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## CALENDRIC TERMINOLOGY IN ANCIENT ISRAEL: THE PROBLEM OF THE MONTH

The mainstream Jewish menology, at least since Hellenistic-Roman times, uses Aramaic names for designating the months, and the word *Ḥodeš* for designating the month as such. However, the situation was quite different in the Biblical period; while the Aramaic month-names are of transparent Mesopotamian origins (to be found in the so called 'Standard Babylonian Calendar', which eventually replaced the Biblical system of numerated months), the specific term for month is unparalleled in other Semitic cultures. In my paper, I attempt to reconstruct the inception of the term and to date it to the Neo-Assyrian period (circa VIII–VII c. BCE).

The Jewish system of designating calendric months seems to have evolved a lot through history, which might be considered only natural in the context of the subsequent influences from dominating empires, first the Neo-Assyrian one, and then the Babylonian, the Persian and, last but not least, Alexander's. What is, however, less natural, is the evolution of the more general terminology, i. e. the designation for the month itself. The oldest attestations of calendrical knowledge in Ancient Israel present quite a different picture, which presupposes a rupture in the tradition.

In the Gezer Tablet – one of the oldest alphabetic inscriptions from Palestine, found in 1908 at Gezer, a Canaanite and later Ephraimite site, and dated paleographically to the pre-monarchic or early monarchic period (XI–X BCE) – we are presented with a ditty, most probably of agricultural calendric content, which enumerates eight seasonal works from the fall to late summer. No month names are used, though the agricultural labors enumerated coincide schematically either with monthly periods or with two months periods (which could thus be called 'the month of this type of work'). Both types of periods are designated with the use of the same Semitic noun, YRḤ, though the grammatical nature of the forms used (YRḤW) is disputed [4, p. 16–17]. The type of month adhered to is probably the true lunar month, which would be the simplest means of measuring time in a pre-bureaucratic social context [2, p. 280]. YRḤ,

meaning 'the Moon' is also cognate to the designation of month-period in Ugarit, Mesopotamia and other Semitic cultures.

Another, probably following, stage demonstrates the use of month-names and corresponding terms. Three Canaanite month-names are attested in the Bible, though in one unique context – the building of Solomonic Temple in Jerusalem according to the Deuteronomistic history (1Kgs 6:1, 37, 38 and 8:2). These are the months of *Bul*, *Etanim* and *Ziw*. Two of those names are known from Phoenician inscriptions [5], which confirms the authenticity of all the three month-names against the later provenance of our biblical text, and strongly suggests the presence of an authentic intermediary source. Those month-names are used with the same term *Yeraḥ* in all cases but one (1Kgs 6:1), and this one is possibly coming from the hand of a later, secondary, scribe [6, p. 9].

Those Canaanite month-names, however, seem to be already hardly known or accepted within the audience of the Deuteronomistic history, since all of them are glossed with an explanation, using numeric system for designating months: Ziw is explained as "the second month", Etanim as "the seventh month" and Bul as "the eighth month". What is especially striking, is the difference in terms for designation of the month-period in those glosses, which is already Ḥodeš, as in the rest of the Bible.

Thus, we are faced with two different systems of measuring calendric time in the Bible: the first, 'Solomonic' presupposes the use of (Canaanite) month-names and the term Yeraḥ, while the second always uses numeric designations and the term Ḥodeš.

The passage from the first one to the second is even more idiosyncratic, if one takes into account the use of the term Ḥodeš (literally 'revolution, innovation') in the oldest biblical texts. In prophetic oeuvres dating to the pre-exilic period, it seems to designate unequivocally not a month-period, but a single festive day, i. e. the day of the New Moon (Is 1:13, 14; Hos 2:11; Am 8:5; cf. also Ez 45:17; 1Sam 20:5, 24, 27; 2Kgs 4:23). Even in the Exilic text of Ezekiel (45:18, 20$^{LXX}$) the use of Ḥodeš for 'month' seems to be questionable (he uses the preposition *le-*, "after", not *be-,* "in"), thus attesting for a slowly evolutionary development.

How then did this lexical transition occur? Why did the name for the first day of the month become the name for the month as such? Though not completely unnatural, such a transition demands a societal context to be explained.

Such a context might be probably sought in the use of 'portable calendars', unearthed by the archeologists and recently published by Jonathan Ben-Dov [1, p. 431–450]. These devices were used in Judah from the Neo-Assyrian period on for bureaucratic purposes of long-term planning. Their dates were highly schematic, ignoring the difference between 29-day and 30-day months, but very useful in practical calculation. These are small bone plaques with perforated

holes arranged in numerical patterns, making a total of 10, 15 or 30, which Ben-Dov identifies with the count of a 360-day administrative year based on schematized 30-days months, not the true lunar ones.

If we imagine the use of this calendars through moving a stick from hole to hole, we shall see that it leaves no necessary place for either month-naming (which is irrelevant, since the count might begin at any date) or even for designating the month as such: you count "one, two, three… 28, 29, *Ḥodeš*". Therefore I suggest that the administrative use of those devices is indeed the best candidate for elucidating the mechanism of transition from the older Canaanite calendrical terminology to a new schematic one, probably under the Neo-Assyrian influence. This argument also supports the recent idea of the schematic 360-day year as the base of the Deuteronomic and Priestly calendars in the Bible and its eventual sacralisation [3, p. 280–285].

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