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Should Christians Observe the New Moons?

Doctrinal Paper

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One question that consistently comes up in the Church has to do with “New Moons.” The Bible mentions New Moons often in the context of the annual Holy Days and the Sabbath. What are the “New Moon” references found in the Old Testament all about? Should Christians observe New Moons today?

Introduction

There is the “astronomical” New Moon, and there is the “*molad*,” which means birth of the moon, and there is the “first crescent.” All three are slightly different and can actually occur on different days. The Bible simply does not tell us which method was used by Moses and the Israelites to determine the first day of each month. In this paper, when we use the term “New Moon” we are referring to the first day of the month as determined by the *molad*. Ancient astronomers were able to calculate the time it takes for the moon to advance through a complete cycle. This figure was used by the Jews to determine the timing of the *molad* and from that the declaration of the first day of the new month.

Molad is defined as the “birth” of the moon or month. There are eight phases to each cycle of the moon, and the *molad* falls during what is called the dark phase. This dark phase of the moon (when the moon’s dark side is facing the earth) can last between 1.5 days and 3 days, depending on the time of day that the conjunction occurs, before you will actually see a portion of the moon again. According to Rabbi Nathan Bushwick, “The molad is roughly in the middle of this period during which the Moon is not visible.”¹

The great Jewish writer from the 12th century, Maimonides, confirms the use of the calculations that have been used since ancient times to determine the date of the New Moon:

“...the Jewish court, too, used to study and investigate and perform mathematical operations, in order to find out whether or not it would be possible for the new crescent to be visible in its proper time, which is the night of the 30th day. If the members of the court found that the new moon might be visible, they were obliged to be in attendance at the court house for the whole 30th day and be on the watch for the arrival of witnesses. If witnesses did arrive, they were duly examined and tested, and if their testimony appeared trustworthy, this day was sanctified as New Moon Day. If the new crescent did not appear and no witnesses arrived, this day was counted as the 30th day of the old month...If, however, the members of the court found by calculation that the New Moon could not possibly be seen, they were not obliged to be in attendance on the 30th day or to wait for the arrival of witnesses. If witnesses nonetheless did appear and testified that they had seen the new crescent, it was certain that they were false witnesses, or that a phenomenon resembling the new moon had been seen by them through the clouds, while in reality it was not the new crescent at all.”²

¹ Bushwick, Rabbi Nathan, *Understanding the Jewish Calendar* (Moznaim Publishing Corporation: New York) 1989.

² *The Code of Maimonides*, Book Three, Treatise Eight, “Sanctification of the New Moon,” translated by Solomon Gandz. Edited by J. Oberman and O. Neugebauer (Yale University Press: New Haven, CT) 1956.

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Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish writer of the first century B.C., makes reference to the New Moon and its calculations, as well:

“This is the New Moon, or beginning of the lunar month, namely the period between one conjunction and the next, the length of which has been accurately calculated in the astronomical schools.”³

Some today believe that the sighting of the “first crescent” is the correct method for establishing the first day of the month. This method (observation with the naked eye) is very difficult if not impossible on a round earth because of the numerous questions and problems that are created. The U.S. Naval Observatory publishes astronomical information on its Web site. They define the New Moon as the moment of the conjunction, which is called the astronomical New Moon to separate it from the *molad* or the first crescent. On their Web site under the *Astronomical Applications Department* they have an article that describes the difficulty one encounters if depending on observation:

“The date and time of each New Moon can be computed exactly (see, for example, Phases of the Moon 1990-2000 in Data Services) but the time that the Moon first becomes visible after the New Moon depends on many factors and cannot be predicted with certainty...Generally, the lunar crescent will become visible to suitably-located, experienced observers with good sky conditions about one day after New Moon.”⁴

In ancient Israel the calculation of the calendar was entrusted to the Levitical priesthood. It was their responsibility to compute the beginning of each month and make it known to the congregation of Israel. The declaration of the New Moons was an essential part in Israel’s calculation of the annual Holy Days.

Authorities in Jerusalem continued to declare the New Moons even after the Babylonian captivity. They based this declaration on both observation (looking for the first crescent) and calculation. The key here isn’t the method that was used, but the fact that the authorities declared to the Jews the first day of each month. Today, the calendar is fixed and there is no need for physical observation.

The Hebrew Calendar relies on the calculation of the *molad*. These calculations for the *molad* have been understood for many centuries by the astronomers. The use of witnesses during the second temple period, since there is no evidence of such in the Old Testament, appears to have been more of a formality, as shown by Maimonides. The actual dates had already been established by calculation. The key in understanding the calendar lies in the authority given to the Levites to declare the dates. In Leviticus 23:2, 4 we read of the responsibility to “proclaim” the festivals. To proclaim the festivals requires an established calendar. There have been changes

³ Judaeus, Philo, *The Special Laws, II, XXVI, 140*, Treatise by F.H. Colson (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA) 1937.

⁴ Astronomical Applications Department, article *Crescent Moon Visibility and the Islamic Calendar* located at www.aa.usno.navy.mil/faq/docs/islamic.html.

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and adjustments made to this calendar over the many centuries, but it is still preserved by the Jews and used to this day for the purpose of observing the annual festivals.

To summarize, for the purpose of this paper, the New Moon is defined as the first day of the month as determined by the *molad*.

New Moon Instructions in the Bible

The first instructions in the Scriptures concerning the observance of the New Moons are found in Numbers 10:1-10. Here Moses is told to create two silver trumpets to be used: 1) to call the general populace to the tabernacle; 2) to call the leaders of the tribes; 3) to sound the general movement of the tribes; 4) as a call to war; and 4) in verse 10: “Also in the day of your gladness, in your appointed feasts, and at the beginning of your months, you shall blow the trumpets over your burnt offerings and over the sacrifices of your peace offerings; and they shall be a memorial for you before your God: I am the LORD your God.”

Instructions concerning the tabernacle offerings are given in Numbers 28 and 29. These two chapters give details on daily offerings (Numbers 28:1-8); Sabbath offerings (Numbers 28:9-10); New Moon offerings (Numbers 28:11-15); Passover and Days of Unleavened Bread (Numbers 28:16-25); Feast of Weeks (Numbers 28:26-31); Feast of Trumpets (Numbers 29:1-6); Day of Atonement (Numbers 29:7-11); Feast of Tabernacles (Numbers 29:12-40).

These instructions concerning the New Moons entail offerings and ceremonies. There are no instructions to abstain from work or convene a holy convocation like the instructions concerning the annual festivals (Numbers 28:17-18, 25, 26, 29:1, 7, 12, 35). Numbers 29:12-40 also contains details on the special sacrifices to be offered on the days of the Feast of Tabernacles that aren't observed as Sabbaths.

The New Moons are conspicuously absent in the list of the “feasts of the LORD” in Leviticus 23, which includes the weekly Sabbath and annual Holy Days. There is no evidence that the New Moons were ever treated as Holy Days or Sabbath days. Because of the importance of identifying the first day of the lunar month, the New Moons occupied a prominent place in the life of the Israelites, but never achieved the status of Sabbath or Holy Day.

Without any biblical direction for observing the New Moons, Israel was left to develop its own approach. With the exception of the special offerings there are no explicit instructions in the Bible for the observance of the New Moons. Geoffery Widoger in his book, *The Encyclopedia of Judaism*, makes reference to this lack of special instruction:

“This had happened by the time the Jews returned from exile at the end of the sixth century BC. It [the New Moon] was no longer a full holiday but a semi-holiday, like *Hol ha-Mo'ed* (the intermediate working days of Passover and Sukkoth) when the rabbis discouraged all but necessary work and women were to have a holiday from their sewing

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and weaving. More stringent economic conditions were probably the reason for the downgrading of the New Moon, particularly since there were no religious or historical reasons for stopping work on that day. In the course of time, even this minor holiday status disappeared and it became a normal working day like any other, except for certain liturgical variations.”

This may explain why there is no reference to a New Moon celebration during the time of Christ. The New Moon celebrations had become virtually nonexistent by the end of the second temple period. This would not preclude the special offerings that were commanded under the Levitical system as long as the temple was standing. There is only one reference to a New Moon in the New Testament, and it is found in the book of Colossians, long after the death of Christ. We have no evidence that Christ or His apostles did anything special on the day of the New Moon or that they ever participated in any type of celebration on the New Moon.

The New Moon Celebration in Israel’s History

A fragment of one New Moon occasion is 1 Samuel 20:5, 18, 24 when David says to Jonathan, “Indeed tomorrow is the New Moon, and I should not fail to sit with the king to eat. But let me go, that I may hide in the field until the third day at evening.” In verse 18 Jonathan says to David, “Tomorrow is the New Moon; and you will be missed, because your seat will be empty.” Verse 24 continues, “Then David hid in the field. And when the New Moon had come, the king sat down to eat the feast.” Here we see that the custom of David’s time was to have a special meal on the New Moon. However, nowhere is this custom commanded or explained scripturally and we have no indication of its origin either in oral law or Levitical tradition.

We must also ask how David and Jonathan could know clearly that the next day would be the New Moon without some prior knowledge through calculation. The essence of the argument over observation requires that one wait until the crescent is actually seen before declaring the day to be the New Moon. In this case Jonathan was certain the next day would be the correct day.

Hastings Bible Dictionary sheds some light on this example in 1 Samuel.

“As the manner in which the New Moon was observed, there were other features besides the sacrifices. There was no ‘solemn convocation’ on the New Moon, but it is usually inferred from 2 Kings 4:23 that visits were paid to the prophets on that day... The New Moon was apparently the time for changing David’s officials, according to 1 Chronicles 27:1. It is not easy to gather the full significance of the incident related in 1 Samuel 20:5. David evidently refers to a family feast on the New Moon, but it is not clear that the king had a special feast on that day.”⁵

There is no indication in this scripture that this was a nationwide festival being observed. As Hastings points out this could have been a “family feast on the New Moon.” We know from

⁵ Hastings, James (ed.), *Dictionary of the Bible Dealing With Its Language, Literature, and Contents Including the Biblical Theology*, in five volumes (Charles Scribner’s Sons: New York) 1911-12, “New Moon,” vol. 3, p. 522.

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this scripture that there was a special feast held and that David was expected to be in attendance. This is all we know.

The scriptures suggest that Saul invited David to a peace offering meal on the New Moon. As stated earlier, "...at the beginning of your months, you shall blow the trumpets over your burnt offerings and over the sacrifices of your *peace offerings*" (Numbers 10:10). Peace offerings had to be eaten either on the day they were sacrificed or on the next day—"And if any of the flesh of the sacrifice of his peace offering is eaten at all on the *third day*, it shall not be accepted, nor shall it be imputed to him; it shall be an abomination to him who offers it, and the person who eats of it shall bear guilt" (Leviticus 7:18). This *could* explain why David wanted to "hide in the field until the *third day*" (1 Samuel 20:5). This would also tie in with Saul's question, "Why has the son of Jesse not come to eat, *either yesterday or today*?" (1 Samuel 20:27). If this is correct, then Saul knew that he would have to conjure up another plan to kill David since the New Moon peace offering could not be eaten on the "third day." Of course, today, peace offerings are not commanded, therefore there's no reason for us to hold such a feast on the New Moons.

From 2 Kings 4 we can deduce that the New Moon was a time when people sought instruction from the priests. Here a woman intends to ask Elisha to heal her dead son. "Then she called to her husband, and said, 'Please send me one of the young men and one of the donkeys, that I may run to the man of God and come back.' So he said, 'Why are you going to him today? It is neither the New Moon nor the Sabbath'" (verses 22-23).

King Solomon mentions New Moons in context with temple worship in 2 Chronicles 2:4. "Behold, I am building a temple for the name of the LORD my God, to dedicate it to Him, to burn before Him sweet incense, for the continual showbread, for the burnt offerings morning and evening, on the Sabbaths, on the New Moons, and on the set feasts of the LORD our God. This is an ordinance forever to Israel."

It is important to note that Solomon distinguishes a difference between each type of celebration and observance. Another example is found in 2 Chronicles 31:3. "The king also appointed a portion of his possessions for the burnt offerings: for the morning and evening burnt offerings, the burnt offerings for the Sabbaths and the New Moons and the set feasts, as it is written in the Law of the LORD." The subject in these verses, as in 2 Chronicles 2:4, is sacrifices, and they are listed in order of frequency: daily, weekly, monthly and annually.

In 1 Chronicles 23:30-31 the priests are instructed "to stand every morning to thank and praise the LORD, and likewise at evening; and at every presentation of a burnt offering to the LORD on the Sabbaths and on the New Moons and on the set feasts." Once again the subject is sacrifices. Although the New Moons were special occasions, these passages aren't raising New Moons to the status of Sabbaths and "set feasts" any more than mentioning daily sacrifices makes every day a Sabbath.

During the rebuilding of the temple, Ezra writes that these customs were still followed. "Afterwards they offered the regular burnt offering, and those for New Moons and for all the appointed feasts of the LORD that were consecrated" (Ezra 3:5).

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Nehemiah mentions the creation of a temple tax in Nehemiah 10:32-33: “Also we made ordinances for ourselves, to exact from ourselves yearly one-third of a shekel for the service of the house of our God: for the showbread, for the regular grain offering, for the regular burnt offering of the Sabbaths, the New Moons, and the set feasts; for the holy things, for the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and all the work of the house of our God.”

As in the other passages, the subject is the sacrificial system of the temple. If the collection of a temple tax for New Moon rituals raises the New Moons to the level of a Sabbath, then it would be just as important for Christians to observe all the offerings and maintain the “holy things” of the temple also mentioned in these verses.

Is a New Moon a Holy Day?

As mentioned earlier, the New Moons are conspicuously absent in the list of the “feasts of the LORD” in Leviticus 23, which includes the weekly Sabbath and annual Holy Days.

Amos tells us that Israelites of his time did not sell grain on a New Moon. People were complaining, “When will the New Moon be past, that we may sell grain? And the Sabbath, that we may trade wheat?” (Amos 8:5). Does this mean that the New Moon is a commanded non-work day?

People would come to the temple for the sacrificial ceremony, as they did for the daily sacrifices. During the time of Amos there were obviously limitations on merchandising, although there are no Scriptural instructions concerning avoiding work.

The only detailed instructions we have concerning many ancient customs are contained in the Talmud. The following quotes are based on the Talmud and can be found in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*.

“Work was permitted on the New Moon (Shab. 24a; Hag. 18a; Ar. 10b), although it was customary for women to abstain from it (TJ, Ta’an. 1:6, 64c). They were allowed to observe this additional semi-festival as a reward for not having surrendered their jewelry for the creation of the golden calf (Tos. To RH 23a, s.v. *Mishum*). It later became customary for them to refrain from difficult labor, such as weaving, but to do light work such as sewing...”⁶

Once again, since there are no instructions in the Bible, we find ourselves dealing with a matter of oral law or tradition that applied to the religious system of ancient Israel, but is not part of the written law.

⁶*Encyclopedia Judaica, Vol. 12, Article “New Moon,”* 1971, p. 1,040.

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God repeatedly chides Israel for adhering to the ritual aspects of the temple, yet neglecting the spiritual meaning. It is important for Christians to not fall into the same ditch.

In Isaiah 1:2-20 God indicts Israel's proclivity to worship Him in form with no substance. Notice the emphasis on their ritual sacrifices without true repentance in verses 12-15: "When you come to appear before Me, who has required this from your hand, to trample My courts? Bring no more futile sacrifices; incense is an abomination to Me. The New Moons, the Sabbaths, and the calling of assemblies—I cannot endure iniquity and the sacred meeting. Your New Moons and your appointed feasts My soul hates; they are a trouble to Me, I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood."

Blowing of the Trumpet

An important event on each New Moon was the blowing of a trumpet. Psalm 81:3 has been used to support the observance of New Moons as monthly Sabbaths: "Blow the trumpet at the time of the New Moon, at the full moon, on our solemn feast day."

This Psalm is many times associated with the Feast of Trumpets which occurs on a New Moon. It is unusual that this passage contains the instructions to blow the trumpet on a "full moon." This is due to the fact that the Feast of Trumpets was the beginning of the fall festival season and the Feast of Tabernacles begins in the middle of the seventh month, which is a full moon. So we can see that this Psalm, which is still read in many Jewish communities on the Feast of Trumpets, concerns a "solemn feast day" which falls on a New Moon as well as one which falls on a full moon. This verse does not establish the New Moons (or full moons) as festivals or Sabbaths.

New Moons in the New Testament

The mention of New Moons occurs only once in the New Testament in Colossians 2:16-17: "So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ."

We can conclude from this passage that there were those in Colosse who were holding some kind of New Moon observance. It is important to first understand the context of this passage and, secondly, not to add anything to it.

Proper translating shows that the Colossians are instructed not to allow the ascetics of the community to judge the Church members concerning "eating" and "drinking" nor the manner of observing the festivals, New Moons or Sabbaths. This understanding can be established by the Greek language. The subject being addressed is judging the manner of "eating" and "drinking." The ascetics also were criticizing the manner of observing of these days, not the fact that they were observing them.

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As we have already seen, “appointed festivals” and Sabbaths are commanded by God in the Old Testament. There are also numerous New Testament passages that show their validity for Christians. We know that the Colossians, if obeying the Scripture, would be refraining from work and would be holding holy convocations on the Sabbaths and Holy Days. We have no indication of what members in Colosse were doing on New Moons. We only have Paul’s instructions not to let the heretics impose ascetic practices on them.

It is interesting to note in Colossians 2:16 that Paul refers to three distinct days or categories of days: “So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths.” It is possible to conclude from the structure of this sentence that Paul is referring to three different categories of days—festivals, Sabbaths and New Moons. A logical conclusion to draw is that a festival is not exactly the same as a Sabbath, and that a New Moon is not the same as a Sabbath or a festival. This would be consistent with the rest of Scripture where we never find the New Moon listed as a Sabbath or a Holy Day (festival).

It is also important to point out that as long as the temple stood in Jerusalem, there would be Jewish Christians who recognized the New Moons as well as performed sacrifices, vows and other rituals. We even have an example of the apostle Paul giving a special offering at the temple on one of his trips to Jerusalem (Acts 21:26-27). After the destruction of the temple, practices related to the Levitical priesthood disappeared from the Christian community. On the other hand, the Sabbath and annual festivals have universal application and continued to be observed according to the commandment.

A Future for New Moons?

Prophecy indicates that during the millennial reign of Jesus Christ a new temple will be built in Jerusalem and the nations will worship God on the Sabbaths and New Moons. ““And it shall come to pass that from one New Moon to another, and from one Sabbath to another, all flesh shall come to worship before Me,” says the LORD” (Isaiah 66:23). And Ezekiel foretells, “Likewise the people of the land shall worship at the entrance to this gateway before the LORD on the Sabbaths and the New Moons” (Ezekiel 46:3). Ezekiel 40-47 is a prophecy concerning this future temple.

The reinstatement of the Levitical priesthood and temple in Jerusalem by Christ will revive the sacrificial system. Zechariah 8 is a prophecy concerning Jerusalem during the Messiah’s reign. Verse 19 lists a number of fasts that will be changed to “cheerful feasts.” These fasts occur in the fourth, fifth, seventh and tenth months. These four fasts were created by the Israelites to commemorate historical events (much like Purim in Esther 9:17-32), but were never commanded Holy Days of the LORD.

So we see that the reinstatement of the Levitical priesthood revives a number of observances that are not listed as God’s appointed Sabbaths in Leviticus 23, including the New Moons and the various fasts of Israelite tradition. But there is no indication that these special days are commanded of Christians today who worship God without a physical temple or Levitical priesthood.

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In Summary:

While the United Church of God is eager to observe all the institutions commanded by God, we do not have a biblical command to observe New Moons. There is a stern admonition found in Deuteronomy 12:32 commanding us not to add or take away from God's commands.

“Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it.”

No man can declare a day holy nor can a man make a day unholy that God has made holy. Therefore, the New Moon cannot be a Holy Day, since we have no explicit statement from God declaring it to be such. There is no command for worship or assembly on these days. God has given us seven annual Holy Days and a weekly Sabbath for assembly and worship. We cannot find support in the Scriptures for declaring the New Moon a Holy Day or a Sabbath day with any special ceremony.