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SOME STAGES OF THE JEWISH CALENDAR

By SOLOMON ZEITLIN *

The study of the Jewish calendar is important not only for students of history and chronology, but also for students of religion—Jewish and Christian, since the calendar in question was used in the Bible and in the time of Jesus. We are told that Jesus was crucified on the first day of Passover or on the eve of Passover, on a Friday, and arose on the third day which was Sunday. We know also that in the first three centuries of the present era, the early Christians had not yet separated themselves from the Jews and still kept their festivals according to the Jewish calendar.

The calendar which was used by the early Hebrews was a lunar one. This is indicated by the word for month, which is *Jerach*, and it derived from the word *Iorach* which means moon. This calendar was calculated according to the lunar system of the neighbors of the Hebrews, the Phoenecians. The moon's phases are more easily observed by primitive peoples than the positions of the stars, or the still more difficult observations of the equinoxes and solstices. The word *Jerach* appears in the Bible only a few times. In the first Book of Kings, the months *Jerach Ziv*, *Jerach Ethanim*, and *Jerach Bul* are mentioned, but the editor adds that these are the second month, the seventh month, and the eighth month, respectively. From this we can conclude that *Ziv*, *Ethanim* and *Bul*, were no longer familiar to the Jews at the period of the compilation of the Book of Kings.

I venture to say that the calendar which was used by the Jews in the Biblical period was a solar one. This can be inferred not only from the fact that the Bible never mentions an intercalated

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month, but from direct Bible reference to the fact that the year consisted of twelve months. We are told, in the Book of Kings, that King Solomon "had twelve officers over all Israel. . . . each man had to make provision for a month in the year." (I Kings 4:7). Likewise, the author of Chronicles tells us that David had divided the officers that served the King into twelve divisions which came in and went out month by month throughout all the months of the year. (I Chronicles 27: 1-15) In the story of the flood, in Genesis, we find that the flood started on the twenty-seventh day of the second month, (so according to the Septuagint), and that the ark rested on the mountain of Ararat on the twenty-seventh day of the seventh month, which was after one hundred and fifty days. This is to say that the month had thirty days, which means, again, that the calendar of the Bible was a solar one. In a solar calendar, the day could not have started from the evening, according to the current practice in the Jewish calendar, but from sunrise; and that is the meaning of the verse, "there was evening and there was morning, the first day," that is to say, from sunrise to sunrise constituted one day, divided into two parts—day and night. This opinion was already expressed by a famous Rabbi in the twelfth century, the Rashbam. As to the statement in Leviticus 23, that the fast on the Day of Atonement should be from evening to the evening, we believe the meaning is not that the Jews had started the day with the evening, but that the law had ordained they should fast on the tenth day of the month and on the ninth thereof, so that the fast consisted of two half-parts of two consecutive days. This system of beginning the days with the morning was also practised by the Chaldeans according to the testimony of Pliny the Elder: "Ipsum diem alii aliter observavere; Babylonii inter duos solis exortus."

Seven days constituted a week and was called *Shabua*. The seventh day of the week was called Sabbath and considered holy, as God had rested from the work which He had created in six days. A month, *Hodesh*, consisted of thirty days. The word

Hodesh means new—probably referring to the new moon, although the months were no longer lunar months, and even the word *Jerach* (derived from the word *Iorach*—moon) was no longer in use. The month was now called *Hodesh*. It is worthwhile noting that the same inconsistency characterizes our present usage, when we say the *months* July and August, etc., although the word month is from the root moon, while our months are not according to the moon. A more striking parallel is to be found in the Russian calendar, a solar one, where the word for month, *mesat*, is also the word for moon. The Greek usage is similar. The Jews had no specific names for the months; they called them the first, second, third, etc. Neither had they any names for the days of the week, but numbered them, excepting the seventh day which was called Sabbath.

The year was divided into four divisions according to the seasons, and began in the spring. A year consisted of twelve months—thirty days each. Twelve times thirty make three hundred and sixty, but the year according to their conception consisted of three hundred and sixty-five days. They therefore added four days every year. The Egyptians added five days every year at the close of the year, after the month of Messori. These five days were called by the Coptics, the "little month," and by the early Greeks, the "intercalated month." The Israelites, on the other hand, added a special day every three months, in the first month, the fourth month, the seventh month, and the tenth month, (cp. Jubilees 6: 23, 27-30; Enoch 75: 1.) The reason for having the four days divided in this order, and not in that of the Egyptians and the Greeks, is that the Jews wanted to have the holidays on the same day of the week every year. They not only wished to *keep the days of the week intact, as they existed in the first week of the Creation*, but also that the holidays should fall on the same day of the week as when they were first instituted; that is to say, the spring holiday, Passover, should always fall on a Sunday and the autumn holiday, the Feast of Tabernacles, also on a Sunday.

The year was still short one day. To remedy this there was instituted the cycle of forty-nine years. After seven Sabbatical cycles, making forty-nine years, on the fiftieth year, between the day of the Great Fast and the festival of Succot, they added forty-nine days. These forty-nine days were called the *Jubilee year*, a year of *Release*, when the slaves were set free, the land which had been sold was returned to its original owners and liberty was proclaimed throughout the land unto all the inhabitants. Hence this Jubilee year was merely a part of the fiftieth year and its purpose was to add the forty-nine days of which the calendar was by this time short. This Jubilee year was announced and proclaimed on the Day of Atonement, as this day was the most solemn day in the Jewish calendar.

This conclusion, namely, that there was no full Jubilee year, but that it was only a part of the fiftieth year, consisting of forty-nine days or seven weeks, beginning with the Sunday after the Day of Atonement and up to the day before the festival of Succot, is based on the following: First, there is no mention in the entire Tannaitic literature of the existence of a Jubilee *year* as such. If there had really ever been a Jubilee *year*, the Rabbis would not have abolished it. The student of Jewish history knows that the Rabbis never abrogated any ancient law or custom, as the Jewish law was considered Divine, and Divine law could not be abrogated. When the Rabbis saw that some Halaka, for one reason or another, could not be harmonized with life, they did not abrogate it, but amended and interpreted it in the spirit of the law. To cite only one example out of many: According to the Biblical law, no one had the right to go out of his "place" on the Sabbath day. But that was impossible to observe in the days of the Second Commonwealth. The Rabbis therefore interpreted the word *Makom*—place, to mean "house," and later to mean "city," and even instituted the *erub*, Sabbath journey, to harmonize the laws of Sabbath with life. If the Jubilee year was really in existence and was very hard for the Jews to observe, the Rabbis would

have amended the law or modified it, but would not have abolished the institution itself, as they did with the laws of the Sabbatical year. They *amended* the laws of *Shemita*, but the Sabbatical years were never abolished; and therefore we may say with certainty that, since we do not find this process in the case of the supposed "Jubilee year," there was no Jubilee year.

In the second place, we know that the Jews, during the Second Commonwealth, observed the Sabbatical years, and we know the exact dates from the Tannaitic literature, from Josephus and from the first Book of Maccabees—and all the sources agree. According to the sources, the year 3829 A.M., i.e., 68-69 C.E. was a Sabbatical year. 3829 is divisible into seven. We know also that the year 3724 A.M., i.e., 38-37 B.C., was a Sabbatical year. 3724 is divisible into seven. Furthermore, from the year 3724 to 3829 are 105 years. 105 is again divisible into seven, and thus all the Sabbatical cycles can be divided into seven. But would this division be possible, if every fifty years an extra year was inserted? To my mind this proves conclusively that the Jews did not have any full Jubilee year.

Again, the author of the Book of Jubilees, who stressed very much the observance of the Sabbatical and the Jubilee years, counts the Jubilee cycle forty-nine years and not fifty. For example: He says that Noah lived 950 years, which were nineteen Jubilees and two weeks of years and five years. Nineteen times forty-nine make 931; two times seven, fourteen; 931, fourteen and five, make 950. He also tells us that Abraham lived 175 years which were three Jubilees and four weeks of years (four Sabbatical cycles). Three times forty-nine make 147; four times seven, twenty eight; 147 and twenty-eight make 175. Thus even the author of the Book of Jubilees did not know of the existence of a special year which is called a Jubilee year.

I believe, furthermore, that even from the account which is given in the Bible about the Sabbatical and the Jubilee years it may be seen that there was not a special Jubilee year. In Leviti-

cus 25, after we are told that the Jews were not allowed to work on the land in this seventh year which should be a Sabbath to the land, the Lawgiver goes on to tell us that in the fiftieth year the Jews were likewise not allowed to work on the land. Then in verse 20: "And if ye shall say: 'What shall we eat the seventh year? behold, we may not sow, nor gather in our increase'; then I will command My blessing upon you in the sixth year, and it shall bring forth produce for the three years." That is, for the sixth, for the seventh, and for the eighth, until the new crops. Now if the Lawgiver had really in mind a Jubilee year as a special year, the question should be asked, how shall we find food in the two consecutive years on which we are not allowed to sow; and the answer should be that God will give His specially fruitful blessing for four years, not for three years, for the forty-eighth—the pre-Sabbatic; the forty-ninth—the Sabbatic; the fiftieth—the Jubilee; and the fifty-first until the new crops.

It seems to me quite possible to translate verse 8 in Leviticus 25, as follows: ". . . and there shall be unto thee the days of seven weeks ('Sabbaths') of years, nine and forty a year." Furthermore, I think that my theory about the Jubilee year can be substantiated by a statement of R. Judah, who lived in the second century C. E. His statement is that the fiftieth year consists of two parts (of the year itself) and also of a *Jubilee* year. Obviously this must refer to a number of days within the year.

This solar calendar which we have discussed previously, was in existence among the Jews before the Exile. During their stay in Babylon they became acquainted with another calendar system, namely the Chaldean, which was a lunar-solar system. In this the month was regulated according to the moon, and the year according to the sun.

The Jews, after their return from Babylon, perceived that their own calendar was not only a complicated one, requiring the addition of a day every three months, and of forty-nine days at the

end of every forty-nine years, but also an imperfect one, since the year does not have three hundred and sixty-five days, as they first thought, but three hundred sixty-five and a quarter. They accordingly changed their calendar into the lunar-solar, in which, the month was theoretically one of twenty-nine and a half days. In practice one month had twenty-nine days and the following thirty, and so on. They also introduced names for the months, which they had learned from the Babylonians. The months were no more called by numbers, but by names like *Nisan*, *Iyar*, *Sivan*, etc. These names of the months appear only in the post-Exilic literature. Whenever the names of the months are given in the Book of Esther and Zechariah, the editors add respectively, that this is the first month, the ninth, the twelfth, etc. In the same manner, as we have noticed before, when the month of *Ziv* was given in the Book of Kings, the editor adds, "that is, the second month." As *Ziv* was no more known and had to be explained, so in the post-Exilic period *Nisan* had not as yet come into popular usage, and the editor had to explain which month, by number, was meant.

In order to adjust the lunar months to the solar year, they intercalated from time to time a special month of thirty days. This kept the festivals in the proper season of the year—Passover after the vernal equinox, and Tabernacles after the autumn equinox. Although the Jews kept intact the seven days of the week as they had been in the first week of the Creation, they abandoned the idea that the holidays should always fall on the same day of the week. They thought it more important to have the festivals in the proper seasons of the year than on the established days of the week. Furthermore, the festival of Shabuot (Weeks), which according to the Bible has no fixed date of the month, they arranged on the fiftieth day after the first day of Passover without regard to any special day of the week.

With this change, the forty-nine days which were added every forty-nine years to the fiftieth year and were called "Jubilee

year" disappeared entirely, and consequently the laws connected with the institution also disappeared. The Rabbis interpreted the laws of the Jubilee year to refer only to the period when all the twelve tribes were in Palestine, but not after the exile of the ten tribes. This change of the calendar aroused great protest among the Jews, as we can see from the Book of Jubilees. The author of this book accused those Jews who regulated their years by observance of the moon, of disturbing the times and the seasons, and profaning the holidays, the months and the Jubilee years. (Jubilees Chap. 6). Furthermore, the author of the Book of Jubilees complained against the leaders of the Jews, that with changing the calendar from a solar to a lunar one and intercalating a month, they had made months to the number of thirteen instead twelve, which was supposed to be according to the number of the Jewish tribes. (*Ibid.* 25).

(That the book of Jubilees is a very early compilation we may see from the Halakot recorded in it. Some of the Halakot are as old as the laws of the Pentateuch. I believe that the Book of Jubilees is, in fact, an apocryphon to the Five Books of Moses.)

To make this calendar more regular and systematic, they adopted from the Greek usage the eight-cycle system; that is to say, they intercalated three months in the course of every eight years. This system was adopted in preference to the Metonic cycle. The reason for the preference was that by the Metonic system, in each seventh year one would have to intercalate a month, thus putting the Jews to the hard necessity of intercalating a month in the Sabbatical year as well as in the post-Sabbatical year. They therefore adopted the Greek system, adding a month in the sixth year (which is a pre-Sabbatic), in the fourth and in the second. This is according to the testimony of Julius Africanus and agrees with what we know from the Tannaitic literature about intercalations. They also changed the New Year from the spring to the fall. The reasons for this change are, first: All the nations at that time counted their years from the fall.

Secondly, by changing the New Year to the fall, the Jews, at that time largely an agricultural people, made the beginning of the Sabbatical year, traditionally in the fall, to coincide with the beginning of the regular year. As to the Biblical phrase that the month of the *Abib*, that is, the month of the spring, is the first month, the Rabbis interpreted this to mean that the month of the *Abib* (*Nisan*) is first in the counting of the months, but that the civil year actually begins with the fall (*Tishri*).

Some scholars are of the opinion that the Jews had other New Years. They hold that the 10th of Tishri was considered the beginning of the year. This idea was supported by Dr. Morgenstern in an article on "The Three Calendars of Ancient Israel." I believe, however, that this idea, which is based on a passage in Ezekiel (40:1), is no valid. The passage reads as follows: "In the five and twentieth year of our captivity, in the beginning of the year, in the tenth day of the month. . . ." The "beginning of the year" does not, I believe, refer at all to *Tishri*. It has reference to a New Year of an era counted from the captivity, and it would therefore refer to *the tenth day of the month Ab*. Thus, in the Greek translation of Symmachus we read, "the *fifth* month, in the tenth day thereof." The fifth month is *Ab*.

Such was the state of the Jewish calendar during the Second Commonwealth up to the fourth century. This calendar is that of the New Testament. The festival of Passover which Jesus celebrated and the Pentecost for whose celebration Paul went to Jerusalem, were according to this calendar. The early Christians, in the first three centuries of the present era, kept the festivals according to the same calendar. Passover was observed after the vernal equinox on the full moon, and Pentecost, on the fiftieth day after Passover.

The early Christians who accepted Sunday as the day of rest instead of Saturday, did not change the order of the days of the week. They merely changed the Sabbath from the seventh

day to the first day of the week, the "Lord's Day." Thus Justin Martyr: "On the first day of the week God made the world, and Jesus Christ, our Saviour, on the same day rose from the dead." In the Apostolic Age, the Christians observed both the Jewish Sabbath and Sunday, the Lord's day. In the Epistle of Ignatius (30-107 C.E.) to the Magnesians, he says: "After the observance of the Sabbath, let every friend of Christ keep the Lord's day as a festival, the Resurrection day, the queen and the chief of all the days." Likewise, the early Christians kept the Preparation day, that is Friday, as a fast day on which day Jesus was crucified. We see that the order of the week was kept intact by the Jews as well as by the Christians from time immemorial.

In the fourth century of the present era, the Jewish calendar underwent a further modification. During the time of the Second Commonwealth, the month was fixed according to witnesses who testified to the appearance of the moon. But after the destruction of the Temple that became impossible. The Festival of Weeks still sometimes fell on the fifth of *Sivan* and sometimes on the sixth and sometimes on the seventh. If the months *Iyar* and *Sivan* were intercalated, Shabuot fell on the fifth. If they were defective, it was on the seventh. If one was intercalated and the other defective, the Festival fell on the sixth. To fix this holiday so that it should fall on a certain date of the month, they arranged the calendar so that one month should be of thirty days and one of twenty-nine days. To prevent some holidays from falling on days which would make the observance hard for the Jews (for example, if the seventh day of Tabernacles should fall on Sabbath the Jews would not be able to carry the willow, and if the Day of Atonement should fall on a Friday or on a Sunday, the breaking of the fast was complicated), the rabbis arranged that in some years the months of *Heshvan*, *Kislev* and *Tebet* should consist of thirty days each. Such a year was called a *full year*. In some years these three months had twenty-nine days each. Such a year

was called defective. Again, some years were fixed so that *Heshvan* should consist of twenty-nine, *Kislev* of thirty and *Tebet* of twenty-nine. Such a year was called *normal*. In this way it was arranged that the first day of the New Year should not fall on Sunday, Wednesday, or Friday, for if the first day of the New Year fell on Sunday—the seventh day of Tabernacles would fall on Saturday; if the New Year fell on Wednesday—the Day of Atonement would fall on Friday; if the New Year fell on Friday, the Day of Atonement would fall on Sunday. In the fixed calendar, consequently, if the New Year cannot fall on the days indicated by אדו, *Adhu*, then Passover cannot fall on the days denoted by בדו, *Badhu*. Nowadays the mnemonic *Badhu* has become more familiar, owing to the fact that in connection therewith the *At-Basb* series possesses significance. We refer to the formula that states:

א"ח The day on which the first day א of Passover falls, on that day also falls the Ninth of Ab ת.

ב"ש The day on which the second day ב of Passover falls, on that day also falls Pentecost ש.

ג"ד The day on which the third day ג of Passover falls, on that day also falls the New Year ד.

ד"ק The day on which the fourth day ד of Passover falls, on that day also falls the Rejoicing of the Law ק.

ה"צ The day on which the fifth day ה of Passover falls, on that day also falls the Day of Atonement צ.

In order to adjust the lunar year to the solar, they abandoned the old system of intercalation—three months of thirty days in the course of eight years—and adopted now the nineteen-year cycle, that is to say, they intercalated every third, sixth, eighth, eleventh, fourteenth, seventeenth and nineteenth years.