Determining the Biblical Month of Nisan

The Abib Standard and the Sacred Calendar

A study guide on the Mosaic criteria for establishing the first month — rooted in agricultural observation, lunar reckoning, and the wave sheaf requirement

I. The Core Principle: Abib Governs the Year

The biblical calendar does not begin with a fixed astronomical event such as the vernal equinox. It begins with an observable agricultural condition: the ripeness of the barley crop in the land of Israel. The Hebrew word *abib* (aviv, ■■■■) means 'green ears' or 'young heads of grain' — specifically barley in the stage just before harvest. The month bearing this name is the divinely appointed first month of the sacred year.

Exodus 12:2

> *"This month shall be unto you the beginning of months: it shall be the first month of the year to you."*

Exodus 13:4

> *"This day came ye out in the month Abib."*

Deuteronomy 16:1

> *"Observe the month of Abib, and keep the passover unto the LORD thy God: for in the month of Abib the LORD thy God brought thee forth out of Egypt by night."*

The command is not to observe 'the first month of spring' in the abstract — it is to observe *Abib*, the month of green grain. This is not a calendar name but a crop description. The month cannot begin until the condition exists in the land.

II. The Wave Sheaf: The Liturgical Lock

The most decisive constraint on when Nisan can begin is the wave sheaf offering commanded for Nisan 16. This is not a preference but a liturgical requirement: ripe, harvestable barley must be physically present in the land on that specific day. If Nisan begins too early, the offering cannot be performed.

Leviticus 23:10–14

> *"Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, When ye be come into the land which I give unto you, and shall reap the harvest thereof, then ye shall bring a sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest unto the priest: And he shall wave the sheaf before the LORD, to be accepted for you: on the morrow after the sabbath the priest shall wave it... And ye shall eat neither bread, nor parched corn, nor green ears, until the selfsame day that ye have brought an offering unto your God."*

Three observations follow directly from this text:

• The barley must be in a harvestable state by Nisan 16.

• The wave sheaf is the *firstfruits* — grain that has already begun to ripen, not grain still weeks away from harvest.

• Nothing from the new grain harvest may be eaten until this offering is made, meaning the entire community's transition to the new crop depends on it.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATION: Palestinian barley does not ripen until April. The latter rains fall through March and into early April. A Nisan that begins in March places Nisan 16 in late March or earliest April — before the barley is ready. Any calendar that produces a March Passover is therefore incompatible with the wave sheaf requirement on its own terms.

III. The Two-Criteria System: Moon and Grain

Biblical Nisan determination requires the convergence of two independent criteria. Neither alone is sufficient.

Criterion 1 — The New Moon (Chodesh)

The Hebrew word for month, *chodesh* (■■■), derives from the root meaning 'new' or 'renew' — specifically the renewal of the moon. Each month begins with the sighting of the new crescent moon at sunset. This is not a calculated conjunction but an observed phasis: witnesses reported the first visible crescent to the Sanhedrin, which then declared the new month.

Psalm 104:19

"He appointed the moon for seasons: the sun knoweth his going down."

Deuteronomy 16:1 (implied)

"The word translated 'observe' (shamar) carries the sense of watching and guarding — active lunar observation, not passive calendar consultation."

Criterion 2 — The State of the Barley (Abib)

Before the new moon of Nisan could be declared, inspectors examined the barley fields — traditionally including the sheltered Kidron Valley fields maintained specifically for the temple's wave sheaf. The question was whether the crop would be in the *abib* stage (roasting-ear ripeness) by the 16th of the coming month.

Exodus 9:31–32

"And the flax and the barley was smitten: for the barley was in the ear [abib], and the flax was bolled. But the wheat and the rie were not smitten: for they were not grown up."

This passage from the plague narrative confirms that *abib* describes a specific phenological stage: the barley is in ear (headed out) while the wheat is not yet grown up. It is observable, distinguishable, and tied to the Palestinian agricultural calendar.

IV. Intercalation: When the Grain Is Not Ready

The lunar year of twelve months runs approximately 354 days — about eleven days shorter than the solar year. Without correction, the months would drift backward through the seasons, eventually placing Passover in winter. The biblical solution is intercalation: the addition of a thirteenth month (Ve-Adar, or Second Adar) when the barley inspection shows the crop will not be ready in time.

The Intercalation Decision

Approximately 30 days before the anticipated Passover, inspectors examined the barley fields. If the grain would not reach *abib* by Nisan 16, the Sanhedrin intercalated a second Adar. This pushed the entire feast cycle forward one lunar month, ensuring the wave sheaf requirement could be met.

Secondary factors the Sanhedrin also considered:

- The state of the fruit trees (were other firstfruits ready?)
- Whether roads and bridges could support pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem
- Whether the Passover lambs and kids were of sufficient size
- The state of the furnaces for Passover ovens
- Whether Diaspora communities had sufficient time to prepare for travel

KEY POINT: Intercalation was driven by agricultural reality, not astronomical calculation. The equinox played no role in the Mosaic system. A month was added because the grain was not ready — period. This self-correcting mechanism kept Nisan anchored to the harvest regardless of where the lunar cycle happened to fall in any given year.

V. The Latter Rain as a Temporal Marker

Scripture itself provides a meteorological confirmation of the Passover season. The 'latter rain' — the malqosh — falls in March in Palestine, maturing the grain for harvest. The Song of Solomon's Passover imagery captures this precisely.

Song of Solomon 2:11–12

> *"For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land."*

Deuteronomy 11:14

> *"That I will give you the rain of your land in his due season, the first rain and the latter rain, that thou mayest gather in thy corn, and thy wine, and thine oil."*

The pattern is consistent: the latter rain falls through March and into early April, the barley ripens in April, and the Passover follows. The Song of Solomon's declaration that 'the rain is over and gone' was understood by ancient readers as the paschal signal — the season had arrived.

VI. Archaeological and Agricultural Confirmation

The Gezer Calendar — a limestone tablet dated to approximately the 10th century BC and discovered in 1908 — preserves an ancient Palestinian agricultural cycle that directly corroborates the biblical

timing. Its fourth-named month is translated 'barley harvest,' corresponding to April in the Palestinian climate.

Modern agricultural and meteorological records from Palestine confirm what the ancient sources assume:

Month	Condition	Biblical Significance
December–January	Early (former) rain begins	Planting season
February–March	Latter rain continues	Grain maturing
Early April	Latter rain ends	Barley reaching abib
Mid-April	**Barley harvest begins**	**Wave sheaf possible — Nisan 16**
April–May	Barley harvest complete	Counting of Omer begins
May–June	Wheat harvest	Pentecost (Shavuot)

VII. Step-by-Step: How Nisan Was Determined

Based on the Mosaic law and first-century Sanhedrin practice, the process for determining the beginning of Nisan proceeded as follows:

Step 1 — Barley Inspection (30 days before anticipated Nisan)

Inspectors examined barley fields in the land of Israel, particularly the Kidron Valley fields maintained for the temple. The question: will this grain be in the abib stage by the 16th of the coming month?

Step 2 — Intercalation Decision

If the barley was not sufficiently advanced, the Sanhedrin declared Ve-Adar (Second Adar), adding a 13th month and delaying the entire feast cycle by one lunar month. If the barley was on track, the year proceeded normally.

Step 3 — Watch for the New Moon

On the 29th or 30th day of Adar (the last month before Nisan), witnesses positioned themselves at sunset to watch for the first crescent moon. Sighting required specific conditions: the moon must be visible above the horizon after sunset, horns pointing upward (the spring crescent angle).

Step 4 — Witness Testimony to the Sanhedrin

Witnesses who saw the crescent traveled to Jerusalem and reported to the Beth-Din (court). They were questioned about the moon's position, inclination, width, altitude above the horizon, and distance from the sun — detailed astronomical observations recorded in the Mishna (Rosh Hashanah 2:6–8).

Step 5 — Declaration of the New Month

If the Sanhedrin accepted the witness testimony, they declared the new month by pronouncement: 'Mekudash!' (It is sanctified!). Fire signals were then relayed from mountaintop to mountaintop across the land and into the Diaspora to announce the new month.

Step 6 — Nisan 16: Wave Sheaf Verification

On the 16th of Nisan (the day after the weekly Sabbath within the Passover week), a sheaf of the first ripe barley was cut, brought to the temple, and waved before the Lord. The entire feast sequence — and the 50-day Omer count to Pentecost — began from this point.

VIII. The Karaite Preservation of the Original Practice

Following the Roman destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD and the subsequent dispersion of the Jewish people, observational lunar reckoning and barley-based intercalation became increasingly difficult to maintain. Unable to signal new months from mountaintop to mountaintop or to gather witnesses in Jerusalem, diaspora communities needed a fixed, computable calendar.

In approximately 359 AD, Hillel II codified a computed calendar that anchored Nisan to the first new moon on or after the vernal equinox. This was practically necessary for diaspora unity but represented a departure from the Mosaic system — producing Nisans in March that the original barley-inspection mechanism would have corrected by intercalation.

The Karaites — a movement arising in the 8th century AD under Anan ben David — rejected the Rabbinical computed calendar and returned to literal Mosaic observance, including barley inspection and visual new moon sighting. Their name derives from the Hebrew *kara* (to read) — those who read and follow the text directly. This preserved the first-century practice in usable form and became the basis for 19th-century Adventist chronological work on the 2300-day prophecy.

> CHRONOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE: The difference between the Rabbinical calendar (equinoctial Nisan) and the Karaite calendar (barley-harvest Nisan) is approximately one month in most years. For first-century chronology, this difference determines whether the Passover falls in March or April — and consequently which years produce a Friday Passover within the ministry of Christ. Under the Karaite reckoning, only 31 AD produces a Friday Passover on an April Nisan 14, fulfilling Daniel 9:27's requirement that Messiah be cut off 'in the midst of the week.'

IX. Key Scripture References at a Glance

Reference	Key Content	Relevance to Nisan
Exodus 12:2	This month is the beginning of months	Establishes Nisan as first sacred month
Exodus 13:4	Came out in the month Abib	Names the month by its crop condition
Exodus 9:31–32	Barley in the ear (abib), wheat not grown	Defines abib as a specific grain stage
Deuteronomy 16:1	Observe the month of Abib	Commands observational, not calculated, start
Leviticus 23:10–14	Wave sheaf of firstfruits on Nisan 16	Liturgical lock: barley must be ripe

Leviticus 23:15–16	Count 50 days to Pentecost from wave sheaf	Pentecost depends on correct Nisan 16
Deuteronomy 11:14	Former and latter rain in due season	Meteorological context for grain ripening
Song of Solomon 2:11–13	Rain is over and gone	Paschal seasonal marker
Psalm 104:19	Moon appointed for seasons	Lunar basis of the feast calendar
Numbers 9:1–3	Keep Passover in its appointed season	Seasonal, not merely calendrical, requirement
Numbers 28:16	Fourteenth day of the first month is Passover	Confirms Nisan 14 as Passover day

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The biblical system for determining Nisan is not primarily astronomical — it is agricultural and observational. The moon marks the beginning of the month; the barley marks the beginning of the year. These two criteria together, operating under the self-correcting mechanism of intercalation, kept the sacred calendar anchored to the land, the harvest, and the seasons that God ordained when He commanded Israel to observe the month of Abib.