no longer in use; the Julian calendar was imposed by the Roman authorities for all secular activities.

Since the introduction of the Julian calendar, the Jewish calendar has served ONE PURPOSE, AND ONE PURPOSE ONLY: to determine the dates for religious observances! That was true in early New Testament times, and that is still true today. The Jewish calendar ceased to be used for trading and commerce and governmental dealings, etc., as it had been used up to that time. From then onwards its ONLY purpose was a religious one.

7) From then onwards the monthly event of eyewitnesses reporting the sightings of each new crescent took on a new significance. This monthly routine became a safeguard against the threat posed by the Julian calendar. It very much kept alive the concept that each month really SHOULD start with a new moon, even though the Roman calendar, under which the Jews were now living, did not do this. It was also a way of involving the general population, since anyone could become an eyewitness of the first new crescent of a new moon.

8) Then, within the space of less than 70 years, Jerusalem was TWICE destroyed by the Romans, first in 70 A.D. and then again in the 130's A.D.

At some point AFTER the destruction of Jerusalem in the 130's A.D. the present Jewish calendar, with its starting date as the molad of Tishri for 3761 B.C., was established. The earliest possible date for the present calendar is around 150 A.D., and the latest date is 358 / 359 A.D., when Hillel II made the basic calculations of the present calendar public. These calculations appear to have undergone further modifications over the subsequent centuries; Moses Maimonides is known to have used slightly different data from that which is used in the calculations employed today.

At any rate, it was a calculated calendar, based on the calculations of the Greek astronomer Hipparchus, who had lived in the 2nd century B.C.. By the time of Hillel II the Jews had been severely scattered and few remained at Jerusalem. A calendar based on visual observations of the new crescents at Jerusalem was totally impractical for the Jewish communities scattered throughout the Roman Empire, especially so when the calendar of that empire totally ignored all new moons.

What was needed was A METHOD of establishing a uniform calendar, by which Jews scattered throughout the Roman Empire could order their religious observances. There was no point in emphasising to the scattered Jews: LOOK TO VISUAL OBSERVANCES AT JERUSALEM FOR GUIDANCE AND DIRECTION, when communications with Jerusalem were difficult and required many weeks or even months.

It was deemed more important to attain A UNIFORMITY OF PRACTICE amongst all of the scattered Jewish communities, than to focus on some "visual sightings" at Jerusalem. The Roman calendar in everyday use throughout the empire still posed as much of a threat as ever to obscuring the dates for religious observances.

So a calculated formula for determining ALL future new moons was deemed to be the answer. If new moons could indeed be accurately predicted well in advance, then Jewish communities anywhere would be able to observe the identical days, as Jews in all other communities scattered throughout the Roman Empire would observe.

By that time the "rules of postponement" had also already been formulated, and so Hillel II made the calculations plus the rules for postponing Tishri 1 public. Since then Jews have had the calendar which they are currently still using.

[This is not the place to discuss how, why and where this calculated Jewish calendar is in conflict with clear biblical statements and requirements. That I have discussed in other articles.]

CONTACTS BETWEEN THE JEWS AND THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH

Those people who think that the Christian Church in the first century A.D. somehow looked to the Jewish community for guidance or instruction regarding the correct calendar to use, should consider the following points.

1) There is no indication that the calendar calculations employed in the present Jewish calendar were even in use in the first century A.D.. All the historical evidence points to the calendar being based on the reports of eyewitnesses having seen the new crescents. If those calculations were known to the Jewish religious leaders (Hipparchus had devised those calculations in the 140's B.C.), they certainly did not make them public during the first century A.D.!

This means that any knowledge of the "JEWISH" calendar calculations was simply not available to Christians in Corinth or in Ephesus or in Rome or in Samaria. So Christian communities in those cities (and the same was true for the Jewish communities in those distant cities) had absolutely NO WAY of knowing when the first day of each new month would be pronounced in Jerusalem, based on witnesses having reported seeing the new crescent there in the area of Jerusalem.

2) Furthermore, at the very start of the New Testament Church the Jews instituted a "GREAT PERSECUTION" (see Acts 8:1) against the Church. This extended to distant cities, as witnessed by Saul (later named Paul) going as far as Damascus to persecute members of God's Church. The Church suffered a great deal of persecution FROM THE JEWS.

It simply does not make sense to assume (and that's all it can be, an assumption) that the small Christian communities would somehow have sought contact with the Jewish communities, in order to find out "the correct calendar" for the next year, assuming that such knowledge was made available a year in advance. They simply would not have gone to their persecutors for guidance and information regarding the timing of the Feasts and the Holy Days. And it is equally unlikely that the Jews would have viewed such approaches, IF they had been made, in a favourable way.

3) So we should understand that for Christians in scattered areas like Colossae, Laodicea, Iconium, Lystra, Pergamos, etc. it would have been pretty well IMPOSSIBLE to have ACCESS to the Jewish calendar! There was a Jewish calendar that was determined in Jerusalem, but which could NEVER be communicated to outlying areas of the empire in time to be of any use.

4) Outlying areas would OF NECESSITY have had to rely on their own local visual observations of the new moons to establish the first day of every month (the first day of the 7th month is the Day of Trumpets). It was with the intention of coming to grips with problems like this that the Jews started keeping TWO days for every one of the Holy Days (except the Day of Atonement), thinking that by keeping two days they would have a greater certainty of at least also keeping the one correct day. The

fact that they didn't do this for the Day of Atonement shows that their desire to get the right day with certainty had very clear limits, don't expect us to fast for TWO days!

There is no indication anywhere that Christians ever followed this Jewish practice of observing TWO days for every Holy Day, because the Jews themselves were not sure that they really had the right day. Now IF Christians in outlying areas like Corinth and Rome and Iconium and Colossae did not observe TWO days for every Holy Day, then this must mean that they COULD NOT HAVE USED THE CALENDAR OF THE JEWS!

Do you follow?

If the Jews had told Christians: "look, we aren't 100% certain that we've really got the right day; so just to be safe we are going to keep TWO days", how could the Christians possibly have said: "that's okay, we know which one of your two days we need to pick"? If the Christians would have felt confident enough to pick one of the two days the Jews were observing "just to be safe", then it means that the Christians didn't really need the Jews to tell them which of their two days was the correct one.

The Jews keeping two days for every day God has commanded is nothing more than doing things in "the way that SEEMS right to the human mind".

5) This Jewish custom of keeping two days was based on CALENDAR INSECURITIES ... "just in case we are wrong by one day with our calendar, we will keep two days to make sure we hit the right day".

6) How could the Church of God congregations possibly look to people for guidance, when those people themselves in effect said: "Look, we aren't totally sure that we have got the calendar correct. We may be out by a day, and so to be totally sure we are going to keep two days for every Holy Day." If the outlying Jewish communities in effect said: "we may be wrong by a day in our observances", how could Christians possibly say: "That's okay. We'll take your calendar and WE'LL decide for ourselves which of each of YOUR two days we are going to keep"?

7) The factor of uncertainty that the outlying Jewish communities acknowledged by their institution of two days for every one day instructed by God, should make quite clear that Christians SIMPLY COULD NOT LOOK TO THE JEWS IN OUTLYING AREAS FOR GUIDANCE REGARDING CALENDAR MATTERS!

And Christians in these far-flung areas of the Roman Empire did not have any access to the Jews in Jerusalem. So they couldn't look to the Jewish calendar in Jerusalem for any guidance either.

So what was really the only option for Christians in the first century A.D.?

GOD'S PEOPLE BACK THEN MUST HAVE KEPT THEIR OWN CALENDAR INDEPENDENT OF THE JEWS!

THE CALENDAR OF GOD'S PEOPLE IN THE FIRST CENTURY A.D.

Let's look at one such outlying small congregation. This one was in the city of Colossae.

Here was a city, about 12 miles from Laodicea, in the Province of Asia, where a small congregation of Christians had been founded. This was a long way from Jerusalem, perhaps up to 1000 miles by the land-route. By ship one would have sailed via the island of Cyprus to the area of Pamphylia, before travelling inland to Colossae. Contact between Colossae and the area of Palestine was extremely difficult and slow. Even if people in Colossae had wanted contact with Jerusalem, it would have been a lengthy, time-consuming process.

In writing to this group, the Apostle Paul referred to "as many as have not seen my face in the flesh" (Colossians 2:1), indicating that very likely he himself had not been there in person. The indications are that a local man from Colossae, Epaphras by name, had been used to raise up that particular congregation (see Colossians 4:12).

Colossae was a non-Jewish community, where the doctrine of asceticism (self-denial) was fairly prominent. The people who had come into God's Church in this town had until recently been themselves involved with all of the pagan customs and traditions of every one around them. Now they had suddenly accepted a whole new way of life, one that was totally alien to their local community.

As a part of the Roman Empire they used the Julian calendar, which totally ignored the timing of new moons.

HOW WAS THIS TINY AND ISOLATED CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY GOING TO OBSERVE THE ANNUAL HOLY DAYS?

They were surrounded by hostile neighbours, steeped in paganism. There were no Jews to go to for help with a calendar. Besides, had there been any Jews, they would probably also have been hostile to this small group of Christians. Access to Jerusalem (i.e. a return trip) could take from 3 months to 6 months and longer, assuming someone had the time and the means and the motivation to undertake the journey.

So what could they do to keep the Holy Days?

THEY WERE FORCED TO KEEP THEIR OWN CALENDAR BASED ON THE LOCAL APPEARANCE OF THE NEW MOONS!

There was simply no other way for them to be able to determine when to observe the annual Feasts and Holy Days. It was either keep their own local lunar calendar, or be totally unable to observe any of the Holy Days.

UNDERSTANDING COLOSSIANS 2:16-17

When we come into God's Church, then people will often criticize us for EVERYTHING we do differently. Such criticism is seldom limited to specific religious observances. Likewise, when the Christians in Colossae departed from all the pagan customs and traditions they had until then been a part of, they were "judged" for everything that they now did differently; not only direct religious observances, but even changes in customs and manners and ways of doing things.

In his letter the Apostle Paul tried to encourage this small group that was facing such pressures from the community around them. So in chapter 2 he warned them to be on guard against the influence of asceticism, which he referred to by the general term "philosophy". He said in Colossians 2:8:

"Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain (empty) deceit, after the traditions of men ..." (Colossians 2:8)

They were being criticized (i.e. "judged") on every side, for virtually everything they did. Paul tried to encourage them to persevere in the face of such opposition. He then continued to explain the process of salvation. Then Paul wrote:

"Let no man therefore judge you ..." (Colossians 2:16)

In plain English Paul was saying: Don't worry about what people think and say about you and your new way of life. Look to God's Church for guidance regarding how you should live, and what is the right form of conduct for you.

Paul then continues to name 5 SPECIFIC THINGS or areas in which the Christians in Colossae WERE being judged by their neighbours. These 5 things made them different from the people around them. These 5 things are:

- meat
- drink
- holy days
- new moons
- sabbath days

Let's look at all of these things.

MEAT: The Christians had changed their diet since coming into the Church. They no longer ate any unclean meats. Very possibly they also avoided eating any clean meats that may have been dedicated to some pagan deity or other in the slaughtering process. The scriptural basis for not eating any unclean meats is Leviticus chapter 11 and Deuteronomy chapter 14.

DRINK: There is no specific biblical injunction against certain things that we may not drink. Probably this is simply a reference to the Christians no longer allowing themselves to drink wine to excess. They made a point of not getting drunk, even when others around them did not exercise such restraint.

HOLY DAYS: These are the Holy Days of Leviticus chapter 23. But there is only one way in which they could have observed these with any degree of certainty. **THEY SIMPLY HAD TO BE AWARE OF EACH NEW MOON IN THE YEAR!** Without a knowledge of the new moons, which are totally ignored in the Julian calendar, it would have been impossible for them to observe these days. And so Paul then mentions the next point:

NEW MOONS: The Christians in Colossae were NOT instructed by Paul to have "meetings or services" on the new moons! They were simply **TAKING NOTE OF** the passage of each new moon! It was **THEIR CALENDAR**, to enable them to observe the annual Feasts. And for this "odd" custom they were now being "judged" by the people around them, who had no use for keeping track of the new moons.

Whether they also got together at the time of each new moon or not is not important one way or the other, any more than it is important whether a local pastor in New York decides to have weekly Bible Studies on a Monday or a Tuesday or a Wednesday, etc. It is not a matter of what people may or may not have done. The point is very clear that in this present age, as also at the time of Christ's ministry, **THE RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE OF NEW MOONS IS SIMPLY NOT COMMANDED BY GOD!**

However, personally keeping track of the passage of new moons was the only way for Christians in Colossae to be able to observe the annual Holy Days. There simply was no other correct "calendar"

available to them!

SABBATH DAYS: This is based on the commandment that we are to observe the Sabbaths.

A GRAMMATICAL KEY TO UNDERSTANDING "NEW MOONS"

Colossians 2:16 is the only place in the New Testament where the "new moon" is mentioned. So we need to be careful to not read anything into this passage that Paul did not intend to convey, since we have no other references in the New Testament to weigh this against.

First let's examine the Greek word that is translated as "IN RESPECT OF" in this verse.

The English expression "... or in respect of an holyday or of the new moon or of the sabbath days" is a translation of the Greek expression: "... e en merei heortes e noumenias e sabbaton".

The noun "meros" (i.e. "merei") is defined in Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament as follows:

- 1) A PART DUE OR ASSIGNED TO ONE (German 'Anteil'),
- 2) ONE OF THE CONSTITUENT PARTS OF A WHOLE.

The word is used 43 times in the New Testament, and is commonly translated as "part" or "portion". It should be clear that "RESPECT" is not a particularly good way to translate this Greek word. The word really has to do with something that is "A PART OF A WHOLE".

The Greek word "heorte" means "feast, festival", and by extension also "holy day". And "noumenias" means "new moon". The Greek expression does NOT contain the definite articles for either "new moon" or for "sabbaths".

So, leaving the word "meros" untranslated for the moment, the Greek text literally reads as follows:

"Let no man therefore judge you ... in MEROS of a feast or of a new moon or of sabbaths".

Note that Paul did not use the word "meros" to apply to meat and to drink. He only applied it to the last three items in this verse. So WHY did Paul choose to use the word "meros" to preface these three nouns? What was Paul trying to tell us?

Note also that Paul was NOT commanding them to do anything ... this verse is not a command to keep the feasts or the new moons or the sabbaths. Rather, they were ALREADY doing something in regard to all three of these terms (feast, new moon and sabbaths), and Paul was simply encouraging them not to let other people judge them for things they were already doing. It is tempting to ASSUME that all three of these must have been commanded as religious observances; but that is not something that is stated in this verse. Therefore, if we want to know whether all three of these are in fact commanded to be observed in a religious way, THEN we must find commands to this effect elsewhere in the Bible.

A careful study of the Bible will show that the things that we are COMMANDED to observe are: 3 annual Feasts, 7 annual Holy Days (also referred to as 'Sabbaths'), the Passover (only for baptized individuals) and the weekly Sabbaths.

Nowhere in the Bible is the observance of new moons enjoined on God's people for this present age! There are references to new moons during the millennial rule of Jesus Christ, but there is also a very great likelihood that the lunar cycle will be changed at the return of Jesus Christ, and whatever may happen on the new moons during the millennium does not appear to be enjoined on God's people in this present age.

Note further that Paul chose to use the SINGULAR for "feast" and for "new moon", but the PLURAL for "Sabbaths". I would take this to mean that he used all three of these nouns as generic terms. The plural for "Sabbaths" then indicates that Paul was including TWO different categories of Sabbaths in this term, the weekly Sabbaths and also the annual Sabbaths.

Thus these three words convey the following information:

"Feast" = a reference to the 3 annual Feasts;

"Sabbaths" = a reference to the weekly Sabbaths PLUS the 7 annual Sabbaths;

"New moon" = a reference to the 12 or 13 new moons in each year.

So now once again the question:

EXACTLY WHAT DID PAUL INTEND THE WORD "MEROS" IN THIS VERSE TO CONVEY TO US?

To me the answer appears to be as follows:

- 1) Paul is telling us that ALL THREE OF THESE items (feasts, new moons, Sabbaths) are linked together in some way ... "AS CONSTITUENT PARTS OF A WHOLE"!
- 2) For Paul the sequence of these three items was logical.
- 3) FIRST, Paul refers to the 3 annual Feasts. If you like, you can certainly include the 7 annual Holy Days in this category, though I personally get the impression that Paul intended for them to be included in the third item. The 3 Feasts give the large overview of the plan of God by symbolically representing the 3 stages in which God will build His immortal Family.
- 4) NEXT, Paul mentions the new moons because they ARE "a constituent part" of the annual Feasts. They are absolutely vital for the observance of these 3 Feasts. If you don't know the time of the new moons, then you cannot know when to observe the Feasts! The "new moons" represent THE CALENDAR which was absolutely essential in order to place the Feasts at the correct times.

The word "calendar" is never mentioned in the Bible. But the new moon is the very foundation of the calendar (for calculating God's Holy Days!); a new moon determines the start of every month and thus also of the new year. If you had to choose one word in biblical times to most clearly represent and to typify the concept of "a calendar", it would have to be the word "new moon" (it is one word in Hebrew and in Greek).

- 5) THIRD, Paul then listed Sabbaths, to include both, the weekly and the annual Sabbaths. They too are a constituent part of the whole. They complete the picture by showing us that God is doing everything in an overall framework of 7000 years (shown by the weekly Sabbaths), and various key steps or events within the context of that 7000 year plan (the annual Sabbaths).

The next verse then shows that this is exactly what Paul had in mind.

COLOSSIANS 2:17 EXPLAINED

This verse reads:

"Which are a shadow of things to come, but the body of Christ." (Colossians 2:17)

A better way to render this verse is to say:

"Which FORESHADOW things to come, but the body of Christ."

"A shadow" is normally something that goes behind the real thing. But that is not what Paul was talking about. Paul is talking about "THESE THINGS" pointing to "things to come", things that have not yet happened.

The word "WHICH" in this verse refers to the exact three things that are "constituent parts of a whole" that he had listed in the previous verse. So "which" refers to: the annual Feasts, the new moons (i.e. the correct calendar), and all of the Sabbaths.

Thus:

The 3 annual Feasts look forward to the steps by which God builds His Family. The calendar looks forward to the time when God will restore a calendar with perfect annual and monthly cycles, which cycles are at this present time totally unsynchronized with one another. The weekly Sabbaths look forward to the millennial rule of Jesus Christ. The annual Sabbaths look forward to the steps in God's plan of salvation that YET need to be fulfilled.

Colossians 2:17 then concludes the thought that was started in verse 16. Paul had started the thought with: "Don't let any MAN judge you regarding your whole new way of life, but "the body of Christ". In the previous chapter (Colossians 1:18) Paul had already explained that by "the body of Christ" he meant "THE CHURCH". In other words: look to God's Church for guidance as to how to live your life and don't be overly concerned about what other people may think of you.

So in summary: this small congregation of Christians in Colossae had changed their eating and drinking habits, they now calculated their new religious observances by a lunar calendar instead of using the Julian calendar, they observed what their neighbours would have called 'Jewish feasts', and they kept the weekly Sabbaths and the annual Holy Days. And for all these things they were receiving a certain amount of persecution from the people around them.

It seems fairly obvious to me that the Christians in this isolated community in Colossae could not possibly have had access to the "Jewish" calendar that was determined in Jerusalem, and this was still 300 years before Hillel II made the calendar computations public. The only thing they could possibly have done was to keep an accurate record of all new moons, and base their observance of the Feasts and the Holy Days on these records.

IN PRACTICE they would have kept the Holy Days on exactly the same days as the Christians in Jerusalem (with perhaps a 1-day fluctuation on some occasions?); but they would have done so without in any way striving to be in harmony with some "Jewish" calendar.

So how concerned would the scattered small communities of Christians in the first century A.D. REALLY have been about the "Jewish" calendar? I don't believe the Jewish calendar even featured in their thinking, even though IN PRACTICE they would have been almost always in full agreement with the Jewish calendar that was at that time still based on visual observations.

IN CONCLUSION

When we examine the question of the calendar used by God's Church in the first century A.D., here is what we find:

1) Until the time when the Roman Empire instituted the Julian calendar, all the nations in the Middle East had used the same basic calendar. This included the Jews. They did not somehow have their own calendar which differed from the calendars of the nations around them. This pre-Julian calendar incorporated all the features required by a "correct" calendar for purposes of determining the annual Holy days.

2) It was only the imposition of the Julian calendar that created a threat to observing the Holy Days at the correct times, because the Julian calendar totally ignored the movements of the moon.

3) As there was no way of communicating new moon decisions, based on visual observations at Jerusalem, to other Jews in scattered areas of the Roman Empire, so the Jews started to observe TWO days for every Holy Day. This observance of two days was based on them using the new moons in their own localities to determine the start of each new month. In practice their calendars would almost always have been in harmony with the visual observations in Jerusalem, though occasionally they could have been one day ahead of Jerusalem (as they were all west of Jerusalem).

4) The early New Testament Church was severely persecuted by the Jews. It is highly unlikely that non-Jewish Christians would have had any religious contact at all with Jews. They would not have approached the Jews for calendar guidance. Besides, the calculations for the calendar had not yet been made public.

5) The only possible way small isolated Christian communities could have observed the annual Holy Days would have been for them to keep their own calendar records, by keeping records of every new moon that occurred. Their MOTIVATION would not have been to be "in harmony with the Jews" (though in practical terms that is exactly what it would have amounted to). Instead, their motivation would have been to determine, as best as they could, when each new month should start.

6) Paul's reference to "new moon" in Colossians 2:16 seems to be a reference to the calendar-practices of this small, isolated congregation. Paul's use of the word "meros" in this verse reveals Paul's intention of clearly linking the "new moon" to the annual feasts and Holy Days, since the new moons are vital to the process of determining when the annual feasts and Holy Days should be observed.

7) God's Church TODAY should not be unduly concerned about always being in agreement with the Jewish calendar of today. That was not a major concern of God's people 1900 years ago either. In practice any correct way of determining a calendar will be in agreement with the Jewish calendar a lot of the time. But the Jews today (i.e. since the time of Hillel II) also manipulate the calendar for reasons of "traditions"; and this manipulation will result in a correct calendar at times being at variance with the Jewish calendar.

So I do not believe that there is any "historical reason", from the practices of God's Church in the first century A.D., that would demand that we today accept the Jewish calendar in an unqualified way.

