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The Montanists and the Jubilees Calendar

For the last two centuries church historians have been puzzled as to why the Montanists were so much derided by the Church Fathers.¹ The charges laid against this movement, which arose in Asia Minor in the second half of the second century of the Common Era (C. E.), seem to them to be somehow exaggerated. However, I suggest that the Church Fathers were right in their condemnations; the Montanists were indeed a breakaway group of the worst type because they employed a different calendar from the rest of the Christian community.² In this article I endeavor to show that the Montanists adopted the Jubilees calendar and by this act they caused a serious schism in the early church.

1 For a survey of research done on this topic and also new ideas, see: Williams, D. H. 1989. *The Origin of the Montanist Movement: A Sociological Analysis*. *Religion*. 19, No. 4, pp. 331-352.

2 Discussing the matter of different calendar calculation by the sectarians of Qumran, Shemaryahu Talmon wrote:

Among the acts which estranged the Sons of Lights from normative Judaism, special importance attaches to their adherence to a calendar not identical with that of the mother-community. No barrier appears to be more substantial and fraught with heavier consequences than difference in calendar calculation. An alternation of any one of the dates that regulate the course of the year inevitably produces a break-up of communal life, impairing the co-ordination between the behaviour of man and his fellow, and abolishes that synchronization of habits and activities which is the foundation of properly functioning social order. Whosoever celebrates his own Sabbath, and does not observe the festivals of the year at the same time as the community in which he lives, removes himself from his fellows and ceases to be a member of the social body to which he hitherto belonged. This rule also applies to other attempts in Jewish history to introduce changes in calendar calculation, the first being attributed to Jeroboam ben Nabat. One may venture to say that the deviation from the calendar accepted by the normative community was for the Dead Sea Sect – as it was for other dissident groups, such as the Samaritans and the Karaites – a sign and symbol of their disobedience towards the contemporary public leadership of Judaism, and of their dissidence from the body politic. Their opponents rightly interpreted this act as a proclamation of civil revolt.

Talmon, Shemaryahu. 1958. *The Calendar Reckoning of the Sect from the Judaean Desert*. p.163. *Scripta Hierosolymitana*. IV, pp. 162-199. Jerusalem: The Magnes Press.

The Jubilees Calendar

The source of the Jubilees calendar is two books written during the Second Temple Period. This period, which started in the year 537 Before the Common Era (B. C. E.) with the return of the first contingents of Babylonian exiles and ended with the destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70 C. E., produced a vast number of Jewish writings, among them *1 (the Ethiopic Book of) Enoch* and *Jubilees*.³ Both books have survived extant only in Ge'ez, the liturgical language of the Ethiopian Church.

The vast Enochic literature had originated from *Genesis* 5: 23-24:

All the days of Enoch came to 365 years. Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, for God took him. (*Tanakh* [The Jewish Publication Society translation, 1985])

This cryptic text, asserting that Enoch, son of Jared and father of Methuselah, lived as many years as there are days in a solar year and that he ascended to heaven to be with God, aroused an enormous amount of imaginative writing, starting already in antiquity up to the Middle Ages.

1 Enoch is a collection of writings of diverse genres, composed during the last three centuries B. C. E. The writings deal with Enoch's ascent to heaven and the secrets revealed to him while he is there. The book had had a tremendous influence on the early church but from the fourth century on, it gradually began to be discredited and was finally banned by the Church Fathers.⁴ It has survived extant only in the Ethiopian Church, where it is considered canonical. In the eighteenth century, a Scottish traveler, James Bruce, brought a copy of it from Ethiopia and in the next century German and English translations were made.

Details of a calendar are given in that part of *1 Enoch* which is known as the *Book of the Courses of the Heavenly Luminaries* (chapters 72-82). This section gives detailed descriptions of the course of the sun, the moon and the stars, the seasons of the year, etc. After working out the procession of the sun through the 'gates' and 'windows' of the heavens, the author reaches the obviously wrong conclusion that a solar year consists of 364 days. There could be no doubt that such a distinguished astronomical maven, who could describe so thoroughly, yet inaccurately,⁵ the features of the universe, knew

3 The full title is: These are the words regarding the divisions of the times of the law and of the testimony, of the events of the years, of the weeks of their jubilees throughout all the years of eternity as he related (them) to Moses on Mt. Sinai when he went up to receive the stone tablets – the law and the commandments – on the Lord's orders as he had told him that he should come up to the summit of the mountain.

4 *The Book of Enoch*. Charles, R. H. (trans). 1893. p. 1. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

5 Neugebauer, O. 1964. *Notes on Ethiopic Astronomy*. *Orientalia*. 33, pp. 49-71.

perfectly well that there are 365¼ days in a solar year and not 364. Moreover, the birth of the Enochic myth is linked to the biblical verse which attributes to Enoch a life-span of 365 years.

The assertion that a year has 364 days is a polemic, intended to heighten a certain religious aspect. In a year of 364 days there are exactly 52 weeks. In a calendar which is based on such a year, all holidays occur not only on the same date but also on the same day of the week. To get the number straight, the year is divided into 12 months each of 30 days and an extra day is added every three months, so each season comprises of 91 days, which is exactly 13 weeks. The four extra days are the equinoxes and the solstices. The new year starts at the vernal equinox.

This kind of calendar is a solar one since it precludes any consideration of the cycle of the moon. Since antiquity, the Jews have been using a lunar-solar calendar where the months follow the moon cycle but the year is calculated according to the solar cycle. The difference between these cycles is resolved by the use of intercalary months according to a given frequency.

The *Book of Jubilees*, generally assumed to be written during the second century B. C. E., adopts a 364-day calendar, as proposed in *1 Enoch*:

6:32 Now you command the Israelites to keep the years in this number – 364 days. Then the year will be complete and it will not disturb its time from its days or from its festivals because everything will happen in harmony with their testimony. They will neither omit a day nor disturb a festival.⁶

The author of *Jubilees* added meanings to the extra four days:

6:23 On the first of the first month, the first of the fourth month, the first of the seventh month, and the first of the tenth month are memorial days and days of the seasons. They are written down and ordained at the four divisions of the year as an eternal testimony. 6:24 Noah ordained them as festivals for himself throughout the history of eternity with the result that through them he had a reminder. 6:25 On the first of the first month he was told to make the ark, and on it the earth became dry, he opened (it), and saw the earth. 6:26 On the first of the fourth month the opening of the depths of the abyss below were closed. On the first of the seventh month all the opening of the earth's depth were opened, and the water began to go down into them. 6:27 On the tenth month the summit of the mountains became visible, and Noah was very happy.

This book was also forgotten in the West until the nineteenth century. In 1844, H. Ewald published a description of a manuscript of *Jubilees* which was brought to Tübingen by a missionary from Ethiopia. The first German translation, by Dillmann, was prepared in 1850-51 (*Das Buch der Jubiläen oder die kleine Genesis*, Göttingen). An English translation, done by R. H.

6 *The Ethiopic Book of Jubilees*. James VanderKam (trans.). 1989. Leuven: CSCO.

Charles, appeared in 1895 (*The Ethiopian Version of the Hebrew Book of Jubilees*, Oxford).

Fragments of the books of *1 Enoch* (in Aramaic) and *Jubilees* (in Hebrew) were found in Qumran. In the writings of the sect, scholars detected some passages that may give reason to believe that the group who lived there might have employed this kind of a calendar, hence the notion of the Jubilees calendar.

A proper calendar needs a procedure for counting the years and *Jubilees* indeed offers such a system: it counts years in sabbatical cycles of seven years, which is a week, and seven such weeks (49 years) are a jubilee. The fiftieth year is the year of Jubilee as commanded in Lev. 25. *Jubilees* counts the fiftieth year as the first year of the next jubilee cycle so, in practice, each jubilee comprises of 49 years and this number is added when summing up the numbers of years of any given number of jubilees. To illustrate this calculation here is one example taken from *Jubilees*:

10:15 Noah slept with his fathers and was buried on Mt. Lubar in the land of Ararat. 10:16 He completed 950 years in his lifetime – 19 jubilees, two weeks and five years...

The arithmetic is simple: $49 \text{ (years)} \times 19 \text{ (jubilees)} = 931 + 14 \text{ (two weeks)} + 5 = 950 \text{ years}$

According to Milik,⁷ there was a full-blown renaissance of Enochic literature in the early Christian communities and it came about through the medium of Greek translations. Some authors of the New Testament were familiar with *Jubilees*⁸ and *1 Enoch*;⁹ Jude quotes *Jubilees* directly. There are testimonies to indicate that *1 Enoch* enjoyed an almost canonical status in the early days of the Church. According to Charles,¹⁰ the *Epistle of Barnabas*, written not many years after 70 C. E., cited *Enoch* three times, twice as Scripture. Around 375 C. E., Epiphanius of Salamis wrote his book against heretics, *Panarion*, in which he cited *Jubilees* as a polemic against the Sethians:

But, as is apparent in *Jubilees* or "The little Genesis," the book even contains the names of both Cain's and Seth's wives – to the utter shame of these people who have recited their myths to the world.¹¹

7 Milik, Józef T. 1976. *The Book of Enoch*. p. 7. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

8 Charles, R. H. 1913. *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha*. Vol II, *Pseudepigrapha*. p. 10. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

9 (*Ethiopic Apocalypse of Enoch*). Isaac, E. (trans.). 1983. p. 10. In Charlesworth, James H. (ed). *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd.

10 *The Book of Enoch*. Charles, R. H. (trans.). 1893. p. 38. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

11 *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*. Williams, Frank (trans.). 1987. E. J. Brill: Leiden.

The Montanists' Use of the Jubilees Calendar

In his *Ecclesiastical History*, the fifth-century church historian Sozomenus wrote (Book VII, chapter 19):¹²

The Montanists, who are called Pepuzits and Phrygians, celebrate the Passover according to a strange fashion which they introduced. They blame those who regulate the time of observing the feast according to the course of the moon, and affirm that it is right to attend exclusively to the cycles of the sun. They reckon each month to consist of thirty days, and account the day after the vernal equinox as the first day of the year, which, according to the Roman method of computation, would be called the ninth day before the calends of April.

The Montanist movement was founded by Montanus in the second half of the second century in Phrygia, which is in central Asia Minor. By its own members, the movement was called the New Prophecy. Pepuzia was a small town in Phrygia. Epiphanius mentioned the sect under the name Cataphrygians ('In Phrygia') in his *Panarion* chapter 48:

These people who are called Cataphrygians also accept all the Old and New Testament, and acknowledge likewise the resurrection of the dead, but they boast of having as a prophet one Montanus, and Priscilla and Maximilla as prophetesses, in adhering to whom they have turned from the truth. They believe what the Holy Catholic church does concerning the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, but they have separated themselves, adhering to spirits of errors and doctrines of demons, and saying, 'It is the charisms too that we must receive.'

While elaborating on their sins and doctrinal errors Epiphanius wrote:

These people revere as well a deserted place in Phrygia which was once a city called Pepuza but is now razed to the ground, and say that there the Jerusalem from above is coming down. So they go off there to celebrate certain mysteries in the place and to sanctify <themselves>, as they suppose. For these people are in Cappadocia too and Galatia and in the Phrygia mentioned earlier, so that the sect is called Cataphrygian. But most of them are in Cilicia and Constantinople.

In the passage quoted from Sozomenus there are three elements which indicate that the Montanists employed the Jubilee calendar: a) the calendar was a solar one; b) they reckoned each month to consist of thirty days; c) they considered the day after the vernal equinox as the first day of the year.

It is interesting to note that they considered March 23 ('the ninth day before the calends of April') as the date of the vernal equinox and not March 21 as expected. They were actually correct. The Julian calendar, which was adopted in 45 B. C. E., calculated a year as 365¼ days, which is too long. The error is 11 minutes and 14 seconds per year, which amounts to almost one and a half days in two centuries and seven days in 1,000 years. The Montanists

12 Sozomenus. *Church History*. Schaff, Philip et al. (trans.). 1957. *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*. Vol. II. Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

were active from the second century on so a correction of two days is reasonable.¹³

Sozomenus continued:

It was on this day [the vernal equinox], they say, that the two great luminaries appointed for the indication of times and years were created. This they prove by the fact that every eight years the sun and the moon meet together in the same point of the heavens. The moon's cycle of eight years is accomplished in ninety-nine months, and in two thousand nine hundred and twenty-two days; and during that time there are eight revolutions made by the sun, each comprising three hundred and sixty-five days, and the fourth part of a day. (explanation added)

The text refers to a cycle of eight years, known as *octaëteris*, which was used in antiquity to give a valid link between lunar and solar cycles. However, by the second century C. E. this calculation was long outdated, replaced by a more accurate cycle of 19 years devised about 430 B. C. E. by the astronomer Meton of Athens. Considering the sophistication the Montanists displayed by taking into account the small error in the Julian calendar, they must have been aware of the inaccuracy of the 'proof' described in the quotation above. By this 'proof' they, perhaps, tried to correct an even grosser mistake in the original calendar. In *1 Enoch* 74: 16 we read:

In eight years the days (add up to) two thousand eight hundred thirty-two days, so that it falls behind by eight days in eight years.

The difference of eight days is the result of the schematic solar year of 364 days. The Montanists adopted the length of 365¼ days and 'corrected' the old 'mistake' with a better approximation.

Sozomenus continued:

For they computed the day of the creation of the sun, mentioned in the Sacred Writ, to have been the fourteenth day of the moon, occurring after the ninth day before the calends of the month of April, and answering to the eighth day prior to ides of the same month. They always celebrate the Passover on this day, when it falls on the day of the resurrection; otherwise they celebrate it on the following Lord's day; for it is written according to their assertion that the feast may be held on any day between the fourteenth and twenty first.

13 By the time the calendar was corrected in the sixteenth century, the mistake accumulated to ten days. A papal bull, issued by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582, brought the vernal equinox back to March 21 by omitting ten days from the calendar. In this way, the day following October 5 of that year became October 15. The same calculation may also explain the date of Christmas. Originally, that holiday replaced a pagan festival of the Unconquered Sun (*Sol Invictus*) celebrated on the day of the winter solstice, which is the twenty-second of December. The first notice of a feast of the nativity of Christ occurred in the year 354 of the Philocalian calendar, which is 336 C. E. At that time the deviation from the original date was already three days. The people of antiquity used sundials and were well aware, much more than us, when the winter solstice occurs.

In other words, Passover was always celebrated on a Sunday, either on the 6th of April ('the fourteenth day of the moon') or any date after it, no later then the 13th of April. I suggest that the phrase 'the fourteenth day of the moon' should be read as 'the fourteenth day of the month.'

The division of dates looks as follows:

The first month of
the Jubilees calendar

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
March	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31
	vernal equinox	the first day of the year							

	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
April	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	calends of April	the first possible date for celebrating Passover								

19	20	21
11	12	13
ides of April		
The last possible date for celebrating Passover		

According to the Montanists' calculation, Passover starts on the fourteenth of the first month; according to Jewish tradition, Passover starts on the fifteenth. In Leviticus 23: 5-6 we read:

In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month, at twilight, there shall be passover offering to the Lord, and on the fifteenth day of that month the Lord's Feast of Unleavened Bread. You shall eat unleavened bread for seven days.

As it is clear from this text, the fourteenth of the first month is not considered to be part of the holiday. The text of *Jubilees* may be interpreted in such a way that the fourteenth is already a day of holiday:

49:1 Remember the commandments which the Lord gave you regarding the passover so that you may celebrate it at its time on the fourteenth of the first month, that you may sacrifice it before evening, and so that they may eat it at night on the evening of the fifteenth from the time of sunset.

The Montanists had among their ranks a major church figure, Tertullian, who joined the movement sometime before 210 C. E. Tertullian considered *Enoch*

Scripture, a fact that may explain the Montanists' adoption of the Jubilees calendar. In his treatise *On the Apparel of Women* Tertullian dealt with, among other topics, the origin of female ornamentation, tracing it back to the angels who had fallen, a motif which appears in *Enoch*. Being aware that his arguments were controversial, Tertullian wrote (chap. III):¹⁴

I am aware that the Scripture of Enoch, which has assigned this order (of Action) to angels, is not received by some, because it is not admitted into the Jewish canon either. I suppose they did not think that, having been published before the deluge, it could have safely survived that world-wide calamity, the abolisher of all things ... If (Noah) had not had this (conservative power) by so short a route, there would (still) be this (consideration) to warrant our assertion of (the genuineness of) this Scripture: he could equally have *renewed* it, under the Spirit's inspiration, after it *had* been destroyed by the violence of the deluge, ... But since Enoch in the same scripture has preached likewise concerning the Lord, nothing at all must be rejected by us which pertain to us; and we read that "every Scripture suitable for edification is divinely inspired." By the *Jews* it may seem to have been rejected for that (very) reason, just like all the other (portions) which tell of Christ. Nor, of course, is this fact wonderful, that they did not receive some scripture which spoke of Him whom even in person, speaking in their presence, they were not to receive. To these considerations is added the fact that Enoch possesses a testimony in the apostle Jude.

As it is clear from this quotation, Tertullian not only knew and used *Enoch*, he also considered it as Scripture. In the 'Elucidation' to this treatise, the translator wrote that although *Enoch* is referred to frequently in the *Patrologia*, of the Fathers only Tertullian pays it the respect due to Scripture.¹⁵ Tertullian's arguments concerning the apparel of women could have been used also for adopting another part of *Enoch*, namely its calendar.

As a millenarist movement, the Montanists might have counted jubilees. However, since they were considered heretics, we know very little about them and I did not find any evidence to indicate such usage. I also examined material concerning ancient inscriptions found in Asia Minor but to no avail.

There is at least one certain case in Christian history where jubilees were counted. Eusebius, the fourth-century church historian, used the jubilees reckoning in the second part of his *Chronicle*, also known as the *Chronological Canons*. Eusebius' work was translated into Latin by Jerome and has survived extant in different versions to the present. On page one of one of the two editions in front of me¹⁶ (from 1866) we read:

14 *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. 1956. Vol. IV, p.15. Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing.

15 Ibid p. 26.

16 Eusebius of Caesarea.

Chronicorum Canonum libri. 1658. Amstelodami.

Chronicorum libri duo. 1866-75. Ed. Alfred Schoene. Berolini.

Apud Hebraeos, usque ad nativitatem Abrahae, computantur anni mille nongenti quinquaginta. Vsque ad diluvium enim ab Adam, habent annos MDCLVI et inde usque ad Abraham CCXCII. Et ideo XL iobelaei a nativitate Abraham computantur. Vnus enim iobelaeus quinquaginta anni sunt.

Eusebius used the birth of Abraham as year number one and from that time kept counting the years until the twentieth year of Constantine's reign, which following this chronology, was the year 2345. In the second manuscript (from 1658), I read that during the eighty-first jubilee (from the creation of the world [?]), the year of the two hundred and second Olympiad, "JESVS CHRISTVS FILIVS DEI" was baptized.¹⁷

Another possible use of the Jubilees calendar is the Gothic calendar, dated no later than the sixth century. Already in the nineteenth century researchers became aware of the fact that of the two known months of the Gothic calendar which are successive, each contained thirty days. The calendar could not have been the Julian calendar because then one of those months should have consisted of thirty-one days. Neither could it have been a solar-lunar calendar because in that case one of the months should have lasted only twenty-nine days. However, it could have been a Jubilees calendar because in that calendar each month consists of thirty days.

In the matter of the calendar, the Montanists were on the losing side. During the second and third centuries there was a great debate among Christians about whether Easter should be celebrated on the fourteenth of the first Jewish month or on the fifteenth. The former method of reckoning was advocated by the so-called Quartodecimans 'Fourteenthers' and the latter by the Quintodecimans 'Fifteenthers'. The Montanists were the forerunners of the Quartodecimans. Epiphanius wrote:

From these two sects which combined with each other, the Cataphrygians and Quintillans or Priscillians, another sect, that of the so-called Quartodecimans, appeared in the world (Panarion, 50.1.1.)

¹⁷ The counting of jubilees was 'resumed' in February 22, 1300 in a decree published by Pope Boniface VIII proclaiming that year as a Jubilee Year. According to *Wetzer und Welte's Kirchenlexikon* (1906-1911, s. v. Jubilaeum, Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder'sche Verlagshandlung) the original idea was to celebrate a Jubilee Year every hundred years but a new such Year was celebrated already from Christmas of 1349 till Christmas of 1350. Later it was decided that the interval would be 33 years, to indicate the number of years Jesus lived, and since 1475 every 25 years. The Jubilee Year is still celebrated by the Catholic Church every 25 years and on special occasions. I suggest that this custom was established as a continuation of the ancient jubilees. I would imagine that the scholars, who in the late twelfth century prepared the report suggesting the idea of a Jubilee Year to Pope Boniface, were familiar with Eusebius' book and the Catholic Church 'Jubilee Year' was modeled on his chronology which, in turn, was based on *Jubilees*.

The question concerning the correct date was finally decided at the Council of Nicaea, in 325, in favour of the Quintadecimans, but it seems that not everybody agreed and some retained their old way of reckoning. Their number must have been quite large because Emperor Constantine himself published a letter urging the dissenters to follow the majority rule. In that letter, reprinted by Eusebius in his *Life of Constantine* and by the fifth-century church historian Socrates (*Church History*, book V chapter XXII), we read:

It is a becoming order which all the churches in the Western, Southern, and Northern parts of the world observe, and some places in the East also. Wherefore all on the present occasion have judged it right, and I have pledged myself that it will have the acquiescence of your prudence, that what is unanimously observed in the city of Rome, throughout Italy, Africa, and the whole of Egypt, in Spain, France, Britain, Libya, and all Greece, the diocese of Asia and Pontus, and Cilicia, your wisdom also will readily embrace; considering not only that the number of churches in the aforesaid places is greater, but also that while there should be a universal concurrence in what is most reasonable, it becomes us to have nothing in common with the perfidious Jews.¹⁸

Nowadays, when a printed and almost universally accepted calendar is hanging on the wall, we need to stretch our imagination to grasp the enormity of power held by those who control the setting of the dates and holy days. It is not surprising to read that seceding groups often adopted a calendar system differing from the mother-communities. The act of changing the calendar is not an end in itself but an expression of breaking away. However, while ideological and doctrinal disagreements may disappear, calendar differences are much harder to reconcile. The Montanists' adoption of a different calendar qualifies them as a dissenting group and the criticism directed against them in antiquity had good reasons.

The calendar adopted by the Montanists had some features which identified it as a Jubilees calendar: the calendar was a solar one; each month consisted of thirty days; the day after the vernal equinox was the first day of the year. However, they calculated the length of year as 365¼ days and not 364 as in *1 Enoch*.

18 Socrates. *Church History*. Schaff, Philip et al. (trans.). 1957. *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*. Vol. II, book V chapter XXII. Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.