CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THEORY, PRACTICE, AND POLEMIC IN ANCIENT JEWISH CALENDARS

1. The Problem

Since the discovery and publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls over the past sixty years, we have become increasingly aware of what had previously been known: that calendrical controversies played an important role in defining the social, religious, and political dividing lines between various Jewish groups, as between Judaism and Christianity (and as between Christian groups) in their subsequent history down to the present. In retrospect, the relative stability of what became the universally practiced Jewish calendar (especially in light of other, continuing intra-Jewish divisions) is all the more remarkable. In antiquity, by contrast, which calendar one followed and who controlled calendrical determinations were important not just for practical considerations of coherent social adherence, but for the projection of political power and religious self-definition. To quote James VanderKam, “Measuring units of time was not simply a matter of convenience; rather, it was a moral issue involving obedience to divine revelation about the nature of reality and the laws by which the world operated.”1 Universally speaking, calendars are a prime medium for linking the cycles and rhythms of human, societal time with those of the cosmos.

2. Scriptural Foundations

At the heart of calendrical controversies is an astronomical discordance between the cycles of the sun and moon, which affects all systems of time-keeping, not just Jewish (or Christian and Islamic), but

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is particularly acute for the monotheistic creeds which understand a single deity to have set all of the celestial bodies in their courses and rhythms as an unalterable pattern to be mirrored by human society in its concordance to a similarly fixed and cyclic calendar of “appointed times” (mo’adim). According to Gen 1:14–16, part of the creation account:

[14] God said, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate day from night; they shall serve as signs for the set times (mo’adim)—the days and the years; [15] and they shall serve as lights in the expanse of the sky to shine upon the earth.” And it was so. [16] God made the two great lights, the greater light to dominate the day and the lesser light to dominate the night, and the stars” (NJPS).

Besides illuminating the day and night, the sun and the moon are intended as signs for the marking of time (seasons, days, and years, but implicitly months as well).

As is well known, and was known in antiquity, it is impossible to synchronize time as measured by the two “great lights” in the sky, since there is not a whole number of lunar months (approximately 29.5 days) within a single solar year (approximately 365.25 days). Or, to put it differently, a year of twelve lunar months (354 days) is shy of a full solar year by approximately 11.25 days. The earliest scriptural recognition of this disparity between solar and lunar years, with an attempt to reconcile the two, is to be found in the chronology of the flood story (Gen 7:6–8:14).\(^2\) It is impossible to mark time according to one “great light” without being out of synchronization with the other, necessitating the favoring of one or the other as the primary celestial timepiece, or their “manual” coordination.

However, the sun-moon competition, and the inability to divide either the month or the year by a whole number of days, is only part of the problem, since the inability to synchronize between these two cosmic timepieces is aggravated when we add the biblical requirement to regulate work and rest by cycles of seven-day weeks, since neither the lunar month nor the solar year is divisible by a whole number of such weeks. Add to that the desire to mark the four agricultural seasons of the solar year (divided by solstices and equinoxes), so that the pilgrimage harvest festivals fall always during the same seasons (around the vernal and autumnal equinoxes), and the requirement to mark larger cycles of time by seven- and fifty-year intervals (Sabbatical and

\(^2\) VanderKam, *Calendars in the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 4–5.