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Exodus 34:22 and the Calendar

Doctrinal Paper

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All scriptures are quoted from *The Holy Bible, New King James Version* (© 1988 Thomas Nelson, Inc., Nashville, Tennessee) unless otherwise noted.

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Doctrinal Paper

Studying the Hebrew Calendar can leave one's head spinning! There is so much to take in and so much to consider. In this confusion over the calendar, some have rejected the Hebrew Calendar and have developed their own calendars. Exodus 34:22 is used by some as the basis for this rejection of the Hebrew Calendar. This paper will examine this scripture in the context of the calendar and the Feast of Tabernacles.

In the United Church of God, *an International Association*, we have accepted the Hebrew Calendar as the only calendar valid for observing the Holy Days. We make no claims to having all knowledge on this subject, but after extensive research (thousands of pages from over 60 authors) we have concluded that the calendar that has been preserved by normative Judaism is the calendar that we should follow. This is not to say that there haven't been changes. The Bible doesn't present a calendar, but it assumes the existence of one, therefore, it is impossible to know with certainty how this calendar was constructed. Even among the Jews the calendar was kept a secret and only those responsible for publishing the dates of the Holy Days knew the details.

While most calendar authors claim that their work comes from Scripture, all must go outside the Bible to construct their calendar. The Bible does not mention a 19-year time cycle, nor does it give the length of a month or the order for intercalary months. It doesn't provide enough information to know with confidence when a year is to begin or what constitutes a year. Equinoxes are not mentioned in Scripture, yet most calendars make use of them. We find no definition of the new moon in Scripture. Since the Bible does not provide all the essential elements for a calendar, where do we look for the calendar that we must use in order to observe the Holy Days? The Jews make the claim that God gave them the responsibility to "proclaim" the Holy Days in "their appointed times."

"Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: 'The feasts of the LORD, *which you shall proclaim* to be holy convocations, these are My feasts. . . These are the feasts of the LORD, holy convocations which you shall proclaim *at their appointed times*'" (Leviticus 23:2,4; see also Numbers 10:10).¹

God gave the priests the responsibility of making judgments in areas that are not specifically defined in the Torah. (As we shall see later in this paper, this surely included the calendar. God revealed the Holy Days and they were to be observed in their seasons at specific times. Thus it is obvious that the priests had to maintain a calendar.) "And you shall come to the priests, the Levites, and to the judge *there* in those days, and inquire *of them*; they shall pronounce upon you the sentence of judgment. You shall do according to the sentence which they pronounce upon you in that place which the LORD chooses. And you shall be careful to do according to all that they order you. According to the sentence of the law in which they instruct you, according to the judgment which they tell you, you shall do; you shall not turn aside *to* the right hand or *to* the left from the sentence which they pronounce upon you. Now the man who acts presumptuously and will not heed the priest who stands to minister there before the LORD

¹*The Holy Bible, New King James Version* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, Inc.) 1982.

Exodus 34:22 and the Calendar

Doctrinal Paper

your God, or the judge, that man shall die. So you shall put away the evil from Israel” (Deuteronomy 17:9-12).²

In the New Testament the apostle Paul writes in Romans 3 about the advantage of being a Jew. “What advantage then has the Jew, or what *is* the profit of circumcision? Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God” (Romans 3:1-2).³ The Greek word for “oracle” is *logion* and can be defined as “saying” or “commandment.” The simplest explanation is that Paul is referring to the laws that form the Torah that were given directly by God. These are truly the *oracles* of God. It seems clear that not everything God spoke to Moses was written down. But one fact should not be ignored—the same group who preserved the Hebrew text of the Bible must have also preserved a calendar. It is impossible to observe the Holy Days without a calendar. Therefore, it would seem logical that a calendar of some sort has existed since the time of Moses (obviously calendars were around even before this time, as the Bible clearly shows) and that the Jewish people have been responsible for its preservation.

Below are comments on the Greek word *logion* that can be found in the various lexicons. It seems clear that the Hebrew text of the Bible is included in the oracles of God which were preserved by the Jews, but what about the calendar? It would seem logical that the same individuals preserved it too. If not, then who else could have been given this task?

λόγιον, ου, τό (Eur., Hdt., mostly of short sayings originating fr. a divinity: Hdt. 8, 60, 3; Thu. 2, 8, 2; Polyb. 3, 112, 8; 8, 30, 6; Diod. S. 2, 14, 3; 2, 26, 9; 4, 65, 3 al.; Aelian, V.H. 2, 41. Likew. LXX [TWManson, Goguel-Festschr. '50, 142f]; Ep. Arist. 177; Philo, Congr. Erud. Grat. 134, Fuga 60, Mos. 2, 262, Praem. 1, Vi. Cont. 25; Jos., Bell. 6, 311) *a saying*, in our lit. only pl. (as also predom. in secular wr.); of the revelations received by Moses λόγια ζῶντα Ac 7:38. Of God's promises to the Jews Ro 3:2 (JWDoeve, Studia Paulina [JdeZwaan-Festschr.] '53, 111-23). Of words fr. Scripture gener.⁴

33.97 λόγια, ων *n* (only in the plural): the content of various utterances - ‘sayings, oracles, message.’ χρείαν ἔχετε τοῦ διδάσκειν ὑμᾶς τινὰ τὰ στοιχεῖα τῆς ἀρχῆς τῶν λογίων τοῦ θεοῦ ‘you need someone to teach you the first lessons about the message of God’ He 5.12; ὃς ἐδέξατο λόγια ζῶντα δοῦναι ἡμῖν ‘who received the living oracles to give to us’ Ac 7.38.⁵

λόγια, ων properly, a little word, a brief utterance, in prof. auth. a divine oracle (doubtless because oracles were generally brief); in Septuagint, the breast-plate of the high priest, which he wore when he consulted Jehovah [once for Hebrew for words of a

²*Ibid.*

³*Ibid.*

⁴Walter Bauer, F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1979.

⁵Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies), 1988, 1989.

Exodus 34:22 and the Calendar

Doctrinal Paper

man, Psalm xviii. (xix.) 15]; but chiefly for Hebrew for any utterance of God, whether precept or promise.⁶

While there is no calendar explicitly given in Scripture, it should not be construed that there are no scriptures that give information about the calendar. We readily agree that such scriptures do exist. But one must be careful. Often an author will refer to hints in the Bible and from these hints, he develops his own calendar. Is this what God intended? Do we have to find hints in Scripture? Or did God give the Jews the responsibility for preserving and developing the calendar? We conclude that He did.

One scripture that is used for this calendar development is Exodus 34:22. Some infer from this scripture that some or all of the Feast of Tabernacles *must* take place *after* the autumnal equinox and since there are years on the Hebrew Calendar when this is not true, the Hebrew Calendar must be wrong. This is the logic which some use. But what does this scripture really say? Does it say that the Feast of Tabernacles can only occur *after* the autumnal equinox (September 23 this century on the Gregorian Calendar)? And if it does, why? What difference does the equinox make? One must also ask what part the autumnal equinox played in any of the calendar calculations in the ancient world. The Hebrew Calendar is based on the revolution of the earth around the sun (determining the length of a year) and the cycles of the moon (determining the length of a month) and is not based on the equinoxes.

Exodus 34:22 and the Feast of Tabernacles

Let's look at this verse without any preconceived ideas. We should note that even in some of the Church's literature from the early '80s this verse was used to support the idea that the equinox must occur during the Feast or before. But is this true? What does the verse say?

“And you shall observe the Feast of Weeks, of the firstfruits of wheat harvest, and the Feast of Ingathering at the year's end.” (NKJV)

“Celebrate the Feast of Weeks with the firstfruits of the wheat harvest, and the Feast of Ingathering at the turn of the year.” (NIV)

“You shall keep the feast of Weeks with the first of the wheat harvest; likewise, the feast at the fruit harvest at the close of the year.” (NAB)

These three translations use three different terms—“at the year's end,” “at the turn of the year” and “at the close of the year.” It must be noted that not one of the translations uses the term “equinox,” or the word “after.” Yet this verse is widely used to support the idea that the Feast must take place after the equinox.

By looking at the Hebrew of this verse we can begin to piece together a proper explanation. In none of the English translations do we find a requirement for the Feast of

⁶ Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc.), 1999.

Exodus 34:22 and the Calendar

Doctrinal Paper

Tabernacles to occur after the autumnal equinox. To interpret this from the English is simply not proper. Exodus 34:22 is reproduced below from the Hebrew text. There are no prepositions.

חג שבעת תעשה לך בכורי קציר חטים וחרג האסיף תקופת
השנה⁷

The literal translation of this verse would be: “Observe (*asah*) feast (*chag*) weeks (*shabua*) firstfruits (*bikkuwr*) wheat (*chittah*) harvest (*qatsiy*) feast (*chag*) ingathering (*acyph*) year’s (*shaneh*) end (*tekufah*).”

Literally this verse tells us that we are to observe the Feast of Weeks with the firstfruits of the wheat harvest and the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year. The key word in all of this is the Hebrew *tekufah* (underlined in the Hebrew text above). It is true that in post-biblical Jewish writing this term is used for equinox. But that does not address the usage of the word in the Hebrew of the Bible. Even if one imposes the term equinox in place of *tekufah*, there is still no concrete evidence for concluding that this verse *requires* the Feast to begin *after* the equinox. There is no such requirement in the verse. The Feast always occurs near the autumnal equinox. This would clearly fulfill the verse even if we conclude that *tekufah* means equinox. The Feast is to be observed “at” or “around” or “near” the year’s end (*tekufah*)—all are permissible.

There is another possibility that must not be overlooked in our studies. In fact, when combined with other verses in the Bible, it is clear that the Hebrew *tekufah* as used in Exodus 34:22 doesn’t refer to the equinox at all. The word in Hebrew (as used in Scripture) has more of a generic meaning of “cycle” or “circuit” or “completion of a cycle.” When compared to other verses it can be shown that the correct explanation is that the Feast of Tabernacles (ingathering) is to occur when the cycle or circuit of harvest has been complete. Clearly the Hebrew term for “ingathering” refers to harvest. This is the descriptive phrase attached to the Feast and it has reference to harvesting the crops, hence the term “gathering.” In reality the equinox has little bearing on the completion of harvest. The harvest is completed based on weather and the number of days since planting and not based on the date of the equinox. We have no reason to believe that the autumnal equinox was ever of any real concern to the Jews

Use of *Tekufah*

By going to all the sources we have available, we can get a clear picture of what is meant by this term *tekufah*. But before we look at the definitions collected from outside the Bible, let’s go to the Bible itself and see how this term has been used. It isn’t a very exhausting process, since there are only three other verses in the entire Old Testament that use the Hebrew word *tekufah*. None of these verses confirm the use of *tekufah* as equinox. The evidence will show that the usage of the term was much broader in the days of the Bible.

Psalms 19:4-6

⁷*Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart), 1990.

Exodus 34:22 and the Calendar

Doctrinal Paper

Their line has gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them He has set a tabernacle for the sun, which *is* like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, *and* rejoices like a strong man to run its race. Its rising *is* from one end of heaven, and its circuit [*tekufah*] to the other end; and there is nothing hidden from its heat.⁸

Here we have the sun described as a bridegroom going forth from its tabernacle. It is described as a hero that runs along a path. One could easily conclude that what is being described is the daily journey of the sun (as it appears from earth) from the time it rises until it sets. The conclusion of verse 6 mentions that there is “nothing hidden from its heat” which would be a reference to the daytime. This would appear to be discussing a normal day. It certainly is not describing the equinox.

One can just as well conclude that the ends of the sun’s circuit would be at the two solstices (summer and winter). In the Northern Hemisphere in the winter the sun rises at its furthest point to the south of east and in the summer it rises at its furthest point north of east. In other words, the solstices and not the equinoxes would mark the ends of the circuit if that is the meaning of the reference in Psalm 19:6. The equinoxes occur in spring and fall. This is the middle of the sun’s path when it rises and sets directly over the equator, making the days and nights of equal length. It would be quite a stretch to believe the author used *tekufah* in Psalm 19:6 to mean equinox. He used the word in the generic sense of a circuit and not the more limiting “equinox.”

2 Chronicles 24:23

So it happened in the spring [*tekufah*] of the year *that* the army of Syria came up against him; and they came to Judah and Jerusalem, and destroyed all the leaders of the people from among the people, and sent all their spoil to the king of Damascus.⁹

In the New King James Version, the word *tekufah* is translated “spring.” In the AV it is translated “end of the year.” It refers to the time that the armies went to battle. This was certainly in the spring of the year after the winter rains when the mud on the roads had dried. But there is another term used in Hebrew for the time to go to war. It is found in 1 Kings 20:22 and 26. The word translated “return of the year” is the Hebrew *teshuvah* and it means, “return.” The return of the year is when the year has been completed and a new year begins.

The first month of the Hebrew Calendar is always in the spring, although not always ENTIRELY in the spring (there are years when the equinox occurs AFTER the first day of Nisan or Abib). There is no requirement that the first day of Nisan begin after the equinox, but that the vernal equinox will always occur either during the first month or just prior to the beginning of the first month. In other words, there is never a year when the first month is entirely BEFORE the vernal equinox. The return of the year is comparable to spring and so translated in the New King James Version. While there is a relationship between the equinox and spring, the two terms

⁸*The Holy Bible, New King James Version* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, Inc.), 1982.

⁹*Ibid.*

Exodus 34:22 and the Calendar

Doctrinal Paper

are not synonymous. The equinox is an astronomical event that is used to declare the first official day of spring, but spring is a season that lasts for about three months. Clearly 2 Chronicles is speaking of a season of the year when travel and fighting were easier and not to a specific date on the calendar. From a weather point of view, spring does not depend on the equinox and it can begin before the equinox or afterward. Once again, a more generic definition of the Hebrew *tekufah* is apparent instead of the narrower one some seem to prefer.

1 Samuel 1:20

So it came to pass in the process [*tekufah*] of time that Hannah conceived and bore a son, and called his name Samuel, saying, “Because I have asked for him from the LORD.”

This is the story of the birth of Samuel. The term “process of time” is used in the New King James. Other translations use different terms: “course of time” (NIV); “due time” (NASB); “end of her term” (New American); and “when the time was come about” (AV). There is no doubt but that this verse is speaking of the end of Hannah’s pregnancy when she gave birth to Samuel. There is no reference at all to the equinox in this verse! Once again it is obvious that the term *tekufah* generally refers to the conclusion of a circuit, a cycle or a term. In this case it is the term of pregnancy that came to a conclusion. This is a specific time period that has a beginning and an end. It can be predicted just as certain cycles in the heavens can be. But there are other cycles or circuits as well, such as the agricultural cycle that has a definite beginning and ending. It also repeats itself each year—there will always be “seedtime and harvest” (Genesis 8:22) as long as the earth remains.

These are the only four places that you will find the Hebrew *tekufah* used in Scripture. Based upon this usage, it is concluded that *tekufah* is a broad term that can be used for (1) a general term for the end of the year, referring to the end of the harvest season; (2) the rising and setting of the sun; (3) the time of going to war, the springtime; or (4) the term of a woman’s pregnancy. To substitute the word “equinox” in any of these verses would make no sense, so why should one substitute it in Exodus 34:22?

Below is an examination of how scholars have defined and used the term *tekufah*.

[תְּקוּפָה] [*tekufah*] n.f. coming round, circuit — *circuit* (completion).¹⁰

The Englishman’s Hebrew and Chaldee Concordance of the Old Testament offers these for synonyms: “revolution of the year;” “come about;” and “circuit.”¹¹

תְּקוּפָה [tek-oo-faw’] coming round, circuit of time or space, a turning, circuit 1a) at the circuit (as adverb)¹²

¹⁰Richard Whitaker, editor, *The Abridged Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew-English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.), 1997.

¹¹*The Englishman’s Hebrew and Chaldee Concordance of the Old Testament* (London: Samuel Bagster and Sons, LTD.), 1890.

¹²*Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.), 1995.

Exodus 34:22 and the Calendar

Doctrinal Paper

The Talmud uses the term *tekufah* in reference to the equinox, but one must keep in mind that the Talmud was written much later than the text of the Hebrew Old Testament. The Talmud was composed between the years 200 and 600 C.E. This is over 1,500 years after the time of Moses. Much can change in a language in 1,500 years. Clearly the Scriptures (and other study resources) demonstrate that the term *tekufah* is a generic term that can be used for any type of cycle or circuit that has a repeating pattern to it. This could include the equinox, though the Bible does not use the term in this fashion.

There is always a danger when one tries to read a meaning backward into the Scriptures. Languages change constantly and to fully understand the Hebrew of the Old Testament, one must find how that term is used in other places. This is the key to understanding *tekufah*.

Importance of Exodus 23:16 and Leviticus 23:34

There are two other verses which shed light on our understanding of Exodus 34:22. As in all cases of exegesis we must take the Bible as a whole and not isolate single verses in an effort to establish our argument. These additional verses explain the nature and character of the Feast of Tabernacles. It is a harvest Feast and it was established to occur on a certain date on the calendar. There is no mention of the equinox in any of the discussion of the Feast of Tabernacles (unless you use Exodus 34:22 incorrectly for that argument).

Exodus 23:15-16

You shall keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread (you shall eat unleavened bread seven days, as I commanded you, at the time appointed in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt; none shall appear before Me empty); and the Feast of Harvest, the firstfruits of your labors which you have sown in the field; and the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you have gathered in *the fruit of* your labors from the field.¹³

Leviticus 23:34

Speak to the children of Israel, saying: “The fifteenth day of this seventh month *shall be* the Feast of Tabernacles *for* seven days to the LORD.”¹⁴

The date for observing the Feast of Tabernacles is determined by a calendar (“fifteenth day of this seventh month”) and not by the equinox. There is no reference given in Scripture as to the date of the equinox, therefore one concludes that it isn’t relevant for the dating of the festivals.

The Feast of Tabernacles is a harvest festival and not an equinox festival. It occurs after the harvest season, which is generally around the time of fall or autumn. Some years on the Hebrew Calendar the Feast of Tabernacles will actually begin before the autumnal equinox, but with the slight shifting of the equinoxes over the years, there is no danger of the Feast occurring

¹³*The Holy Bible, New King James Version* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, Inc.), 1982.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

Exodus 34:22 and the Calendar

Doctrinal Paper

entirely prior to the equinox any time in the future. Some argue that since this is permissible that it has indeed happened with the Hebrew Calendar. This is really a moot point, since there is no prohibition on the Hebrew Calendar (or in the Bible) for this to occur. It simply doesn't happen today and there is no definitive proof that it has ever happened. If you use the rules of the calendar today and extrapolate backward in time you may encounter dates that appear to be prior to the equinox. One must be careful in jumping to conclusions about these dates. But you should also remember that this is not a significant issue with the Hebrew Calendar. The focus is on the harvest and not on the autumnal equinox!

Exodus 23:16 is a very telling scripture. The same language is used here in English as we find in Exodus 34:22. There is a slight difference in the word translated "end." This word is not *tekufah*, but *tzet ha shannah* (end of the year). Since the wording is so similar (especially in English), we can learn more of what is meant in Exodus 34:22. Here the meaning is quite clear. The focus is on the harvest—"the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year, **when** you have gathered in *the fruit of your labors* from the field." When does the Feast of Tabernacles occur? We read that it is at the end of the year—when the fruit has been gathered from the fields. The Feast begins on the 15th day of the seventh month. This requires a calendar that takes into consideration the growing and harvest seasons of the various crops. The Feast of Tabernacles is called the Feast of Ingathering. It is the final festival (including the eighth day) of the year and it is the celebration of the great harvest. To tie the date to that of the equinox is to read something into the account that is not there.

Summary

Much is made about the interpretation of Exodus 34:22 by some who oppose the Hebrew Calendar. They arrive at their conclusions by reading more into the text of this verse than is truly warranted. But even if one concludes (erroneously) that the Hebrew word *tekufah* means equinox, Exodus 34:22 does not require one to observe the Feast of Tabernacles after the autumnal equinox. On the Hebrew Calendar the Wave Sheaf Offering occurs after the vernal equinox. This prevents there ever being a problem with the crops in the fall. If there are green ears during the Days of Unleavened Bread, the barley and other grains can be harvested by Pentecost, and the other crops will be harvested in plenty of time prior to the Feast of Tabernacles in the fall. There is no need to manipulate the calendar to accommodate the autumnal equinox. This is all a part of the regular cycle or circuit of the agricultural year. The ripening of crops is determined by the time of planting and the weather, and not by the equinox. The equinox is simply the day the sun rises and sets directly over the equator causing day and night to be of equal length.

There are many lessons to be learned about the Bible and the calendar. One very important lesson is that Scripture is not of any "private interpretation" (2 Peter 1:20). Sometimes we can be swayed because someone says it is so, but in reality the position must be supported by the Scripture and not personal opinions. This is the case with Exodus 34:22. Whatever interpretation you accept of the Hebrew word *tekufah*, Exodus 34:22 is not being violated by the Hebrew Calendar. The United Church of God uses the Hebrew Calendar for determining the dates of the Holy Days and, while there are still certain aspects of an agrarian society that are

Exodus 34:22 and the Calendar

Doctrinal Paper

relevant as symbols in those observances, we are celebrating God's plan, which is spiritual and not physical. This should be our focus—observing the Holy Days in the true spirit of worship. God surely did not intend that the calendar be used as an excuse for debate and endless arguments.