ison to approximately 6,000 years of human history. Clearly, it wasn't the calendar in use when God told Moses, "This month shall be your beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year to you" (Exodus 12:2).

What a festival calendar must do

Can we know which calendar was used when God revealed His annual festivals (Leviticus 23)? The Bible itself does not give enough details to construct a calendar. But it does tell us when the festivals occur according to a calendar.

The Passover is to be observed on the 14th day of *the first month*, followed by a weeklong Feast of Unleavened Bread, which begins on the 15th day of the same month (Leviticus 23:5-6). (The Hebrew word translated "month" is also the word for the new moon.) The festivals also tie into the seasons, as the harvest began during Unleavened Bread (Leviticus 23:10).

The next festival, Pentecost, was determined by counting seven weeks plus one day (the word *Pentecost* means "fiftieth" in Greek) from a specific day related to the Unleavened Bread festival.

The Feast of Trumpets is observed "*in the seventh month*, on the first day of the month" (Leviticus 23:24, emphasis added throughout). The Day of Atonement falls on the 10th day of the seventh month, followed by the final festivals of the year. The Feast of Tabernacles begins on "the fifteenth day of this seventh month" (Leviticus 23:34), followed a week later by the last festival of the year (verse 39).

These festivals are date-specific, so it is critical that one knows what calendar to use in determining them. They are also season-specific. The first festivals coincide with the beginning and end of the spring harvest season in the Holy Land; the last festivals, with the fall harvest season. Neither a purely solar calendar nor a purely lunar calendar can determine these dates accurately. A solar calendar comes close to coinciding with the seasons, but it doesn't reflect the cycle of the moon necessary for determining the

biblical months. A purely lunar calendar doesn't even come close to coinciding with the seasons.

The Hebrew calendar

However, the Hebrews have preserved a solar-lunar calendar that coincides with the seasons. It is calculated by both the movements of the sun and the cycles of the moon.

"The calculation of the calendar was transmitted to the sages in an unbroken chain going back to Moses. ... According to the ancient calculations, the exact time between one new moon and the next is 29 days, 12 hours, and 793 chalekim 'parts of an hour' (the hour is divided into 1080 parts). In other words, one lunar month has 29.53059 days. It is interesting to note that according to NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration), the time between one new moon and the next is 29.530588 days. Of course, NASA has at its disposal the most advanced and sophisticated telescopes and computers. Nevertheless, the difference between NASA's figures and that used by Hillel II, which originated more than 3000 years ago, is .000002 or two millionths of a day, calculated for the period of one month" (Avraham Yaakov Finkel, *The Essence of the Holy Days—Insight from the Jewish Sages*, 1993, p. 141).

In addition to this incredible accuracy, the Bible itself points us to the Jews as the guardians of the oracles of God, which would include the Hebrew Scriptures and the calendar. Paul wrote, "Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God" (Romans 3:2). Therefore, we use the Hebrew calendar to determine when the biblical festivals occur each year.

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Can Humans Designate Holy Days?

Some people teach that God lets us decide for ourselves what days to dedicate to worshipping Him. Ancient Israel tried this approach—with tragic results! What does the Bible teach?

Christians have always had the freedom to decide whether to obey God or not and when to pray, study the Bible, fast and practice spiritual meditation. In reference to choices about vegetarianism and fasting, Paul wrote:

"One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks" (Romans 14:5-6).

But these prerogatives of free moral agency in our relationship with God do not extend to determining which days are God's holy days. While we may choose when we will exercise personal spiritual activities, God is the one who determines holy time that supersedes human choice.

God's instructions

In teaching the ancient Israelites about His feasts, He instructed Moses, "Speak to the children of Isra-

el, and say to them: 'The feasts of the LORD, which you shall proclaim to be holy convocations, these are My feasts'" (Leviticus 23:2, also see verse 4).

The first of these divinely appointed days deriving their authority and existence from God Himself is the weekly Sabbath. As God stated, "'Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation. You shall do no work on it; it is the Sabbath of the LORD in all your dwellings'" (verse 3).

The weekly Sabbath and holy days are similar in that we are not to do our customary work on these days (Leviticus 23:3, 7, 8, 21, 25, 28, 35, 36). They are to be observed from "evening to evening" (verse 32),

Jesus did not change His mind about the importance of keeping all of the Ten Commandments.

meaning "from sunset … to sunset" as the Good News Translation renders the passage.

Some have mistakenly thought that because there is no physically discernible difference between a holy day designated by God and any other day, humans can decide when to hold special celebrations to worship Him.

Representing this line of reasoning, some say that Christians today can simply choose one day in seven to worship God. This mistaken way of thinking overlooks the fact that God gave very specific dates for each of His days of worship. He didn't say, choose one day out of seven or choose seven different times in the year for My annual holy days according to what best fits your schedule or just make up your own days of worship.

If God intended to give humans the right to alter the dates of His feasts or make up their own days, He certainly could have seen that this was written in the

Bible. But He didn't do this. Instead, He was very clear about the specific days that were His holy days and about His expectation that these days be observed.

For example, God told the ancient Israelites that the Sabbath was to be observed even during the times of plowing and harvest—critical times for farmers (Exodus 34:21). Furthermore, those who broke the Sabbath were to be put to death (Exodus 35:2). While this command is not enforced today, it does illustrate the importance God placed and continues to place on this day.

As for the Day of Atonement (one of God's holy days), God said, "For any person who is not afflicted in soul on that same day shall be cut off from his people. And any person who does any work on that same day, that person I will destroy from among his people" (Leviticus 23:29-30).

Ancient Israel's example

In spite of God's clear instructions as to which days should be kept holy, the ancient Israelites tried establishing their own days of worship with tragic results.

Throughout their history, the ancient Israelites dishonored God by abandoning His prescribed days, by establishing their own days of worship similar to God's, by practicing syncretism—that is, trying to combine the worship of God with the pagan practices of other nations—and by outright idol worship (Jeremiah 17:21-23, 27; Exodus 32:1-5; 1 Kings 12:32-33; Zephaniah 1:4-6). Because of these sins, God allowed both Israel and Judah to go into captivity.

When it comes to holy time, we also note something very important about the Sabbath command. God said, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8).

The clear instruction from God is that we are to respect this specific day by keeping it—not merely a day of our choosing—holy. God is the One who designates His holy days.

Which Calendar Should We Use to Calculate the Biblical Festivals?

To celebrate "the feasts of the LORD" described in the Bible (Leviticus 23:2), you need to know when they occur. And to know that, you have to know what calendar was used in the Bible.

Which calendar should be used is not a question to which most people give any thought. But throughout history, calculating an accurate calendar has been challenging. The calendar used by much of the world today was not instituted until 1582 by Pope Gregory XIII. He ordered it to correct errors in the Julian calendar, established in 45 B.C. by Julius Caesar.

Many Protestant countries did not adopt the Gregorian calendar for centuries. By the time England adopted this calendar in 1752, its Julian calendar was 12 days behind the seasons. To this day, many Orthodox churches refuse to accept the Gregorian calendar, and they still use the Julian calendar, which is now 13 days behind.

Both the Julian and the Gregorian calendars are purely solar calendars, meaning they are calculated on the basis of the movements of the sun. By contrast, the Muslim calendar is purely a lunar calendar, based solely on the cycles of the moon. Its months are not connected to the seasons and therefore can vary considerably from the Gregorian calendar. That is why Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting, does not coincide with any fixed month on the Gregorian calendar.

Therefore, today's Gregorian calendar is relatively new, only a little over four centuries old, in compar-