CHAPTER 12

Rabbinic, Christian, and Local Calendars in Late Antique Babylonia: Influence and Shared Culture

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A variety of calendars were used by Jews, Christians, and others in late antique Babylonian society. Many of these calendars were lunar, and shared common structural features such as months beginning at the new moon, and years of twelve or thirteen lunar months; but the precise way these calendars were reckoned could vary quite considerably. In late Antiquity, moreover, the lunar calendars of Jews, Christians, and others were in a process of gradual but quite radical change. The purpose of this paper is to assess the relationship between rabbinic, Christian, and local lunar calendars in late antique Babylonia. Were they, in fact, one and the same calendar, or did they have separate and distinct identities as Jewish, Christian, and other? Was the evolution of different lunar calendars in this period interrelated—as indeed they seem to follow a similar trajectory—or did these processes occur, in fact, independently of one another? If these processes were interrelated, how do we envisage such a shared history to have unfolded?

Before addressing all these questions, I shall begin with some general, background information on ancient calendars, and then with some theoretical musings on the concepts of ‘influence’ and ‘shared culture’ which much of this article will be leading to. I shall then argue, in the body of this article, that the rabbinic, Christian, and other local Babylonian calendars evolved in this period in similar ways and in similar directions, although not necessarily through mutual influence and not necessarily for the same reasons.

From the mid first millennium BCE to mid first millennium CE, ancient calendars evolved from flexible, diverse, and empirical methods of time reckoning to unified and standard, fixed schemes. In the Near East, the Achaemenid (sixth–fourth centuries) and Seleucid (third–first centuries BCE) dynasties adopted the Babylonian calendar (assimilated, under the Seleucids, with the Macedonian calendar) as their official imperial calendar. This calendar had always been based on empirical sightings of the new moon, but in this period it was increasingly standardized and fixed through the use of new moon predictions and the adoption of a fixed pattern of intercalations (i.e., adding a thirteenth lunar month every two or three years). The standard, 19-year cycle
of intercalations made it easy for the Babylonian calendar to be reckoned uniformly across the vast expanses of the Empire, from the eastern provinces of Bactria (northern Afghanistan) to Elephantine in southern Egypt and Lycia in western Asia Minor, where the Babylonian calendar is known to have been used. Another calendar instituted under the Achaemenids was completely fixed and schematic, and modeled entirely on the Egyptian calendar, with a changeless 365-day year. This calendar, later known as Zoroastrian, became the official calendar of the Persian, Sasanian Empire in late Antiquity (third–sixth centuries CE); its adoption may have been motivated, among other reasons, by a desire to rationalize, standardize, and hence simplify the administration of the Empire. In the Roman Empire, perhaps for similar reasons, the Julian calendar—another fixed, schematic calendar based on a 365-day year, instituted by Julius Caesar in 46 BCE—extended by the end of the first century BCE throughout the Mediterranean basin as a standard imperial calendar, albeit in a variety of forms; it eventually became, as we know, the modern, Gregorian calendar in global use today.¹

Small pockets of resistance to the rise of these large-scale, official imperial calendars remained. Particularly relevant to us, in late Antiquity, are the Jews in the Roman Empire, who stubbornly clung to their lunar calendars and refused to adapt them (as most others had done in the Roman Near East) to the Julian, solar year. The Christians, who in the first few centuries were not always clearly distinguishable from Jews, also dated some of their most important festivals, above all Easter, according to a lunar reckoning. In the first-third centuries CE, Jewish and Christian lunar calendars were flexible and empirically based, and for that reason, could vary significantly from one locality to the next. But in subsequent centuries—the period of ‘late Antiquity’ with which this article will be concerned—the calendars in both traditions remained lunar but followed the general historical trend outlined above, and became increasingly schematic, standardized, and fixed. Similar conditions appear to have also affected the local calendars in Babylonia that had remained lunar.²

In the late antique Near East, moreover, the calendars of Jews, Christians, and all others who used Aramaic language shared in common the same month names, regardless of how their calendars were structured: these were the
