



Daily Verse and Comment

Exodus 12:2

(2) "This month *shall be* to you the beginning of months. It shall be the first month of the year to you.

A Faithful Version

In [Exodus 12:2](#), [God](#) is beginning to instruct [Moses](#) on the institution of [Passover](#) and the [Feast of Unleavened Bread](#) among the Israelites in Egypt. Since these festivals are appointed times that are to be kept annually, He must give Israel a calendar on which to place them, which in turn demands a starting point for the year. In that verse, He tells Moses simply, "This month shall be your beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year to you."

The name of this first month does not appear until the next chapter, where within further instructions on the Feast of Unleavened Bread, God says, "On this day you are going out, in the month Abib" ([Exodus 13:4](#)). The Hebrew word, *'bîb*, refers to barley, particularly the ripe but soft and tender grain that is produced in the early springtime, so it is often defined as "young," "tender," or "green ear." The first month of the year, then, coincides with the beginning of spring. Later, this month was named "Nisan," a Chaldean word borrowed during the Jews' exile in Babylon. "Nisan" appears only in texts written after their return.

When specifically does this month begin? The earliest reckoning of the first month may have relied on visible observation of the new moon that coincided with the "green ear" stage of the growth of barley. Because the ancient Israelites were more closely tied to the cycles of life in nature than we are, they knew when this time was approaching. A simple observation of the local barley crop would tell them whether the ears would ripen to the

"green ear" stage by the next new moon. If they would, the next new moon would begin the first month, Abib. If not, it was delayed or postponed by one month, and the following month would become Abib.

Later, the Israelites—most likely the Levites, who were in charge of the calendar—developed a system whereby they could calculate with great accuracy the appearance of the new moons. Their calculations were based on astronomical data that had been collected over many hundreds of years, and before long, they could predict the conjunction of moon and sun to the minute. Visual sightings verified their calculations, and the high priest would sanctify the new moon (that is, pronounce it as valid or set apart for determining God's appointed times, [the holy days](#)) for the nation.

Yet, the Bible contains indications that the new moon of Tishri, the seventh month, coinciding with the beginning of autumn, may also have functioned as a New Year. For example, [Ezekiel 40:1](#) contains a phrase, "the head of the year" (KJV) or "the beginning of the year" (New King James Version [NKJV]), in concert with a date, the tenth day of the month, which Judaism identifies as Tishri, making this the [Day of Atonement](#). (This phrase, Hebrew *rosh hashana*, is used by Jews today to designate the [Feast of Trumpets](#), the first day of the seventh month.)

In addition, in [Exodus 23:16](#), the Feast of Ingathering (Tabernacles) is said to be "at the end [going out] of the year," and in [Exodus 34:22](#), the same feast is dated "at the year's end," a phrase more literally rendered as "at the turn of the year." Further, [II Samuel 11:1](#) begins with a phrase that designates springtime as "the return of the year" (in the NKJV, this phrase is directly interpreted as "the spring of the year").

Scholars argue that these phrases indicate two calendar years in simultaneous use. Tishri 1, they assert, began what can be called the "civil" or "secular" year, while Abib 1 inaugurated the "sacred," "cultic," or "religious" year. However, each of these indications of a Tishri 1 New Year can be disputed. For instance, the name of the month in [Ezekiel 40:1](#) does not appear in the text, and further, throughout his book, the prophet consistently uses the Babylonian system of reckoning—which had a spring New Year. "Head of the year," then, would indicate the tenth day of the *first* month, Abib, making Abib 1 the true *rosh hashana*.

As for the [Feast of Tabernacles](#) taking place "at the end of the year," it does—at the end of the agricultural year. The context says nothing about a calendar but a great deal about Israelite agrarian activities throughout a typical annual cycle. Finally, calling springtime "the return of the year" makes sense, as it is indeed the time when the year "returns" to begin anew.

While some surrounding cultures may have used a Tishri 1 date for their New Year, Israel seems to have adhered to an Abib 1 New Year based on the clear and unambiguous statement by God in [Exodus 12:2](#). If we are well-grounded in the springtime "first month of the year" commanded in [Exodus 12:2](#), the biblical indications of a Tishri 1 New Year become explainable and fall by the wayside.

— Richard T. Ritenbaugh

To learn more, see:
[The Biblical New Year](#)

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