

# Calendars in the Dead Sea Scrolls

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*Liturgy was a crucial part of Qumran life. But to sanctify life it is necessary to sanctify the year. For this reason, it was important that the calendar should not only be in accordance with the progress of the stars and the seasons, but also be based on a revealed tradition. Today, we know that this was one of the controversial issues between the Qumran group and the rest of the Israelites.*

*By James C. VanderKam, Professor, University of Notre Dame*

SOME OF THE FIRST DEAD SEA SCROLLS to be found in 1947 suggested to scholars that issues having to do with the religious calendar were important to the writers of the texts. For example, the *Community Rule*, a work that describes the basic beliefs and practices of the group, stipulates, "They shall not depart from any command of God concerning their times; they shall be neither early nor late for any of their appointed times" (column 1 lines 14–15).

The *Commentary on Habakkuk* provided another type of evidence that the group differed from their contemporaries in calculating the timing of at least one important holiday, the Day of Atonement. In a comment on *Habakkuk* 2:15, which he read as saying "woe to him who causes his neighbor to drink, who pours out his venom to make them drunk that he may gaze on their feasts," the expositor writes, "interpreted, this concerns the Wicked Priest who pursued the Teacher of Righteousness to the house of his exile that he might confuse him with his venomous fury. And at the time appointed for rest, the Day of Atonement, he appeared before them to confuse them, and to cause them to stumble on the Day of Fasting, their Sabbath of repose" (column 11 lines 4–8). The Wicked Priest seems to have been the reigning high priest, and, according to biblical law, he had many duties in the sanctuary on the Day of Atonement (see *Leviticus* 16). In addition, this was also a day on which all work, as well as travel, was prohibited. So, if he was the high priest, he would not have been able to travel to the place where the Teacher of Righteousness, the leader of the group behind the scrolls, had gone for refuge. All of this led scholars to the conclusion that the Wicked Priest and the Teacher of Righteousness observed the Day of Atonement—dated

by the Bible to the tenth day of the seventh month—at different times, and that they therefore employed different calendars. The Qumran commentary may be suggesting as much when it refers to the day as "their Sabbath of repose."

With the discovery of more texts in the early 1950s, especially the ones from Qumran Cave 4, the information about calendrical matters increased exponentially. It had been known from texts available before the scroll discoveries that Jews in antiquity had used more than one calendar. There was, of course, the one familiar from rabbinic texts. According to it, each month had 29 or 30 days (that is, they were true lunar months), and the beginning of the month was determined on the basis of the testimony of reliable witnesses who reported having sighted the new moon. The lunar months were augmented by intercalation, the purpose of which was to bring the lunar system more into harmony with the solar year. This was important because several festivals that are precisely dated in the Bible are tied to specific harvest seasons. So, for example, the festival of booths, celebrated in the seventh month from the fifteenth to the twenty-first (= 7/15–21), marked the end of the harvest season in the early autumn. If one used only lunar months, every twelve months the calendar would fall behind the solar year (which determines the seasons) by ten or eleven days, with the result that in just a few years the festivals and their corresponding harvest seasons would be far separated from one another. In order to retain the scriptural connections between harvests and holidays, the lunar calendar was supplemented by an extra month approximately every third year (seven times in nineteen years). In this way, the shortfall would be remedied regularly and the proper seasonal associations secured.

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## Solar Calendars and Apocryphal Texts

In two other texts known before the scrolls were found, *1 Enoch* and *Jubilees*, another calendar appeared—a solar one with 364 days per year. Each quarter of the year contains 91 days and consists of months having 30, 30, and 31 days. In *1 Enoch* 72–82 (chapters called the “Astronomical Book of Enoch”) the 364-day calendar is described in some detail, and it is placed side-by-side with a lunar calendar in which months have alternately 29 and 30 days for a total of 354 days in a twelve-month period. For neither of these calendars does the “Astronomical Book” provide a method of intercalation to bring it into line with a true solar year. The author simply notes the difference between the two and gives no indication that he was aware a solar year actually lasts about 365.25 days. In this text both calendars are revealed to Enoch, the seventh person from Adam, by a holy angel named Uriel; neither the solar nor the lunar system is presented as superior to the other. The “Astronomical Book” was written no later than about 200 BCE, which is the approximate date of the earliest Aramaic copy of the book from Qumran Cave 4.

Matters are quite different in the *Book of Jubilees*. It was written in Hebrew around 160 BCE and packages itself as a revelation to Moses from an angel of the presence, who reads the contents of the book to Moses from heavenly tablets. Moses is supposed to have received all of the information in the book (a rewritten version of Genesis 1–Exodus 24) while he was on Mt. Sinai, directly after the covenant had been renewed. The details of the calendar were disclosed to Moses in connection with the story about the flood. The deluge account is the only place in Genesis–Exodus that has a heavy concentration of exact dates. For example, 600th year, the second month, the seventeenth day (Genesis 7:11), and it ended for the occupants of the ark the next year on 2/27 (Genesis 8:14). In other versions of Genesis, such as the one read by the author of *Jubilees*, the earth became dry on the 2/17, that is exactly one year after the flood began (*Jubilees* 5:31). The fact that the flood lasted one year suggested that its story contained essential information for establishing the proper annual calendar. For this reason the writer of *Jubilees* attached a section about the calendar to the flood narrative. He notes that each of the four seasons has thirteen weeks (= 91 days as in *1 Enoch*; see *Jubilees* 6:29) and adds: “All the days of the commandments will be 52 weeks of days; [they will make] the entire year complete. So it has been engraved and ordained on the heavenly tablets. One is not allowed to transgress a single year, year by year. Now you [= Moses] command the Israelites to keep the years in this number—364 days. Then the year will be complete and it will not disturb its time from its days or from its festivals because everything will happen in harmony with their testimony. They will neither omit a day nor disturb a festival” (*Jubilees* 6:30–32).

In some respects the author of *Jubilees*, while sharing the 364-day solar calendar with the writer of *1 Enoch*, takes different positions from those of his predecessor. For example, he dates the biblical festivals according to this calendar (*1 Enoch* does



The *Community Rule* (detail) describes the basic beliefs and practices of the Qumran group.

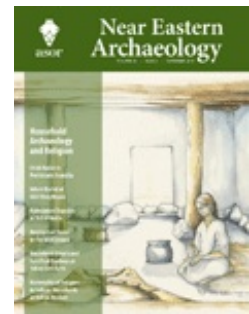
not mention the sabbaths or festivals), and he forbids the use of a lunar calendar. The angel who reveals the book warns that there will be people who “forget the covenantal festivals and walk in the festivals of the nations, after their error and after their ignorance. There will be people who carefully observe the moon with lunar observations because it is corrupt [with respect to] the seasons and is early from year to year by ten days” (6:35–36). Use of a lunar calendar would lead people to consider ordinary days as religious festivals and vice versa, thus mixing the sacred and the profane (6:37). Calendrical deviation would entail that one “err regarding the months, the sabbaths, the festivals, and the jubilee” (6:38). *Jubilees*, like *1 Enoch*, offers no hint that the author advocated any kind of intercalation.

Another way in which *Jubilees* differs from the “Astronomical Book” is that the calendrical discussion in chapter 6 is tied to proper observance of the festival of weeks. This holiday is a crucial one for *Jubilees* because on it the covenant was made and later renewed. In biblical law, nearly all of the festivals are carefully and precisely dated, but one prominent exception is the festival of weeks. The scriptural lists of holidays say only that it was to be celebrated fifty days (hence its Greek name pentecost) after the waving of the barley omer, a ceremony that is also not dated other than that it was to be performed at some point after passover, “on the day after the sabbath” (Leviticus 23:11). There were discussions among Jewish experts

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about the precise meaning of that phrase. Some took it to mean that the omer was to be waved the day after the first day of the festival of unleavened bread (understanding "sabbath" to mean "holiday" as it does in some passages). They therefore celebrated the festival of weeks in the first part of the third month of the year. Jubilees dates the festival of weeks to 3/15 (see, for example, 44:1-5); from this it follows that the writer understood "the day after the sabbath" in Leviticus 23:11 to mean the Sunday following the first sabbath after the conclusion of the festival of unleavened bread (that is, 1/26).

All of this information was available to scholars who, in the early days of Qumran research, were trying to understand and situate the Dead Sea Scrolls. As their study proceeded, it soon became evident that there were a number of connections between the teachings of *1 Enoch/Jubilees*, on the one hand, and the scrolls on the other. For example, both sets of texts interpreted "the sons of God" in Genesis 6:1-4 to be angels who mated with women ("the daughters of men") and fathered monstrous children who caused the great increase in evil that forced God to send the flood. Also, one important Qumran text, the *Damasus Document*, referred to *Jubilees* as an authority in chronological matters (column 16 lines 2-4), and numerous copies of both *1 Enoch* and *Jubilees* were identified in the Qumran caves. Clearly there was some connection. When the calendar documents from Qumran Cave 4 were made available, the nature of that connection became more transparent.

First, some texts from Qumran say or imply that a year lasts 364 days. The clearest evidence comes from the large *Psalms Scroll* from Qumran Cave 11. In a passage that describes King David's poetic compositions, it says: "YHWH gave him an intelligent and brilliant spirit, and he wrote 3600 psalms and 364 songs to sing before the altar for the daily perpetual sacrifice, for all the days of the year; and 52 songs for the Sabbath offerings . . ." (column 27 lines 4-6). The explicit statement from the *Psalms Scroll* (364 songs, one for each day of the year) was reinforced by a number of calendrical texts from Cave 4 which, in varied ways, also indicated that a 364-day year lay behind their calculations. They also showed that, as in *Jubilees*, the festival of weeks was dated to 3/15. In light of these facts it came as something of a surprise that the Qumran library also included a number of documents that are

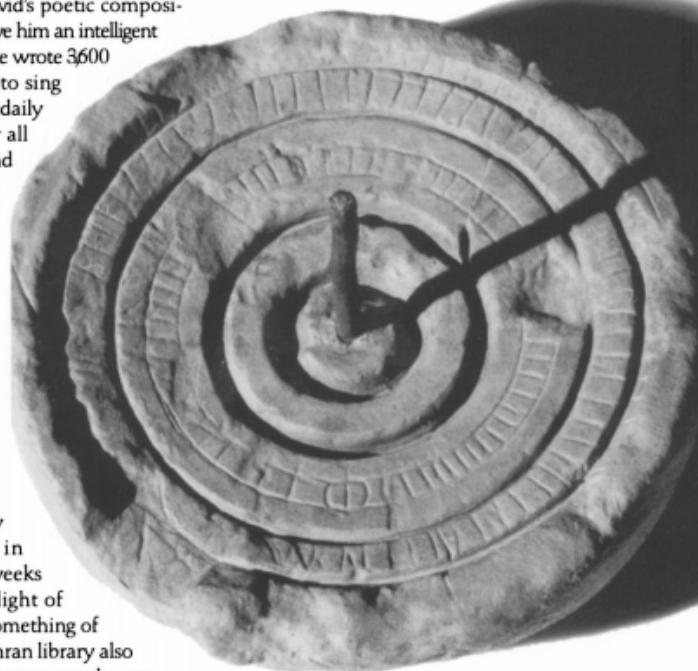
calendrical in nature and that present both a solar and a lunar calendar. In this respect they follow the "Astronomical Book," not the *Book of Jubilees*.

### The non-normative Qumran "Calendar"

The texts from Qumran that are labeled calendars are not calendars in the modern sense of the term: they do not list each day of the year. They are, rather, lists that date recurring phenomena such as sabbaths or festivals. More often, they are lists that coordinate two or more phenomena within a calendrical framework. It will be helpful to examine a few examples of the different types of texts.

**1. Lists dating recurring phenomena.** 4Q327 is a small text with very short lines (just a word or two in each) and is thus list-like even in appearance. In repetitive language it specifies the dates in each month on which a sabbath falls; it apparently did the same for festivals although only two are mentioned in the fragment. The details in the text fit the 364-day calendar, and the preserved portions probably deal with the fifth and sixth months of the year. Another list-like text, 4Q317, provides exact information in fractions (using fourteenths) for how much of the moon's surface is covered or illuminated during the successive nights in a lunar month.

**2. Texts correlating two or more entities within a calendrical framework.** Several Qumran calendar texts not only give dates but also relate them to the names of the priestly divisions. The large number of priests in ancient Israel required that a system be introduced so that only some of them would be on duty in the



*This incised limestone disk (145 mm in diameter and 30 mm thick) was excavated by R. de Vaux at Qumran in the 1950s. In 1996, it was interpreted by two German scholars, Uwe Glessner and Matthias Albani, as an instrument for astronomical measurement and probably was used as a sundial. This may indicate the hours functioning according to the seasons.*



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temple at any one time. 1 Chronicles 24:7–18, part of David's instructions to his son Solomon for the temple and temple service, contains a list of the twenty-four groups into which the priestly families were divided. The Bible does not explain how the system worked, but later sources say that a priestly division or watch would serve in the temple for one week and then would be relieved by the next one on the list. The result was that in a year each priestly watch would be on duty for two weeks ( $24 \times 2 = 48$ ), while a few would have to serve three times to fill the remaining weeks in the year. Since each priestly group served for one week at a time (from sabbath to sabbath), the calendrically inclined apparently saw in this system a way to name the weeks of a year: they would be designated by the name of the priestly division then on duty. Several Qumran texts show precisely this practice at work. If one knows the list of priestly watches and the number of days in each month of the 364-day calendar, one can derive rather interesting information from these seemingly tedious enumerations.

A relatively straightforward example is 4Q320 (fragment 4 column 3). It is part of a section that deals with a cycle of six years, after which a year would begin with the first priestly division on duty again, just as happened in the first year of such a cycle. In the Qumran calendar, each of the twenty-four divisions would serve twice in a year (forty-eight weeks), and four would serve three times (to fill fifty-two weeks); in a six-year period each of the groups would have one year in which they served three times, thus bringing the system back to its beginning after six years. A small part of the 4Q320 reads:

- The first year: its feasts. On the third (day in the week of) Meoziah: the Passover.
- On the 1st (day) [in (the week of) Jedaiah]: the Waving of the [Sheaf].
- On the 5th (day) in (the week of) Seorim: the [Second] Passover.
- On the 1st (day) in (the week of) Jeshua: the Feast of Weeks.

Meoziah (biblical Maaziah) is the last name in the list of twenty-four priestly groups in 1 Chronicles 24. The third day in his week of service (a Tuesday) is passover, which the Bible dates to 1/14. The second holiday is the waving of the sheaf (that is, the omer), the date for which was, as we have seen, a subject of dispute. In this text it falls on the first day of Jedaiah's service. Jedaiah is the second name in the priestly roster. This means that if passover was on the third day of Meoziah, we would have to add the remaining four days of his week, the seven days of Jehoiarib (the first name on the list), and the first day of Jedaiah to reach the date for the waving ceremony:  $14$  (- passover)  $+ 4 + 7 + 1 = 26$ . That is, the text places the waving of the omer on 1/26, just as *Jubilees* implies.

The next holiday, the second passover, is scripturally dated to 2/14, one month after passover itself. Here it occurs on the fifth day of the week of Seorim, the fourth name in the list. If we add the remaining six days of Jedaiah's service, the seven of Harim (= the third division), and five of Seorim, the calculations agree with the biblical date:  $26 + 6 + 7 + 5$  (there are thirty days in month one), the date reached is 2/14 (that is, the

eighteen days that are added to 1/26 fill the last four days of month one and the first fourteen days of month two). A significant date in the text quoted above is the one for the festival of weeks, placed on the first day of Jeshua, the ninth name in Chronicles' list. Here we would have to add to 2/14 the last two days of Seorim, the twenty-eight of the next four divisions in the list, and the first of Jeshua. Remembering that month two also has thirty days, we would see that its last sixteen days would include the two days of Seorim and the fourteen of the next two groups. That would leave the fourteen of the next two divisions, plus the one of Jeshua, yielding 3/15 as the date for the festival of weeks, exactly as in *Jubilees* and quite different from what seems to have been the practice then among most of the Jewish population.

Other calendrical texts could be added to this discussion, and they would show that the Qumran group seems to have worked out a system by which they could calculate which priestly group would have been on duty in any week, stretching all the way back to creation—long before there were priestly watches. Other texts reveal that the calendarists coordinated the days of solar and lunar months and specified in them when the new and full moons occurred. It seems likely that the Qumran community did practice a form of intercalation. We do not know all the details of the system, but they probably added entire weeks at regular intervals and in this way retained the sabbatical character of their solar calendar.

An interesting question that has arisen in connection with the non-normative calendar of Qumran is whether it played a part in the schism of the group from the larger Jewish community. We do not have very much information about when the split occurred and what the reasons for it were, but it is certainly possible that a calendrical dispute was a factor—perhaps even an important one. Dating festivals by a different calendar has very practical consequences: one is celebrating all of the important holidays at a different time than one's co-religionists. One text that may provide support for thinking that the difference regarding the calendar had a role in the exodus of the Qumran group from Jerusalem and other centers of Jewish society is called 4QMMT (*Some of the Works of the Law*). This appears to be a composition that spells out the matters on which the authors disagree with Jewish authorities; in it the writers attempt to show how their views are the correct ones and urge their opponents to agree. At the very beginning of the preserved part of this text is a statement about the 364-day calendar. It is a fragmentary one but its very presence indicates that in this work that details the differences between two groups, the calendar has a prominent position and is possibly the first point made in it. It seems reasonable to conclude, therefore, that a dispute about calendars was one reason why the Qumran groups separated themselves from other Jews.

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