

When Does the Biblical Year Begin?

By T.W. Tramm

ONE OF THE MOST important rules of eschatology—particularly as it relates to the biblical calendar—is to not take anything for granted, or accept something as fact, merely because it’s the majority view.

Why is this important?

Because so much of what we know and presume about the calendar derives from the teachings and writings of the Jewish authorities and rabbis—the same authorities who failed to recognize their Messiah due to a misreading of the Scriptures and who, due to their lack of observance of the Levitical statutes (e.g., keeping the Sabbaticals), lost control of God’s “datebook.”

Consequently, virtually *every* aspect of the calendar is up for debate: the correct reckoning of the years, the sabbatical and jubilee cycles—even the feast dates. This presents a problem for today’s watchmen trying to determine where we sit on God’s prophetic timeline. And this is why we must follow His command to “test all things” by studying the Scriptures for ourselves (1 Thess. 5:21).

In this article we’re going to follow the Lord’s command to test what is said and taught by exploring an area of controversy especially relevant in our time: the debate over the correct starting point of the biblical year, including the Sabbatical and Jubilee.

For those not familiar with the controversy, most who observe the biblical calendar today accept the rabbinical position that the New Year for “the counting of years” begins in the fall, on Tishrei 1. There is a minority faction, however, who insists that the biblical years are to be reckoned from the spring, or Nisan 1.

Why does each side believe the way they do?

Lets’ begin with the minority view.

THE SPRING ARGUMENT

The foundational Scripture cited by those who believe that the biblical years should be reckoned from the spring is Exodus 12 where God instructs Moses concerning the calendar:

“The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in Egypt, “This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year. Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household” (Ex. 12:1-3).

Notice the Lord tells Moses that the month of Passover (Nisan) is to be “*the first month of your year.*”

The passage is so clear that no one debates what is being said.

Building on this, proponents of the spring New Year note that nowhere in Scripture does God *modify or retract* His explicit command to number the years from the month of Passover. Additionally, nowhere does the Lord instruct Israel to observe a *second* New Year in the fall. Indeed, Tishrei is always and without exception identified as “*the seventh month*” in the Bible.¹

Where, then, did the Jews get the idea to observe a second New Year in the fall?

There are multiple theories.

Egypt:

Some say the observance of a fall New Year stems from Israel’s sojourn in Egypt where a New Year was celebrated in the late summer.

Rabbinic Tradition:

The rabbis teach that the tradition of observing the New Year in the fall derives from the belief that God created the world in the month of Tishrei. However, this is debated as well: some believe that the world was created in the *spring*—the time of new beginnings. Nonetheless, the rabbis note that Tishrei was chosen as the New Year because Tishrei 1 (*Yom Teruah*) entails special ceremonies, such as sacrifices and the blowing of trumpets, whereas Nisan 1 has no ceremonies attached. In other words, the first of Tishrei (more than Nisan) resembled a “New Year’s celebration” and was, therefore, chosen as the starting point of the year.²

Incidentally, critics of the rabbinical (fall) view point out that nowhere in Scripture does the Lord command Israel to observe *any* special ceremony related to the first day of the year. Celebrating the New Year was, however, a common practice in Babylon, which leads to another theory.

Pagan Influence:

Many believe that the Jews’ practice of observing a fall New Year derives from their exposure to Babylonian culture during the exile. The Babylonians celebrated the New Year festival of “Akitu” twice a year—once at the beginning of their month called “Nisanu” (Nisan) and once at the beginning of their month called “Tashritu” (Tishrei). That the Jews had already adopted the Babylonian month-names (Nisan, Tishrei, etc.)—a fact readily admitted by the rabbis—paved the way for them to eventually take up a New Year celebration in the fall, as well.

Lending credence to the Babylonian-influence theory, the same type of phenomenon (adopting the traditions of a host culture) can be observed in modern times, as Jews observing *Hanukkah* in America have adopted and adapted certain pagan customs related to Christmas. Because of Hanukkah's proximity to Christmas on the calendar, the custom of giving gifts on Hanukkah began. Once Hanukkah took on this aspect of Christmas, it became ripe for more significant influences. For instance, today many American Jews have established the custom of setting up a "Hanukkah bush" as a Jewish alternative to the Christmas tree. Thus, the pagan tradition of a Christmas tree has essentially been "Judaized" and incorporated into Hanukkah. This, it is proposed, is what happened with the biblical feast of *Yom Teruah*: its proximity to the pagan New Year celebration on the first day of "Tashritu" (Tishrei) resulted in its eventually being celebrated as a New Year.

The notion that the fall New Year is an added feature to God's calendar is bolstered by the fact that the term *Rosh Hashanah*, or "head of the year," is first connected to the seventh month (Tishrei) in the *Mishna*, or Jewish code of law, compiled by the rabbis in 200 AD.³

The Lord, of course, makes no bones about His stance regarding additions to the Law:

"You shall not add anything to what I command you or take anything away from it, but keep the commandments of Yahweh your God that I enjoin upon you" (Deut. 4:2).

Citing God's command to "not add," the [Karaites](#) sect of Judaism, characterized by its strict recognition of the Torah *alone* as the supreme authority in Jewish law and theology, utterly rejects the notion of a fall New Year. They view it as a mere invention of man, a pagan-inspired custom deriving from Israel's time in Babylon and perpetuated by the rabbis. As far as the Karaites are concerned, the first day of the biblical year—including the Sabbatical and Jubilee—is in the spring.⁴

The [Samaritans](#) concur. In their stringent compliance to the Torah and what they view as the "true" religion of the Israelites before the Babylonian captivity, they preserve the biblical name *Yom Teruah* for Tishrei 1 and do not recognize it as "*Rosh Hashanah*," or as any type of New Year.

THE FALL ARGUMENT

Now that we've heard the basic arguments from the "spring" camp, who base their view on the Lord's clear instructions in Exodus and what they consider the dubious origins of the fall New Year, let's take a look at the Scriptures cited as supporting the *fall* New Year position.

Our first example is Exodus 34:22, where the *fall* Feast of Tabernacles is linked to the "end" of the year:

"And you shall observe the Feast of Weeks, of the firstfruits of wheat harvest, and *the Feast of Ingathering [Tabernacles] at the year's end*" (Ex. 34:22 KJV).

The crucial thing to understand about the word “end” in this verse is that it’s translated from the Hebrew *tekufah*, which refers to the “turn” of the seasons that occurs at both the spring and fall equinoxes—the two times a year when the sun crosses the celestial equator and the length of the day and night are equal.

Notice the NIV properly renders the word *tekufah* “turn”:

“Celebrate the Festival of Weeks with the firstfruits of the wheat harvest, and the Festival of Ingathering [Tabernacles] at the *turn* of the year” (Ex. 34:22 NIV).

Knowing that the *tekufah* (turn) of the year can refer to *either* the spring *or* the fall equinox, we understand that only ONE of these equinoctial turns—the spring or the fall—can mark the “end” of the year as far as the numbering of years is concerned.

Which one is correct?

Spring proponents point out that, because God clearly establishes Nisan as the first month of the year in Exodus, the “turn” associated with Tabernacles refers simply to the turning point of the year, or the change of the season, when summer turns to fall.

Another Scripture cited as proof that the biblical years begin in the fall is Leviticus 25 where the trumpet of jubilee is sounded on the Day of Atonement:

“Count off seven sabbath years—seven times seven years—so that the seven sabbath years amount to a period of forty-nine years. Then have the trumpet sounded everywhere on the tenth day of the seventh month; *on the Day of Atonement sound the trumpet throughout your land*” (Lev. 25:8, 9).

The logic is that if the jubilee trumpet is sounded on the Day of Atonement then the jubilee year must *begin* at this time.

But is this what the passage is actually saying?

Not according to spring jubilee proponents. They point out that the Jubilee is merely being “declared” on Tishrei 10. The trumpet blast, they note, has nothing to do with the actual start time of the Jubilee, a fact reflected in even the fall (rabbinical) view, which acknowledges that the trumpet is sounded ten days apart from the start of the year, on Tishrei 1.

Incidentally, Karaite Jews believe that the Jubilee is declared on the Day of Atonement *preceding* the fiftieth year (during the 49th). This, they explain, allows time in advance to make preparations for the transfer of property and relocation of persons that occurs during the Jubilee. One could also make a case, however, based on a plain reading of Leviticus 25, that the jubilee trumpet should be sounded on the Day of Atonement *during, or in the midst of*, the jubilee year. (More on this later.) This *also* allows preparation time before the trumpet blast, as well as afterward (during the five months remaining), to

carry out the actual transfer of property. In this scenario, *all* of the jubilee-related activity is carried out *within* the jubilee year.

Another Scripture cited as proof that the year begins in the fall is Ezekiel 40:1:

“In the twenty-fifth year of our exile, at the *beginning of the year, on the tenth of the month*, in the fourteenth year after the fall of the city—on that very day the hand of the LORD was on me and he took me there” (Ezek. 40:1).

The reason this verse is considered proof of a fall New Year is that “the tenth of the month” is assumed by the rabbis to be a veiled reference to the Day of Atonement, which occurs on Tishrei 10. Spring proponents point out, however, that there is no basis for this assumption other than a pre-existing belief that the “beginning of the year” occurs in the fall. In other words, from an objective standpoint, there is no reason to assume that the tenth of the month refers to anything other than the tenth day of the month of Passover (Nisan), which Exodus establishes as *the first month of the year*.

The rabbis also cite verses pertaining to the agricultural cycle as proof of a fall New Year:

“So long as the earth remains—*sowing* time and *reaping* time, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night, will not cease” (Gen. 8:22).

“And for six years shall you *sow* your land and *gather* in its produce, But the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of your people may eat” (Lev. 23:10, 11).

That “sowing,” which happens in the fall, is mentioned before “reaping,” which happens in the spring, is seen as an indication that the agricultural cycle—and thus the *year*—begins in Tishrei.

Other arguments, based on similar assumptions, are made in support of the fall view. The weakness of these arguments, some contend, is that they rely on *inference and assumption*, which is why they often entail lengthy or complex explanations. In contrast, the case for the spring-reckoned Jubilee is simply made: In Exodus, God says the first month of the year is the month of Passover. The Jewish observance of a fall New Year going back millennia is the result of pagan influence and a failure to observe the Lord’s instructions.

Which side is correct?

It’s not our aim here to make that determination. However, I will say, as a subscriber to Newton’s adage that “Truth is ever to be found in the simplicity of things,” that when a case can be made by citing a few plain Scriptures as opposed to those involving assumptions, I find that compelling. The reality, coming from one who (like most) has taken for granted that the biblical year begins in the fall, is that the spring view poses some difficult questions for the majority position.

For instance:

- In Scripture, the month we call Nisan is identified as the *first month* (Ex. 12:1-3). For what purpose does One, namely God, number the months other than to establish the *start and end point* of the year?
- The Bible says, “God is not the author of confusion” (1 Cor. 14:33). If the Lord intended that Israel observe the *seventh* month (Tishrei) as “the first month of the year,” why is this not explicitly stated in at least one verse of Scripture?

For the rabbis ...

- Why does the *Mishnah* state that the first month of the year is in the *fall*, while the Torah (Bible) says the first month of the year is in the *spring*? Moreover, why do the rabbinical writings speak of *multiple* “New Years” when the Bible mentions only one?⁵
- Regardless of the calendar observed (or not observed) prior to the Exodus, why—after God plainly instructed Israel to henceforth observe the month of Passover as the first month of the year—would the rabbis continue numbering years according to the so-called “ancient” way?

These are just questions.

Again, the purpose of this article is not a comprehensive study, or to decide the issue, but merely to review the opposing arguments and ask legitimate questions where they are warranted.

Some warranted questions/food for thought:

- Is it possible that the confusion and controversy swirling around the correct starting point of the year has something to do with Satan’s stated ambition to “make alterations,” or “change the seasons,” in the Law?⁶
- Is it *conceivable*, in view of the Jewish authorities’ less than stellar stewardship of the biblical calendar (e.g., being centuries off on the year count, failing to observe and losing track of the seven and forty-nine year cycles, adopting the Babylonian month names, etc.) that they might *also* be numbering the years from the wrong “turn” of the season?
- Is it conceivable that even the most respected and learned teachers of today, rather than going against the tide of tradition, have simply accepted the rabbis’ position on the calendar—taking for granted that the forbearers were correct concerning something so fundamental as the starting point of the year?

IMPLICATIONS

Since we've raised the notion of a spring-reckoned Jubilee, you may be wondering about the implications. For instance, if the presumed 1967 Jubilee commenced in the spring instead of the fall, where might this put us with respect to a potential *final* Jubilee?

Also, what about Jonathan Cahn's shemitah collapses and the various date alignments pointing to the fall—are they still valid?

Let's address these one at a time.

Jubilee:

Assuming that the June 1967 recapture of Jerusalem was indeed a jubilee event and that the Jubilee began two months earlier, in April (Nisan 1), let's follow God's instructions in Leviticus and see where they lead:

"Count off seven sabbath years—seven times seven years—so that the seven sabbath years amount to a period of forty-nine years. Then have the trumpet sounded everywhere on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement sound the trumpet throughout your land. Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you" (Lev. 25:8-10).

Notice the Lord says to count a *full* forty-nine years; "then," *after* we have counted the forty-nine years, during the fiftieth year, we are to sound the trumpet in the seventh month, on the Day of Atonement.

Following these instructions, if we count the forty nine years from April 11 (Nisan 1) in 1967, we arrive at April 9, 2016. This date would represent the beginning of the fiftieth (jubilee) year. From here, following the command to sound the trumpet in the seventh month, on the Day of Atonement, the trumpet would be sounded on October 12, 2016.

Thus, a spring-reckoned Jubilee would put us, at present, more or less *in the midst* of a jubilee year that began in early April, 2016 and will conclude at the end of March, 2017.⁷

The other possibility for a spring-reckoned Jubilee, based on the notion that the Jubilee is intercalary, or set apart from the sabbatical cycles, is to count the forty-nine years beginning from Nisan 1 of 1968, the first biblical New Year *following* the Jew's return in June of '67. This scenario results in a Jubilee that spans March 2017 to March 2018.

Shemitah Collapses:

Assuming the seven-year Sabbaticals are to be reckoned from the spring, the “shemitah” years, as presently recognized, would simply shift to the *right* six (biblical) months. For instance, instead of the most recent shemitah year spanning the fall of 2014 to 2015, it would span the spring of 2015 to 2016. Significantly, this “shift” does not nullify the Elul 29 and other shemitah crashes, as they still occur within the shemitah year. The consequence of the spring reckoning is that the time of “release,” or debt cancellation, occurs *not* at the “end” of the year but at the fall “turn” of the year, around the seventh month and beyond.

In some way, this may even make more sense of the shemitah phenomenon: In Jonathan Cahn’s *Mystery of the Shemitah*, we find that, often, the bulk of the shemitah effect occurs “in the wake” of the key months of Elul/Tishrei, putting much of the shemitah activity *outside and beyond* the shemitah year. When the shemitah is reckoned from spring-to-spring, however, the bulk of the shemitah activity occurs *within* the actual shemitah year, between the seventh and final month.

In the scenario in which the forty-nine years are counted from the spring *following* the return in 1967 (Nisan 1, 1968), the Elul 29/shemitah crashes of fall 2001 and 2008 end up occurring *before* what would be shemitah years: spring 2002-2003, and spring 2009-2010.

Date Alignments:

What about the uncanny date alignments linking the 1967 recapture of Jerusalem to the fall of 2015 and also the consecutive Elul-29 crashes in 2001 and 2008? Aren’t these confirmations from God that the biblical year begins in the *fall*?

It depends on how one looks at it. One has to be careful about getting locked into a singular way of seeing something based on a preconception, e.g., that Tishrei marks the beginning of the year. For instance, one could argue that the Lord may have intended these date alignments not as year-markers *per se* but, rather, merely as attention-getters, couched in the “language” we *understand*—the modern Jewish (rabbinical) calendar. After all, had the shemitah crashes and date alignments occurred in the *spring*—the supposed *midst* of the biblical year—who in the eschatological realm would have taken note?

And so the date alignments may be simply “signs,” like the solar and lunar eclipses, pointing to a key time in God’s appointment book (the fall) without necessarily revealing anything too specific. That said, it’s possible that the alignments *do* reveal something specific that will only be recognized at a later time, with the benefit of hindsight.

CONCLUSION

As alluded to at the outset, this article is not so much about reaching conclusions as it is about asking questions and considering possibilities.

Is it possible that...

- Satan has successfully manipulated the Jewish authorities over the millennia to corrupt even the most fundamental component of God’s calendar—*the reckoning of the year*?
- Today’s religious Jews and messianic Christians, equally blinded by centuries of rabbinic tradition, are counting the biblical years from the *wrong season*?
- Calendar alterations, like the one suspected here, are the reason Jesus is so adamant that we must “*keep watch*” and not assume He is delaying?

As always, time will provide the answers.

In the larger scheme, one could argue it doesn’t matter a great deal whether the jubilee year concludes in the spring of 2017 or six to twelve months later, in the following autumn or spring, because, either way, Jesus is coming very soon.

Amen to that!

Still, for those of us who cannot help but piece together possible rapture scenarios based on the calendar, the notion of a spring Jubilee is something to factor into the calculus.

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NOTES:

1. That the biblical years begin and end in the spring is reinforced in 2 Samuel. Compare the following translations (KJV vs. RSV) of the same verse (11:1), which, together, indicate spring as the time when the year expires:

“And it came to pass, *after the year was expired*, at the time when kings go forth to battle...” (2 Sam. 11:1 KJV).

“*In the spring of the year*, the time when kings go forth to battle...” (2 Sam. 11:1 RSV).

2. Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus said, “In Tishrei the world was created ... on New Year the bondage of our ancestors in Egypt ceased, in Nisan they were redeemed but in Tishrei they will be redeemed in the time to come.” However, Rabbi Joshua said that “in Nisan the world was created ... and in Nisan they will be redeemed in the time to come” (*Rosh Hashana* 10B-11A). Both rabbis base their view on the same Scripture describing the creation: “Let the earth put forth grass, herb yielding seed and fruit trees” (Gen. 1:11). R. Eliezer says this refers to Tishrei, the month when the trees bear fruit, while Joshua says it refers to Nisan, when grass begins to grow and the trees sprout. Despite the difference of opinion as to the month creation occurred (spring or fall), these rabbanim of circa 100 AD declared the New Year to be on the first of Tishrei because this festival entails ceremonies, such as sacrifices and the blowing of trumpets, whereas the first of Nisan has no ceremonies attached.

<http://www.ipost.com/Opinion/Op-Ed-Contributors/Why-is-Rosh-Hashana-in-the-autumn>
<http://juchre.org/talmud/rosh/rosh.htm>

3. The rabbis might argue otherwise. They point to the phrase “at the beginning of the year” (Ezekiel 40:1), which is *Rosh Hashanah* in Hebrew and assume that “the tenth of the month” in the same verse refers to *Yom Kippur*. Thus, “the beginning of the year” is connected to a fall feast. Critics point out, however, that the notion that the “tenth of the month” refers to *Yom Kippur* is an unwarranted assumption and also that *Yom Kippur*, according to even the rabbis own view, is not the beginning of the year—Tishrei 1 is.

4. Examples of the Karaite perspective as to why the biblical years should be reckoned from the spring:

<https://www.karaiteinsights.com/article/this-month-shall-be>
<https://www.nehemiaswall.com/yom-teruah-day-shouting-became-rosh-hashanah>

5. Tractate *Rosh Hashanah*, Chapter 1, Mishna 1 states: “Four New Years are there: on the first of Nisan is the New Year for kings and holidays, on the first of Elul is the New Year for animal tithes, ... on the first of Tishrei is the New Year for years, shemita, Jubilee, planting and vegetables. On the first of Shevat is the New Year for trees ...”

6. <http://biblehub.com/daniel/7-25.htm> (See NASB and JPS Tanakh 1917.)

7. As an interesting aside, the notion of the Jubilee beginning on Nisan 1, 2016 sheds a potentially different (more significant) light on the total solar eclipse that occurred exactly one year earlier, on Nisan 1, 2015.