



"Life is really simple, but we insist on making it complicated."
—Confucius

01-Jan-16

The Biblical New Year

When studying a biblical topic, it is always helpful to begin with a plain, unambiguous statement that provides a fundamental understanding of the subject. Such a clear and concise scriptural declaration becomes a springboard for expanding our inquiry into deeper and less distinct areas of the doctrine. As long as we hold on to these clear scriptures—which can be called "definition verses," for lack of a better term—allowing them to underlay and delineate our belief, we are likely to remain on course.

The apostle John is well-known for his simple declarative sentences that follow this pattern. Among his best-known definition verses is I John 3:4, "Whoever commits [sin](#) also commits lawlessness, and *sin is lawlessness*" (emphasis ours). Knowing that sin is lawlessness—or as the King James Version (KJV) puts it, "sin is the transgression of the law"—gives us a baseline from which we can venture into other aspects of the topic. John also gives us the basic definition of the love of [God](#), "that we keep His commandments" (I John 5:3). In his gospel, he provides us multiple definition verses to help us comprehend our Savior, [Jesus Christ](#): He is the Word, and the Word was God; He is the Lamb of God; He is the resurrection and the life; He is the bread of life; He is the way; etc.

Paul also makes use of definition verses throughout his epistles. His offerings in this regard include, among many others, Romans 6:23, where he gives us two: "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." These clear declarations of truth ground us in several subjects, such as sin and its penalty,

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death, judgment, justice, and on the other side, eternal life, God's gift, Christ's work, Christ's life, salvation, God's calling, and so forth. Paul is also responsible for I Corinthians 13:4-7, which describes love through its actions, and Hebrews 11:1, which defines faith.

Definition verses can be found throughout the Bible, although the preponderance of them are in the New Testament. At this time of year, specifically, an Old Testament definition verse becomes more significant to true Christians: [Exodus 12:2](#), where 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, *Ābīb*, 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.

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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](#). This is where the Bible study principle seen in the "definition verses" helps us to remain on the right path. 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.

Even more pointedly to us, it reveals the January 1 New Year's Day to be wholly erroneous.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Now Is the Time](#)

by Mark Schindler

Mark Schindler, reflecting on the 1946 movie , The Best Years of Our Lives, as American drama film about three servicemen trying to piece their lives back together after coming home from World War II, only to discover that they and their families have been irreparably changed. The struggle that these veterans encountered has some parallels with the struggles we undergo in our spiritual lives. "Taking the Kingdom of Heaven by Force" has some rather dubious interpretations in the various popular commentaries. The context referred to the "heart turning" or "heart circumcision" which commenced with John the Baptist and continues up to the present, when layer upon layer of repentant people are added to God's kingdom .Those called now are enduring the violent pressure of hostile friction; those called now face family fiction, inter-cerebral cortex conflicts, and Satan and his demons. Through these violent continuous struggles, God is perfecting holiness in us. As we learn to trust God in everything, the yoke or burden will become easier. These are the best years of our lives.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Time and Life](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

The way men and God look at time and life are very different. But if we come to understand God's perspective, we have a greater chance of living His way!

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