Frank W. Nelte

THE TIMING OF THE BARLEY HARVEST IN ISRAEL

Some people claim that the timing of the barley harvest in Israel should be the deciding factor as to when to start the new year for determining the observance of God's annual Feasts and Holy Days.

That claim is obviously not correct. God did not hinge the start of a new year on the state of the barley crop, even if on occasions in the first and second centuries A.D. the pharisaical leaders of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem decided to use the state of the barley harvest to start a new year one new moon later. This question is addressed in more detail in some of the articles in the Calendar Articles section of this website.

However, a major motive with people today wanting to use the barley harvest to determine the start of the year is to justify starting the year AS EARLY AS POSSIBLE, frequently even before the end of winter. That is in fact the opposite of what the Talmud records the leaders of the Sanhedrin occasionally doing ... they at times decided to start the year LATER rather than earlier.

These decisions today are invariably made by religious people who have a clear vested interest in the outcome of "their investigation of the state of the barley crop". Some people in the churches of God look to the Karaites in Israel for this information regarding the state of the barley.

Now IF the state of the barley harvest really was an important factor in determining the start of the year, which it is not, THEN at the very least I would like to have an objective assessment made by people who have no vested interest of any kind in the outcome of the investigation concerning the state of the barley harvest.

SO HERE I HAVE A LETTER FROM AN ISRAELI OFFICIAL IN THE MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE.

The following is an accurate and faithful copy of a letter that I have in my possession. It was written by the DIRECTOR OF FIELD CROPS DEPARTMENT, of the EXTENSION SERVICE of the MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE, of the STATE OF ISRAEL.

The author is a Mr. N. Bar-Droma. The date of the letter is JUNE 8TH, 1983. The letter has the REFERENCE NUMBER 35/24. The address is given as HAKIRYA, TEL-AVIV.

Here is the exact text of this letter, without any corrections or alterations having been made. The only thing I have done is delete the recipient's name to preserve his anonymity.

START OF THE LETTER

Mr. .....

Queen's Bay

R.R.#3, Nelson

British Columbia

Canada VIL 5P6

Dear Sir,

I received your letter of May 12, in which you asked for some data about barley. It is real coincidence that recently I have been receiving two other letters from different countries, all dealing with the same subject. Well, first of all, I want to give you some general information about barley growing to day in our country, which may use as a background for better understanding. As a matter of fact, barley has been diminishing steadily in our country for the last 10-15 years and covers today no more than approx. 10% of the total small grain production. This trend is due to the much lower prices for barley in compare with wheat prices, whereas the yields of both grains are more or less at the same level. The main region for barley growing is in the Negeb (South) between Beer Shebah and the Gaza strip. In the Jordan Valley there is hardly any barley left to day. Among the Arab farmers in the vicinity of Jericho there can still be found some small patches of barley.

This year was a very exceptional one, from climatic point of view. We have had an extreme wet and cold winter and therefor there was a great delay in the ripening of wheat and barley. Both are sown as a rule, in November and the harvest starts around the end of April - the beginning of May. As stated, this year the first wheat and barley have been harvested not before mid of May in the Jordan Valley.

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However, it is not right of course to make a comparison between to-day and the Ancient time, not as far as concerns the variety of barley and not the way of harvesting. To-day we have to wait with the harvest until the grain is entirely dry which means a moisture content of 12-13% only. Otherwise the mechanical harvester does not perform a clean threshing and the grain cannot be stored without further drying. In the ancient times and even to-day with primitive methods the barley and wheat were harvested with a sicle and left on the land in sheaves for further drying. Therefor the crop could be harvested a couple of weeks earlier even if the barley would have been harvested with 20% moisture content. As you probably may know, at Passover the first Omer of barley was brought as sacrifice to the Temple and before this day, the new barley was not allowed to be consumed neither for the animals. New wheat was not allowed to be consumed before Pentacost or at least as long as old wheat was still available. In the Talmud, it is mentioned that there were years that the barley was not yet ripe at Passover. In order to be able to bring the Omer sacrifice of barley in time to the Temple, they used to sow barley upon some flat roofs in the Jericho valley, which would be ready and apt to the Sacrifice on the Passover. The Omer is not a big quantity of grain. I guess that this rather extended answer will satisfy you but in case that there is still any information required, don't hesitate to write again.

Yours sincerely

N. Bar-Droma

Director Field Crops Dept.

(signed below this)

END OF THE LETTER

Here are some comments regarding this letter:

1) This letter was written in 1983 only about 3 weeks after the barley harvest had started in the middle of

May.

2) The writer was obviously knowledgeable about barley, being the director of a department within the Ministry of Agriculture in Israel.

3) The writer states that NORMALLY the barley harvest STARTS at around THE END OF APRIL. This is about 6 weeks LATER than some Karaite "experts" today claim to find "ripe barley". So Mr. Bar-Droma's comments are considerably at odds with the claims of some religious leaders who find "ripe barley" around the middle of March.

4) For the year 1983 the Jewish calendar started the year on MARCH 15, and Nisan 14 was on March 28. The actual lunar conjunction, expressed in Local Jerusalem Time, was on March 14 at 8:05 p.m., which was the first part of March 15. So in 1983 the Jewish calendar started the year on the day of the lunar conjunction. The "first Omer of barley", as Mr. Bar-Droma called it, would theoretically have been required on Sunday morning, April 3, during the Days of Unleavened Bread.

But for 1983 that was still about 6 weeks BEFORE the first barley was being harvested in the Jordan Valley, according to this Ministry of Agriculture official. Presumably the religious "barley experts" in Israel had also managed to find some ripe barley 6 weeks before the barley farmers themselves found it that year?

5) Mr. Bar-Droma acknowledged that barley could be reaped "a couple of weeks earlier" if two favourable factors came into play:

A) Harvesting by hand permitted reaping earlier with a higher moisture content, and then letting the sheaves dry further in the fields.

B) Using specific varieties with shorter growing seasons also allows reaping at an earlier date.

Combining these two favourable factors could in biblical times have brought the time of the barley harvest forward from the end of April to the middle of April (i.e. a couple of weeks). That is still about 10 days LATER than "the first Omer of barley" could theoretically be required when Nisan 1 is never earlier than the first day of spring (March 21/22).

6) So when we expect barley to be ripe for the wave offering around April 5-10, then we are still expecting barley to be ripe A FULL THREE WEEKS BEFORE the Director of the Field Crops Department stated barley is NORMALLY harvested in this age.

Now people have, through genetic modifications, produced varieties of barley that require a shorter growing season, so that these varieties can be used in colder climates, like the northern USA and southern Canada. And if such genetically manipulated varieties are grown in Israel today, then they could perhaps be ready for harvesting around April 5-10? But anything earlier than that must be viewed with scepticism, if Mr. Bar-Droma's views carry any weight.

So when the Jewish year starts on March 14, as it did in 2002, and when the Passover is on March 27, and when the wave offering would theoretically have been required on Sunday, March 31 (in 2002), THEN THAT IS A FULL MONTH BEFORE BARLEY IS NORMALLY REAPED IN ISRAEL TODAY!

I believe that under such circumstances the claim of having ripe barley available by March 31 is highly suspect of ulterior religious motives.

IF the barley harvest was to have any influence at all in determining the correct new moon for starting

the year, then it surely has to be this:

> The state of the barley harvest could PERHAPS cause the start of a year to be postponed to THE FOLLOWING NEW MOON (thereby giving the previous year a 13th month), but the state of the barley harvest could NEVER DETERMINE THAT AN EARLIER NEW MOON SHOULD BE USED TO START THE YEAR!

To use barley to try to start the year AS EARLY AS POSSIBLE is to misapply the intent of the instruction to bring a wave offering of the new barley.

If you would like to receive objective information about the barley harvests in Israel, why not write your own letter to the Field Crops Department of the Ministry of Agriculture of the State of Israel? The information they give you is far more likely to be free from religious bias, than, for example, the information various religious sects are likely to provide. But there is no reason why Mr. Bar-Droma's comments should not still be correct today, about 20 years after they were written.

Frank W. Nelte