

Why New Moons Are Irrelevant to the Jewish Calendar

Among the Christian groups who trace their doctrines back to Herbert W. Armstrong, there is widespread ignorance of the calendar currently used by the Jewish community around the world. These people look to the Jews for the dates on which they will observe holy days listed in the Bible in the Old Testament Book of Leviticus chapter 23.

One common misconception is that the Jews determine the start of a month by taking notice of the new moon. This is not true. The real way that the Jews determine the start of a month is the subject of this article.

Looking for the Conjunction?

Some think that the conjunction, i.e. the instant the earth, the moon and the sun line up, once every lunar month, is the reference time. The times of the conjunctions are well known to astronomers and have been calculated many years in advance.

This is not a great difficulty. Astronomers even in ancient civilizations were able to predict with varying degrees of accuracy when a new moon would start. Around 1000 BCE, both David and Jonathan knew in advance when the next new moon would be (I Sam 20: 5, 18). Obviously they were not using an observation method.

However, even though the time of the conjunction is now readily available, e.g. at Internet sites like aa.usno.navy.mil, no Jew anywhere in the world is looking at any astronomical data to learn when a month begins.

Looking for a crescent?

Another popular idea is that the reference time for the start of a month is determined by looking into the setting sun in the west at Jerusalem, peering for the first sign of the slim waxing crescent of the new moon.

In reality, no Jew anywhere in the world is looking for a new moon crescent to decide if that day is the start of a month.

In a modern society, where planning is essential and needs to be months and years in advance, looking for crescents of past events is unworkable.

How They Do It

Like citizens of the USA, Europe, etc., they follow the calendar of their culture. It is published in advance, and people work along with it.

Apart from printed calendars, there are Internet sites with present, past, and future, Jewish calendars available. One with easy conversion between Jewish dates and Gregorian dates is www.abdicate.net. These calendars can be centuries in advance, and none uses any times of new moons anywhere in their production.

The Jewish calendar is a table of nineteen Jewish years with all months fixed in advance. More precisely, it is 235 lunar months long.

When one nineteen year cycle finishes, another identical cycle begins. And so it repeats and repeats.

If one date is known, any other can be reckoned from it, just by knowing the nineteen year cycle. No need to know anything about new moons.

It's a Fixed Table

The Jewish calendar is a fixed table, which was approved by the Sanhedrin in 358 CE.

In this case, fixed means fixed. It remains in force on devout Jews until changed by a properly constituted Sanhedrin. Numerous unsuccessful attempts have been made over the centuries to reform a valid Sanhedrin, including one by Napoleon. Until one can be reconstituted, the table will remain in use, even with its known error of slipping backwards one full day in 231 Gregorian years.

The Jewish year begins with the month "Tishri" or "Tishrei", a name adopted from the Babylonian exile.

The following table shows the months and their duration in days for each of the years in the 19 year cycle.

A leap month, "Adar II", occurs in certain years as shown.

Some months are always the same length, e.g. Tishrei and Shevat are always 30 days long, but some have different lengths in different years, e.g. Heshvan and Adar I.

Month	Y 1	Y 2	Y 3	Y 4	Y 5	Y 6	Y 7	Y 8	Y 9	Y 10
Tishrei	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30
Heshvan	29	30	30	29	29	30	30	29	29	30
Kislev	30	30	30	29	30	30	30	29	30	30
Tevet	29	29	29	29	29	29	29	29	29	29
Shevat	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30
Adar I	29	29	30	29	29	30	29	30	29	29
Adar II	n/a	n/a	29	n/a	n/a	29	n/a	29	n/a	n/a
Nisan	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30
Iyyar	29	29	29	29	29	29	29	29	29	29
Sivan	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30
Tammuz	29	29	29	29	29	29	29	29	29	29
Av	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30
Elul	29	29	29	29	29	29	29	29	29	29

Month	Y 11	Y 12	Y 13	Y 14	Y 15	Y 16	Y 17	Y 18	Y 19
Tishrei	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30
Heshvan	29	29	30	30	29	29	30	29	30
Kislev	29	30	30	30	30	29	30	30	30
Tevet	29	29	29	29	29	29	29	29	29
Shevat	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30
Adar I	30	29	29	30	29	29	30	29	30
Adar II	29	n/a	n/a	29	n/a	n/a	29	n/a	29
Nisan	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30
Iyyar	29	29	29	29	29	29	29	29	29
Sivan	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30
Tammuz	29	29	29	29	29	29	29	29	29
Av	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30
Elul	29	29	29	29	29	29	29	29	29

Calendar month information has been obtained from <http://www.abdiccate.net/>

Working Without New Moons

The current nineteen year cycle began on the first day of Tishrei in the Jewish year 5758, on Thursday the second of October 1997 in the Gregorian calendar, and will end on the twenty ninth day of the month of Elul in the Jewish year 5776, which is Sunday the second of October 2016 in the Gregorian calendar.

Note that there is no need to consider new moons, whether calculated or observed. Using the information above, i.e. the starting date and the table of months and their durations, any future day and date can be predetermined.

Example 1

For example, in the first year of the nineteen year cycle, we can determine the date of the first of Nisan. It is $(30 + 29 + 30 + 29 + 30 + 29) = 177$ days after the first of Tishrei. In the Gregorian calendar, that is 177 days after 2 October 1997, which is 28 March 1998.

Example 2

We can also determine the date of Nisan 14 in a final year of the nineteen year cycle. Using the fixed tables, the first of Nisan is scheduled to coincide with Saturday 9 April 2016. The Gregorian date of Nisan 14 is thirteen days later, on 22 April 2016.

Example 3

When the current nineteen year cycle completes on 29 Elul, on Sunday 2 October 2016, a new cycle will begin with 1 Tishrei, the next day, on Monday 3 October 2016.

Note that in arriving at these example dates there has been no reference to any new moon times, equinoxes, or solstices. We have not had to think about postponements or postponement rules. The fixed table nineteen year cycle calendar has all of that built in, so that all of the religious requirements of Judaism at the time of its adoption, in the fourth century C. E., are met. Thus devout Jews can merely follow this table and all of their customs can be carried out without doubt or guilt.

To learn more about postponements, consult the article "Why does the Jewish calendar have postponements?" at www.geocities.com/selwynrussell/SR/erevYK.pdf

This document is available from www.geocities.com/SR/ September2008