

Thinking to Change Times and Laws—Part One

Time is difficult to define and to measure. This is what we have learned by trying to understand the laws that govern our universe, the starting point by which people begin to chart their human existence and to contemplate the purpose of life. Leaving us to only mark the passage of time, often memorializing events and individuals on our calendars, which can reflect the defining and binding cultural attributes, religious beliefs and political directions of peoples and nations.

The difficulty in explaining our universe and our time spent living in this universe lies in the fact that humankind was not around at the beginning of the universe, which has limited people's awareness of their existence to only a few thousand years of human experience.

Scientists and astronomers alike have informed us that the universe is very old and it is moving away from us in all directions, which is an observation seemingly not overlooked in Scripture because Isaiah described a similar idea when he wrote: "It is he that sitteth upon the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers; that stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain, and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in" (Isa. 40:22).

This indicates to us that the Bible addresses the fact that there had to be an

observable beginning to the universe and a beginning for time, but a conclusion has not been reached by either the scientist or theologian as to what exactly took place at "the beginning" of the universe (Rom. 1:20). Leaving the Apostle Paul to tell us that "through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which do appear (Heb. 11:3).

Nevertheless, when people began to chart their existence and measure their time on earth, they were compelled to do it based on the physical universe that came into existence prior to human arrival. People have done this by various means, but basically people have numbered their days according to the seasons, and the sun, moon and stars.

By these celestial bodies, people have charted their time on earth, often in the form of calendars, to mark their place in the passage of time. This seems to give people a sense of belonging and realism in their lives. It also gives people a sense of purpose, so their lives don't seem meaningless and aimless, because a calendar can mark important events—both past and future—and give place to our memorials.

"So teach us to number our days,"
King David said.

And that is what we do.

On the individual level and on a national scale.

But not without some confusion and distortions in how we chart our times on the earth, because there are different interpretations of events and experiences and sometimes these are changed as the result of circumstances, and the result is sometimes a change in the direction of people's lives. (David's statement implies a reflection on our personal life as a temporary existence and that such time should be used wisely in living God's way of life.)

Sometimes this has a good outcome, and at other times it has led to troubles.

Now, it seems that many peoples, nations and empires have seen themselves as the center of the universe, or at least their own universe, and it is from this frame of mind that people sometimes record their life experiences, remembering the past, and planning the future direction of their lives.

Consequently, an accepted calendar by any group of people can be influential in this context, and it can have a guiding nature for different cultures, and so it is easy to understand how a change in the way we chart the times affects our understanding of the past and the future. Likewise, we can also understand how a departure from one calendar, to the acceptance of another calendar, can reflect what people choose to believe and how they choose to remember their past and see their future.

More importantly, however, is that any change in how people see their memorials in regard to their beliefs—political or religious—can spark conflict without resolution, and invite intervention by greater authorities and powers, and it is particularly so with peoples and nations who hold collective beliefs, some perhaps memorialized on calendars, who feel that their religious and political existence is in jeopardy by the changing of seasons and laws.

An example we can draw on from the Bible is found in a statement made in a prophecy recorded in the book of Daniel where it speaks of an authority who intends—within the scope of the authority—to “change times and laws,” which is to say “seasonal” memorials and laws that would affect both political and religious practice, which would naturally be reflected in how people mark the important and guiding events of their past and future.

Prompting us to explore this issue further, and in doing so we will examine the significance of this intent to change “times and laws” from the perspective of the calendar.

The Mayas, for example, had a belief that the universe would continue to be created and destroyed many times over. They understood their world in terms of beginnings and endings, and each time the world would last about 5,000 years. Their universe began, according to a modern understanding of their calendar, on the

day equivalent to September 6, 3114 BCE on the Julian Calendar, and it would be destroyed sometime after AD 2000. (We can say as of this writing that it hasn't happened as yet.)

We can take another example of how people chart their time and relate it to their culture and religion from a discovery that occurred some decades ago. An amazing discovery was made in a peat bog of the English Midlands of England. A peat cutter came upon the remains of a man, fairly well preserved, who was thought to be about 2,000 years old. He came to be called Lindow Man, and further research revealed that he was probably a Druid nobleman and priest.

Additional research revealed that he had died about the time the Romans began their invasion of Britain, and that his death was related to the ancient Beltain celebration, noting that the Celts used a fourfold division of the year, based on important points of the agricultural cycle, which were marked by four main festivals — Imbolc, Lughnasa, Beltain and Samain (Samhain).

The hideous Beltain was celebrated during times of uncertainty and fear of danger.

Some of the calendar feasts of the Celts were absorbed by the Catholic Church. Imbolc was assigned to Candlemas, Lughnasa became Lammas (First Fruits Festival), and All Saints Day (Halloween) has its roots in Samain. The Beltain (May Day) remained secular.

These examples reveal how rituals and meanings are added to the calendar, which not only mark the seasons, but mark influential times of celebration or festivity during those seasons, which can shape and reshape a culture and its national policy. Calendars can also show how the adoption of such festivals has had a profound affect on the evolution of the Christian faith, which has on many grounds departed from the simplicity of its original teachings that came from Jesus.

Obviously, when people have charted their lives and times, they have added mystic and cultic rituals to them. The Druids, for example, were instrumental in using their knowledge of astronomy and calendars to exercise control over people. An example is one of the oldest inscriptions in the Celtic language known today as the Coligny calendar, which is considered to be the work of Gaulish Druids. (It was divided by lines of small holes beside each day and covered a span of 16 months.)

The Druids, thought to be astronomer-priests, used places such as Avebury, Callanish and the famous Stonehenge of England as ceremonial sites, and not far from Stonehenge was found the remains of a man who was thought to be a chieftain or king of the Celts. On his chest was found a lozenge-shaped gold breastplate, engraved with what is assumed to be a calendar, showing again how significant the seasons and celestial

bodies are for marking time in people's lives.

So it is that people have set out to measure the passage of time, sometimes with the purpose of controlling the lives of others, which was accomplished by establishing calendars based on the seasons, the sun, the moon and the stars.

In this world, the moon is probably the most celebrated timekeeper, but it has its limitations in some respects. There are many festivals that surround the moon's appearance, as well as many mystiques, but it became essential for counting the passing of time.

The ancient Babylonians, for example, used a lunar-solar calendar to help them measure the cycle of the seasons. If they had used only a lunar calendar, that would have created a wandering year. In other words, the seasons would begin to fall during succeeding months as time went on. This is because a lunar month lasts about 29 1/2 days, and some 44 minutes. Twelve lunar months are about 11 days shorter than a solar year.

The Babylonian solution was to use what scholars call the Metonic Cycle, which was a nineteen-year time cycle (seven years of 13 months, and 12 years of 12 months). It was thought to be in use in Babylon at least by the 5th century BCE, following Daniel's time in Babylon. (Daniel's position as head of the Magi may well have been instrumental in the Babylonian's ultimate acceptance of the nineteen-year time cycle.)

The Egyptians began with a simpler plan as they invented a civil calendar based to some degree on the flooding of the Nile River, and the rise of the star, Sirius.

Each year the river would flood its banks, turning the narrow strip of land on each side of the river into a fertile growing area. When this happened the Egyptians simply calculated that if they used a solar year of 12 months of thirty days each, adding five at the end of the year, they could make a year of 365 days. (The Egyptians also used the lunar-solar calendar for festivals and rituals.)

This became known as the "Nile Year."

The people of ancient Israel also used a lunar-solar calendar, as do the Jews today. To adjust it to the seasons, they simply add one extra month for each leap year. The Jewish year is made up of 12 months of 29 or 30 days, totaling 354 (or 355 and 356) days. To adjust it to the seasons, they add a month of 30 days to seven of the years in a nineteen-year time-cycle, as in ancient Babylonia.

From Scripture we see that most of the months in the Hebrew calendar retain their Babylonian names acquired during the Exile. Only four of the original Hebrew names are known in Scripture. The meaning of three of the names is uncertain. The one called Abib, may be translated as "ripening of grain," or "ear of grain," but it is commonly referred to by its Babylonian name of Nisan (Nisan).

(It is probable that one month is known as “clear heat,” as found in Isaiah.)

Now, according to the directions of the Qur’an, Islam only follows a lunar calendar, and this is in strict obedience to the words of the prophet Muhammad. The Muslim life is guided by the cycle of the moon, for by it they know when to take their pilgrimage to Mecca, and when to keep Ramadan (the month of fasting).

The Muslim year has 12 months, with days that alternate from 29 to 30. To keep their calendar correct they use a cycle of about 33 years, when the beginning of the year returns to the same seasonal position.

This has led to some problems.

Some Muslims would prefer to use calculations to correct the problems of the lunar cycle, while the majority still prefer to hold to observation of the moon and not the sun as their guide. Noting that because of the strict adherence to the cycle of the moon, the pilgrimage to Mecca can take place in summer or in winter, and the date for Ramadan can change by several solar days each year (April/May 2021).

In the early church, there were those who used the Hebrew lunar-solar calendar to calculate the Passover, a festival on the 14th day of the first month (Nissan) of the year. Later Christianity generally followed the Hebrew lunar-solar calendar for determining Easter (the presumed day of the wave-sheaf) and Pentecost. (For general use the Hebrew calendar is

replaced by the Julian and now the Gregorian calendar.)

Historically, however, Passover would fall on different days on the Julian calendar used throughout the Roman Empire. This would change the day of Easter for some Christians who followed the Roman calendar, and who were determined that Easter should always be observed on a Sunday. The problem for Easter was resolved at the Council of Nicaea in Asia Minor in AD 325, which attempted to set a unified date for Easter.

So, we can begin to see then how the establishment of calendars has had a profound effect on people’s lives, and how it often comes to govern the way people worship, and how they see their past and future, and how they see their political standing in the world.

Consequently, a change in times and laws that create changes in our memorials as reflected in a calendar can have significant political and religious ramifications for a nation. (Continued in part two of this series.) 