

Abib Expedition - The Coming Together !

by Brian Convery, March 2002

For the first time as far as we know, the Church of God received this year an unusual request. Would we help an ancient worldwide sect of the Jews to establish the dates of this years calendar; the calendar we read of in the bible!

The significance of this request was astounding in many respects. In a way, it can be explained but only if one believes that God works in mysterious ways at times. The Karaites also revere the Old Testament scriptures as we in the Church of God do also. Many of us have been aware of this for some years now. They do not accept any authority outside of them; no Talmud, no Mishna, no Traditions of Men period. Many brethren in the Church of God have come to understand that they in fact are trusted partners in following the calendar of God because of their zeal in following the literal translation of the scriptures. Their web site at www.karaite-korner.org provides accurate information on the start of each month and the correct time for the beginning of God's year. Now they were requesting our help, because they fear that if and when the Palestinians are given their own state, they will not, as Jews, be allowed into those places where they need to go to seek the biblical signal of the new year - the firstfruits of the barley crop in the land of Israel.

Of course, we could not ignore their request, and expect others to do for us what we are not prepared to do for ourselves. Over 1700 invitations went out, but interestingly enough, the four respondents who participated were all from the Church of God - one from the parent body Worldwide, two from an independent church - the North West Church of God in England and one independent member.

Why did we need to go to Israel? We all believe in the simplicity of Jesus Christ's example 1Peter 2:20. At the time of Christ, the new year was established by the priests who needed to wave the wave sheaf during Unleavened Bread, and they needed to be sure that the barley would be ready to harvest at that time in the land of Israel, Lev 23:10-11. Jesus Christ understood the important symbolism of this firstfruit sheaf for He was the very first of the firstfruits harvest and He ascended into heaven just as that sheaf was being waved, on the Sunday after the Sabbath during Unleavened Bread. Only long after His death did most of the Jews depart from this way of establishing the calendar, but Jesus Christ does not change. He is the same yesterday, today and forever as Hebrews 13:8 reminds us.

On our arrival in Jerusalem, we spent two days being instructed about the Abib Expedition - how to recognize the various varieties and stages of barley development, where it was likely to be found, how the Karaites came about. To the surprise of our Karaite hosts several of us noticed barley growing on the slopes of the Old City on Wednesday evening as we were returning to the hotel from a private tour of the Temple foundation tunnel. It appeared to be in a state of Abib from the yellow color it carried. We returned here the first thing next morning to find that 70% of the samples we picked

at random were in a state of Abib or Aviv as the Karaites call it. This was quite amazingly, for Jerusalem is higher and colder than most areas, and here we were finding Abib barley within the shadow of the Temple mount in the old city of Jerusalem. Quite a start to the search.

Rejoicing, we left Jerusalem behind, heading for the northern Negev, towards Gaza (which is much warmer and very fertile). We visited many sites in this area, recording them by Global Satellite Positioning for future years. Seventy percent of the selected barley we examined here was already Abib. Next day we journeyed in the opposite direction, to the NE of Jerusalem around Jericho, the Jordan valley and the Dead Sea. This area is hotter still, much more rugged and dry, but still with farms which grow barley crops as well as much wild barley. Here almost all the barley we examined proved to be abib.

We found that the naturally grown barley crops and the wild barley grew to maturity much more quickly than irrigated barley because of the lack of moisture. The irrigated barley was not found to be Abib, instead developing a sturdier stock and heavier grains which slowed down its development.

Some were surprised to find the Abib and then to find it in such abundance was a clear answer to our question as to when to start the beginning of the year. Now we understood more clearly why in the Hebrew the word 'Abib' is always preceded by the definite article, as in Ex.13:4 "This day came you out in the month of the abib." It is not just the name of a month but an agricultural event. It is the occurrence of the Abib or the 'Aviv', as the Israelis call it, that determines the first month of the year.

Having found the abib, widely spread over the land of Israel, we gathered that evening on the last day of the 12th month after sunset, on the roof of a tall hotel in Jerusalem to look for the first sign of the new moon that would finalize the start of the new year. The sky to the West was cloudy, but as the clouds moved across a break emerged and a cry was heard, ' There it is - the new moon !' Nehemiah blew on his shophar and new years greetings were exchanged - the Abib had been found, the new moon had been seen, and the new year had begun at 18:11 on Friday March 15th 2002 !

The four Church of God members who participated in the Abib Expedition were myself (Brian Convery), Michael Storey, Gerald Kirby and Richard Dolan. Michael is a former member of WCG and UCG who fellowships with the North West Church of God at Chester, England. Gerald is a former member of WCG and CGI who now has taken his pastoral responsibilities to the North West Church of God. He may be reached by e-mail at geraldpeter.kirby@ukgateway.net or at P.O. Box 88 CH63 2RL UK. Richard is a member of WCG and has been for many years. As I write this he is in Jordan inspecting the barley crop in the biblical territory of Israel. I am a former member of WCG and GCG who is not affiliated with any organization. My family and I reside in Western New York.

You asked, What changes to your calendar understanding did this trip make?

For me, personally and to some extent, I think I speak for the other members of the expedition, this trip confirmed our own research, beliefs and commitment we have come to understand from the scriptures. It is incredible how we as well as others are coming to the understanding that we have not had this doctrine right in the past. The experience the Karaites have developed by following the literal translation of the scriptures and their practical application of it has been very humbling to observe. We learned firsthand how to determine at what stage the barley needs to be at to qualify to be Abib, to meet the requirements of Lev. 2:14, which is the minimum requirements to meet the law of the firstfruits grain offering. There are profound spiritual lessons to be understood from this especially as it applies to the wavesheaf offering which must be offered on the first Sunday during the days of Unleavened Bread.

The Karaites and the four of us who were part of the Abib Expedition have gathered hundreds of samples and pictures for the express purpose of putting together a guide, written and pictorial, to help others in their search for the Abib of God. The openness and candor of our host Nehemia Gordon and the other Karaites was a learning experience in itself. Their hospitality matches the best I have experienced in the Church. These folks have so much in common with ourselves it is quite humbling to observe and learn from. The Karaites have rejected the "Traditions of Men". We know that to be a major teaching of Christ's from the New Testament scriptures. They do not accept the teachings of the Talmud or the Mishna but only those found in the Old Testament. Their purpose in life is to seek the way of God or as they prefer to call Him, YHWH. It is my good pleasure to tell you all that for the first time they were exposed to Christianity of the Bible and not that of the Universal Church and her daughters. They gave us hours upon hours in study to explain our beliefs and doctrines which we have derived from the scriptures. One very important aspect about the barley we learned was that it grows all over Israel. The wild barley seeds itself and is like a weed in its resiliency. We found it growing everywhere, in flower gardens, food plots, open fields, amongst other crops, along roadsides, hillsides and even in our hotel parking lot in downtown Jerusalem. So much for the recent comments of some that it is undependable because it is scarce or does not exist anymore. We also found that the naturally growing barley that which was not irrigated, whether wild or domesticated varieties matured much earlier than that which is irrigated. The irrigated barley developed big thick stocks and large heads which resulted in a lot more time being required to mature.

You asked, What makes the green barley ears important in calendar calculations?

It is important to understand that Bib does not mean "green" ears. That is a mistranslation and can be misleading. The Bib barley is fundamental to the proper observance of the Passover, as well as all the festivals of God, for it is by this that God instructs us to start the year and thus the beginning of the count in setting the "appointed times 'of God. Lev. 23:37 is very specific about this. We are not to be careless for God says, "These are the feasts (appointed times) of the Lord which you shall proclaim to be holy convocations, to offer an offering made by fire to the Lord, a burnt offering and a grain offering, a sacrifice and drink offerings, EVERYTHING ON ITS DAY". That is why God attaches a very specific numerical day to each so there is to be no mistake which day it is and it all

starts in the month of the Abib. This is explicitly commanded in Dt 16:1, "Observe the month of the Abib and perform the Passover to the LORD your God" (Dt 16:1). Passover is tied to the Month of the Abib because the Exodus itself took place in this month. We read this in the following Scriptures "This day you are going out in the month of the Abib." (Ex 13:4) "You will keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread; seven days you will eat unleavened bread, as I have commanded you, at the time of the month of the Abib, because in it you went out of Egypt." (Ex 23:15) "You will keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread; seven days you will eat unleavened bread, as have I commanded you, at the time of the month of the Abib, because in the month of Abib you went out of Egypt." (Ex 34:18).

You asked, Isn't the season and the new moon the real indicator of when spring begins?

The Appointed Times are not related to "Spring" or to the "seasons". In fact, Biblical Hebrew does not even have words for Spring or Autumn. The division of the year into four seasons is a foreign concept superimposed on ancient Israel by Europeans. Ancient Israel only had two seasons, Winter and Summer. Genesis 8:22 tells us after the flood, "While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and winter and summer, and day and night, shall not cease". Look at these very clear contrasts. Winter and summer are equated to cold and hot and seedtime and harvest. When Gen.8:22 was given in the Torah, the concept of spring as occurring after the equinox was as unknown and irrelevant as the equinox itself. These are all agricultural criteria which are affected by meteorological events not astrological occurrences. Israel has two seasons defined by rain, its abundance or its lack thereof. You can read that throughout the scriptures. Anyone who has spent time living in Israel understands this to be true even today. When we look at Gen. 1:14 we see a fine example of a mistranslation based on a European mind-set which confuses many people, "Then God said, let there be LIGHTS in the firmament of the heavens to divide the day from the night, and let them be for SIGNS and SEASONS, and for days and years". The Hebrew word for season here is Mo'ed. It has nothing to do with "a season". It is translated from Hebrew as, "appointed place of meeting or appointed times". It is used to qualify Gods festivals throughout the scriptures. An example is Lev. 23:2 "Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them the feasts (appointed times or Mo"ed) of the Lord, which you shall proclaim to be holy convocations, these are my feasts (Mo'ed)". It becomes very clear, that a big distortion takes place when the word Mo'ed is translated season. There are other Hebrew words which actually mean exactly that. The translators have applied their bias to Genesis 1:14 in translating this Hebrew word. This unfortunately has caused a lot of confusion to those who are learning that God has clearly spelled out His calendar requirements and instructions in the scriptures. Many today try to tie the two astrological moments in time called the Vernal (spring) and Autumnal (fall) equinoxes into the calendar. They try and tie the "four seasons" concept into the "appointed times" of God. This is not supported by scripture. Another key word in Gen. 1:14 is the Hebrew word translated "signs". It is Owth and it means, sign or mark as in something visible. That is why God calls the sun and the moon, lights here in verses 14,15 and 16. These scriptures clearly tell us we are to use their "light" in applying them to the calendar instructions. That is why we seek out the first crescent of the moon. That is also one of the reasons we do not use the equinox

in any of our calendar criteria. You cannot see an equinox and for that matter you cannot see a conjunction of the earth and the moon as some teach should be used to start the month. Some teach that you can use both but we find no scriptural evidence of this. On the contrary forbid us to follow astrology in our determinations. "Seasons" do not enter into the calendar criteria but the "appointed times" do. I repeat there is no Hebrew word for either spring or autumn. That is not an oversight by God. Meteorology determines when and how crops grow, not a single day astrological event. Thus we do not ascribe to the teachings of some that the new year cannot start until the first new moon after the equinox. God has given specific information for us to follow in determining the start of the year.

What did you learn about the Karaites and their history?

The Karaites teach the Feast of Unleavened Bread and the Passover must be observed in the Month of the Abib which commences with the first New Moon after the barley becomes "Abib". Abib is an ancient Hebrew agricultural term, which refers to a certain stage in the ripening of the barley. This is clear from Ex 9:31 which says "And the flax and the barley were smitten, because the barley was Abib and the flax was Giv'ol. And the wheat and the spelt were not smitten because they were dark (Afilot)."

The Abib was recognized by all ancient Jewish groups as the true determining factor in the beginning of the year. Even the Pharisees recognized this and historically used the Abib in beginning the year up until the time of Hillel II in 359 CE. The Talmud relates "Based on three things is the year intercalated on the Abib, on the fruits of the trees, and on the equinox. Based on two of them the year is intercalated but based on one of them alone the year is not intercalated. And when the Abib is one of them everyone is pleased." (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 11b). In Second Temple, the calendar used in the Temple utilized the Abib to begin the year. The following is related in the Talmud concerning Gamaliel (the same Pharisee mentioned in Act 5:34; 22:3)"It once happened that Rabban Gamaliel was sitting on a step on the Temple Mount, and the well known Scribe John was standing before him... [Gamaliel said to him] ...write to our brethren, the Exiles of Babylon and to those in Media, and to all the other exiled sons of Israel, saying "May your peace be great forever! We beg to inform that... the Abib is not yet ripe. It seems advisable to me and to my colleagues to add thirty days to this year." (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 11b).

Unlike the Pharisees who eventually abandoned the observance of the Abib, the Karaites preserved this true ancient practice throughout the millennia. Indeed, the Karaites even incorporated the observance of the Abib calendar into their marriage ceremony. Every marrying couple was required to undertake a solemn vow to "observe the holy appointed times of YHWH according to the sighting of the New Moon and the finding of Abib in the Land of Israel." By making this vow, the marrying couple became full members of the Karaite community. To this day, the Karaite cantor repeats the Abib vow on every high day and the entire congregation responds with a resounding "Truth!".

Historical sources report that the Karaites observed the Abib throughout the Middle Ages and even as late as 1642. Some reports seem to indicate the Karaites were still observing the Abib in the 1830s. However, by 1860 the Karaites had forsaken the Abib. In that year, a Karaite sage in Cairo wrote in his book "Curtains of Solomon" that the Karaites had fallen into sin and stopped observing the Abib. But as soon as they returned to the Land of Israel, he said, they would resume its observance. It was not until 1989 that this was to come about. As early as the mid-1970s Karaites began to investigate the corruption that had crept into their own calendar. Although they continued to declare the truth of the Abib-New Moon calendar in the synagogue every holy day, they had in fact gone astray after the "learned traditions of men" (Isa 29:13) by employing a "calculated" calendar. In the late-1980s this hypocrisy could no longer be borne and a small group of learned Karaites finally re-established the Abib Calendar.

Using ancient tomes as their starting point, this group of faithful Karaites began to intensively study the Abib. Within a few years they had rediscovered the meaning of this ancient agricultural term. In the final analysis it was the very description of Abib in the Hebrew Scriptures more than anything else that proved to unlock the secrets of the Abib. The Karaite Abib Searchers used three separate clues to recover the meaning of the word "Abib".

The first clue was the phrase "Abib parched in fire" (Lev 2:14). The Karaites carried out extensive tests to determine at what stage in the barley's development it could be parched in fire and still produce food. To do this they went out into the fields every week gathering barley in different stages of development and parching it in fire.

The second clue the Karaites used was the wave-sheaf offering. Lev 23:10 relates that the wave-sheaf offering brought during Feast of Unleavened Bread is to be brought from "the first sheaf of your harvest". From this it was clear that there must be fully harvestable barley by the Feast of Unleavened Bread, fifteen days into the First biblical month (see also Dt 16:9). Using this as their guide, the Karaites looked for the stage in the barley's development which was two weeks away from being harvestable.

The third clue was Ex 9:31-32 which describes the devastation caused by the plague of hail. Looking at the Hebrew, the Karaites noticed that the barley was destroyed by the hail "because it was Abib" while the wheat and spelt were undamaged because they were "dark". The Karaites used what became known as the "slap test" to check at which stage the barley becomes brittle enough to be damaged by a strike such as hail.

All three of the above methods pointed to the same stage in the barley's development. With three witnesses all pointing to the same thing the Karaites knew they had rediscovered the meaning of the ancient Hebrew agricultural term Abib.

One of the things the Karaites discovered was that the King James term "green ears" was not an accurate translation of the Hebrew word Abib. This became clear as soon as they tried to parch green ears of barley. When the young tender ears were parched, the undeveloped seeds simply evaporated in the heat. This could hardly be the "Abib parched

in fire" offered as a Firstfruits offering (Lev 2:14). And again the "slap test" could not damage the "dark" green ears, which were soft and flexible when struck. Finally, it was clear that the young tender ears were at least a month away from being harvestable, so using them to begin the year would result in there being no wave-sheaf offering which must come from "the first sheaf of your harvest".

After several years of tests the Karaites discovered that in order to satisfy the biblical requirements they would have to look to barley with fully formed seeds. When the seeds were firm like soft cheese they would produce food through parching. They were also brittle enough to be damaged when struck and would be harvestable in about two weeks time. This not-yet-ripe barley bore ears that were "still green" yet had begun to develop yellow streaks. All the evidence confirmed that this was the barley referred to in the term "The Month of the Abib".

Early on the Karaites learned that barley develops at different rates in different parts of the Land of Israel. They also found that the stage of development would vary greatly between one field and the next, even within the same region. It was not without reason that the ancient harvest season lasted seven weeks. But the biblical guidelines were clear enough. Dt 16:9, describing the day of the wave-sheaf offering, says in the Hebrew "from when sickle begins upon the standing grain shall you count seven weeks". And Lev 23:10 spoke of the "first sheaf" of the harvest. Clearly the Abib used to determine the beginning of the year would have to be the earliest ripening barley. Only this would correlate to the beginning of the harvest and the first sheaf.

To find the earliest ripening barley would require nothing less than an "Abib Search". The boundaries of the search were defined by Lev 23:10 "And when you come into the land which I am giving you and harvest its harvest". The region to search for the Abib was none other than the Land of Israel ("its harvest"). Throughout the late 80s and 90s the Abib Search was carried out every year with increasing efficiency. During the illusion of peace in the mid-90s, the entire Land of Israel was searched high and low. After a number of years it was found that the barley becomes Abib earliest in the Jordan Valley (near Jericho) and the Northern Negev (near Gaza).

When war broke out in October 2000, the Karaites were faced with a dilemma. To search for Abib would require entering regions that were becoming increasingly dangerous. With hundreds of Israelis dead and thousands of wounded, the days of driving around the Land of Israel looking for Abib seemed to be in jeopardy.

The plan to call in non-Israelis to search for Abib was first proposed in the opening months of 2001. The reasoning was that while the Arab death squads target Jewish civilians, tourists are usually left alone and only occasionally do they get killed in the crossfire. As the date of the 2001 Abib Search approached, the Karaites decided they would look for Abib in the "safe" areas and only if this failed would they appeal to Abib keepers from abroad to assist. The Abib was found earlier than expected and the call for outside assistance was put on hold. As the war heated up towards the end of 2001, the Abib Search itself was in jeopardy.

In early 2002 the call went out for Abib Keepers around the world to join in the Abib Search. The four of us answered the call as I stated earlier and we spent two days learning about Abib from our Karaite hosts and then another two days on the actual search. The search was an overwhelming success. Abib was found all over the Land of Israel, from Jerusalem to the Northern Negev to the Jordan Valley. Abib was found in large quantities in numerous locations. The International Abib Expedition of 2002 showed that people from greatly diverse backgrounds, could unite under the universal banner of YHWH's perfect Torah, to search out His truth, in humility and with hearts turned towards heaven.

The importance of this endeavor goes far beyond the simple search for barley in a state of Abib. That is a commanded function expected of us. What is of greater importance is the way in which members of the Church of God and members of Karaite Judaism have worked side by side in seeking the way of God. I personally do not feel this is a coincidence. We honor the same God and as brothers are working together to restore the truth of the scriptures in our lives and in the lives of all who will listen. There are many brethren in the Church of God who have come to and are coming to the realization that we have been following the wrong calendar in the past. We have followed the "Traditions of Men" in that doctrine. We all do not agree on the exact form to follow, but we are all searching the scriptures to make that decision. It is deeply personal and should be accorded as such. It seems nothing comes easy in the Church of God these days. I remind everyone who may read this that it is God who determines who is called a brother and that we should understand that in dealing with our differences.

May the peace of God be with you all.
