

# Why God Counts the Years From Nisan—and Why It Matters

By T.W. Tramm

IN EXODUS, God instructs Moses to number the years from the month of Nisan:

*“The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in Egypt, ‘This month [of Passover] is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year...’”* (Ex. 12:1, 2).

It’s important to note that nowhere in Scripture does God modify or retract His command to count the years from the month of Nisan, nor does He instruct Israel to observe a *second* New Year in the fall.

Why, then, is a fall New Year observed in modern Israel?

The path was paved millennia ago. The Hebrew patriarchs who lived in Canaan observed the calendar of the Canaanites who reckoned the years from the fall. Later, during the time in Egypt, the Hebrews observed the Egyptian calendar, which had a fall starting point as well.

A more recent influence was the Babylonian culture in which the Israelites were immersed during the exile. The Babylonians celebrated the New Year festival of “Akitu” twice a year, once at the beginning of their month called “Nisanu” in the spring, and once at the beginning of their month called “Tashritu” in the fall.

Centuries of exposure to pagan calendars led, eventually, to the Jews incorporating foreign elements into the biblical calendar. Evidence of Israel’s adoption of non-biblical elements is the use of the Babylonian month-names, Nisan, Tishrei, etc., even though God assigns no names to the months in Scripture, they are simply numbered, the “first month,” the “second month,” etc.

“DO NOT ADD ANYTHING TO WHAT I COMMAND YOU...” (DEUT. 4:2)

That the fall New Year is not biblical but, rather, an added feature to God’s calendar is evidenced by the fact that nowhere in the Bible is Tishrei 1 referred to as Rosh Hashanah, or “head of the year.” The first time we see Tishrei 1 called Rosh Hashanah is in the Mishna (Jewish code of law) compiled by the rabbis in 200 AD.

Citing the Lord’s command to not add to His Word, the Karaite sect of Judaism utterly rejects the notion of a fall New Year. Beginning the year at Tishrei is seen as a pagan-inspired custom deriving from Israel’s time in Babylon and perpetuated by the rabbis.

The Samaritans concur. They thus preserve the biblical name *Yom Teruah* for Tishrei 1 and do not recognize it as “*Rosh Hashanah*,” or head of the year.

Despite the fact that the Tishrei New Year is nowhere explicitly mentioned in Scripture, proponents contend that it’s *implied* in certain verses.

#### ARGUMENTS FROM SCRIPTURE

One verse cited as supporting a fall New Year 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).

It’s crucial to understand that the word translated “end” in this verse is the Hebrew *tekufah*, referring to the turn of the seasons that occurs at both the spring and fall equinoxes. The NIV properly renders the word *tekufah* “turn”: “*Celebrate the Festival of Ingathering at the turn of the year*” (v. 22 paraphr). Thus, the verse cited as linking the fall harvest to the “end” of the year is, in reality, merely linking the harvest to the *equinox*.

The most frequently cited passage in support of a fall New Year is the jubilee command in Leviticus:

*“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).

Fall New-Year proponents contend that since the jubilee trumpet is sounded on the Day of Atonement, the jubilee year must *begin* at this time as well. However, the day on which the trumpet is sounded has nothing to do with the start point of the year. The Day of Atonement is simply the day God has chosen to announce, or declare, the approaching Jubilee.<sup>1</sup> It’s fitting that the Day of Atonement, a.k.a. Judgment Day, was chosen to announce the impending Jubilee as the fulfillment of the “year of redemption,” presumably our physical redemption at the Rapture, is a precursor to Israel’s time of judgment, or Jacob’s Trouble.

A verse in Ezekiel is cited as supporting a fall New Year:

*“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).

Here, “the tenth of the month” is assumed to be a reference to the Day of Atonement on Tishrei 10. This assertion, however, rests solely on a pre-existing belief that the “beginning of the year” is in the fall. Aside from the preconceived notion that years begin in the fall, there is no reason to assume that the tenth of the month, here, refers to anything other than the tenth day of the month of Passover, which is Nisan.

Some 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).*

Because sowing, a fall activity, represents the start point of the agricultural cycle, it’s reasoned that the *year* should start in the fall as well. But Scripture doesn’t link the start of the agricultural cycle to the start of the year. In fact, in the chapter of Leviticus which details the agricultural-themed festivals, it’s explicitly stated that the *first month of the year* is Nisan (Lev. 23:4).

#### THE RABBIS SAY

A fundamental principle of the fall New Year tradition is the belief that the world was created in Tishrei. The idea is that since “time,” and thus the reckoning of years, began at Tishrei, the *end* of time will occur at Tishrei as well. The problem with this view is that, according to rabbinic tradition, the world was *also* created on Nisan 1, in the spring! The truth is that opinions diverge among the rabbis as to when the world was created (spring vs. fall).<sup>2</sup>

Even granting the notion that Creation occurred at Tishrei, there is no way to know how events like the Fall at Eden and, later, the Flood effected the mechanism of the cosmos and, consequently, *time*. Assuming our solar system represented a perfectly calibrated clock at the time of Creation, we understand this is no longer the case. With the degraded cosmic clock in view, it’s possible that the spring New Year was a “synchronization” intended to put us on track concerning the reckoning of time and the end of the age. It’s also possible that God’s spring New-Year declaration was a *reassertion* of an ancient truth obscured by pagan calendars—that Creation occurred in the spring.

How do the rabbis reconcile the fall New Year with the command in Exodus to count the years from the spring? The contention is that the decree to observe Nisan as the first month applies only to *religious matters*, i.e., the festivals. According to the rabbis, Moses decided that, for things pertaining to selling and buying and other ordinary affairs, the years should continue to be numbered from the fall. The problem with this explanation is that there is no evidence supporting it. There is not the slightest hint anywhere in Scripture that Moses decided to keep numbering the years from the fall or that a dual

calendar reckoning system, with two distinct series of months in use for different purposes at the same time, was ever in place.<sup>3</sup>

The only New Year mentioned in the Bible is Nisan 1, starting at the Exodus. This means that *every year* mentioned in Scripture post-Exodus, including the weeks, or sabbatical cycles, of Daniel's Messiah prophecy (9:24-27), have a *Nisan* starting point. This is confirmed in Ezra and Nehemiah where the decrees granting the Jews' freedom to return to Jerusalem were issued on Nisan 1.<sup>4</sup>

That Daniel's prophetic weeks begin in the spring is crucial because, owing to the popular fall mindset, many expect the Church Age to conclude in the month of Tishrei. However, the template established by Daniel's already fulfilled weeks confirms that God's prophetic timespans begin in the spring. Assuming the pattern holds, we might expect the unfulfilled weeks of Daniel to have a spring start and/or end point as well.

The bottom line is that, regardless of when Creation occurred or how the ancient Hebrews reckoned years before Israel became a nation, God instructs us in Scripture to count years from the *spring*. One has to trust that this command was intended not to obscure the truth concerning the correct start/end point of the years and prophetic timelines but, rather, to *reveal* the truth about the Lord's timing.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In summary, there is one thing that all arguments for the fall New-Year position have in common: they are based on inference and assumption rather than any explicit or definitive verse of Scripture. This is why the explanations for the fall view tend to be lengthy and complicated. In contrast, the case for the spring New Year and Jubilee is made by citing a single verse:

*"[The] month [of Passover] is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year..."* (Ex. 12: 2).

The fall New Year in Judaism, familiar due to past adherence and exposure to the calendars of the Canaanites, Egyptians, and Babylonians, found its way into the rabbinic literature to become part of Hebrew culture. The rabbis misconstrued key scriptures to support the fall New Year and put a constraint on God's command to count Nisan the first month by asserting this does not apply to the numbering of years.

Incidentally, when we strip away the Babylonian month names and identify the months simply by number, as God does, it becomes apparent how ludicrous it is to have a calendar system in which the month the Lord calls "the first month of the year" is not actually the first month of the year. Instead, the *seventh* month of the year is supposed to be the first month.

That the biblical New year has become muddled is not surprising in view of Satan's desire to "change the appointed times" and "sacred seasons" (Dan. 7:25). Unfortunately, Christians who study the calendar, even respected scholars, have largely accepted without challenging the rabbinical teaching of a dual

calendar system, thus inheriting the onerous task of explaining why there are *two* Jewish New years and why the “first month” is not really the first month of the year but, rather, the *seventh* month is the first month of the year.

God is not the author of confusion (1 Cor. 14:33). If He intended that we observe the seventh month as the first month of the year, we can rest assured it would be mentioned in at least one verse of Scripture—yet it is not. The fact is that there is no mention whatsoever of a fall New Year in the Bible, only in the written traditions of the rabbis.

Is it *possible* that the original New Year, i.e. day one of Creation, was in the fall? Sure. Is it *conceivable* that a fall New Year was sanctioned by God at some point in the distant past? Certainly. However, even granting that the first “New Year” was in the fall, when Israel became a nation 3500 years ago, the Lord established Nisan 1 as the *only* New Year. Therefore, to number years from the fall, even based on the highly disputable notion that Tishrei is when time began, is to be in disagreement with God’s calendar as set forth in His word. To be in disagreement with God’s calendar is to be ignorant of His timing.

While it’s clear in Scripture that the Lord counts years from the spring, the truth has been obscured by centuries of manmade tradition. It seems the Lord issued a reminder of the true New Year in 2015—an exceedingly rare total solar eclipse on Nisan 1—yet due to the prevalence of the Tishrei/fall tradition, many missed the memo.

Why does it matter when the biblical year begins and ends?

A fundamental belief in eschatology is that the end of the Church Age will correspond to the end of the 6,000<sup>th</sup> year of biblical history. If one believes that the year ends in the autumn when, in actuality, it ends in the spring, he is liable to be caught napping when the Bridegroom appears.

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#### NOTES:

1. Sounding the trumpet on the Day of Atonement in the 49<sup>th</sup> year also serves the practical purpose of allowing time to make preparations for the transfer and release of property and persons that occurs in the jubilee year.

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 *"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.

3. One scholar notes: "It is confidently affirmed by the rabbis that the divine command to their forefathers to number the months of their year from the month in which they went out of Egypt referred only to religious matters; and that for civil purposes the year was still considered as beginning in Tishrei. This account is as ancient as Josephus .... *"Moses appointed that Nisan should be the first month for their festivals because he brought them out of Egypt in that month: so that this month began the year, as to all the solemnities (feasts) they observed to the honour of God; although he preserved the original order of the months, as to selling and buying, and other ordinary affairs"* (Joseph. Antiq. Lib i. c.2. s.3.). To this statement it may be objected that a double computation by two distinct series of months, in use for different purposes at the same time, is nowhere mentioned in the sacred history; nor does Moses give the least intimation that the new commencement of the year was restricted to religious solemnities" .... "The notion of a double commencement of the ancient Jewish New year has been adopted by many Christian writers .... [However] the only passage of Scripture cited in support of this assertion is the command respecting the Jubilee" (John Allen, *Modern Judaism: Or a Brief Account of the Opinions, Traditions, Rites, & Ceremonies of the Jews in Modern Times*, Forgotten Books, pp. 359, 360).

4. There are actually two biblical decrees commonly applied to Daniel 9:25. The first decree was issued in 457 BC by the Persian King Artaxerxes to Ezra (Ezra 7). The second decree was issued in 444 BC by the same King Artaxerxes to Nehemiah (Neh. 2). Both decrees were issued on Nisan 1: In Ezra chapter 7 Artaxerxes gives permission to Ezra to lead a band of exiles back to Jerusalem. In verse 9 Ezra begins his journey from Babylon to Jerusalem *"on the first day of the first month,"* or Nisan 1. In Nehemiah 2 the second (444 BC) decree by Artaxerxes is issued on Nisan 1 as well (v. 1). While only the *month* of the Nehemiah decree is specified, it's commonly understood that in the absence of a date it is the first day of the month being referred to. Incidentally, Scripture gives no date for the 537/538 Cyrus decree.

#### MISCELLANEOUS NOTES:

- Biblically, spring is the time of new beginnings, resurrection, ascension, the grain harvest, and is the time when kings go forth. Additionally, spring is when God's people are released from bondage in Egypt and Babylon (Exodus; Ezra 7; Nehemiah. 2). The fall is a pivotal time in the Lord's prophetic plan as well, though in a different way: fall is a time of judgment and collapse.

- 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).

The first translation makes clear that Kings go to battle at the expiration of the year. The second translation makes clear that Kings go to battle in the *spring*. Thus, the years expire in spring.