

What's In a Year? An Incomplete Study on the Notion of Completeness



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WHAT'S IN A YEAR? AN INCOMPLETE STUDY ON THE NOTION OF COMPLETENESS

This paper investigates ways to uncover ideological and epistemological presuppositions behind legalistic statements. Commencing with several examples from cuneiform and Greek literature, it then focuses on early Jewish literature of the Graeco-Roman period. The question at stake is the human control over the natural flow of time: can mankind tame time using man-made categories like the month and the year, or must mankind align itself with divinely-ordained categories of time, with no human intervention allowed? Generally speaking, sectarian Jewish circles held the latter opinion, while the somewhat later rabbinic stance promoted the former opinion in a highly explicit polemic. The paper examines one specific moment in rabbinic literature, in which this strong ideological stance is compromised and an ideal year (i.e. devoid of any human influence) is embraced. We draw the circumstances for this preference and speculate as to the ideological stance of its proponent, Rabbi Judah the Prince.



Years, months and weeks are devices invented by mankind in an attempt to tame the overwhelming flow of natural time. From very early on, human beings conceptualized time using the cycles of the moon, the sun, the stars, the seasons, agricultural phenomena and other cycles, both longer and shorter. Quite rarely, however, do we stop to think about the character and definition of our time units. These categories are so powerfully stamped in our cognition that they inhere in perception itself, within the very essence of Immanuel Kant's categories of 'Reason'. One of the reasons for this unawareness is the exceptionally high efficiency of the Julian-Gregorian framework that most of us live by, as well as the unprecedented dominance of Western bookkeeping in today's global administration. Even Jews, Muslims and Buddhists, who run their religious life according to a different year, employ the Julian calendar for civil and administrative purposes. These religious groups are more often required to reflect on their own frameworks of time, usually with regard to its discrepancy with the Western calendar. People who have no timing conflicts are also bound to come to terms with their time frames. Since time is such a profound category of the human experience, pondering it will inadvertently expose – and possibly also deconstruct – some of the cultural foundations of the reflective agent.

The calendar is, naturally, an excellent tool for defining time frames. There are times, however, when man-made categories like 'a year' are insufficient and resort is made to other, more profound definitions. Special reflection may be required by the politics of national identity, by the anxiety of a tormented father for the well-being of his family, or by countless other occasions. In this paper I present several occasions from antiquity where this kind of pondering was required. It is by no means an exhaustive survey, but rather a selection of outstanding moments characteristic of the reflection about time in antiquity. Commencing with a handful of ancient Babylonian and Greek examples, I will then move to Jewish literature, which is where I specialize and where I can enhance the resolution of the cultural issues that are at stake.

The concept I aim to deconstruct is the year. This concept is not only defined formally on the grounds of astronomical cycles but also intuitively conceived on the same grounds. Astrology, for example, waits for the sun to return to Aries. The year could also mean the cycle of seasons,

most relevant for farmers. People who are attached to any of these natural cycles will thus experience the path of the year quite distinctly. Hesiod thus reports his sense of the complete year (*Works and Days*):¹

When the Atlas-born Pleiades rise, start the harvest [...]. They are concealed for forty nights and days, but when the year has revolved they appear once more [...] (383–6).

When the Pleiades and Hyades and the strength of Orion set, that is the time to be mindful of plowing in good season. *May the whole year be well-fitting in the earth* (614–17).

While farmers tend to emphasize the role of stars in the definition of the year, others seek different ways to express the same concept. Consider the following example from cuneiform literature, about 1700 BCE.

The civil calendar of ancient Mesopotamia was already a lunisolar one in the third millennium BCE. However, a lunar calendar is hardly an optimal framework for executing long-term calculations. If one needs, for example, to calculate the amount of grain required to feed the workers in a large royal project like building a new bridge, how many days should be employed in the multiplication: so-and-so pounds of barley per day times the number of days of the project's duration? One can never be sure whether the relevant months will be 29 or 30 days long. In addition, what happens if an intercalary month is inserted? Should it be calculated in advance? If loans are required in order to fund the operation, is interest collected on the 30th day of the month or on the 29th? Mesopotamians therefore used early on a schematic 360-day year in their long-term calculations (Brack-Bernsen, 2007), in order to avoid the infelicities of the lunar year (Ben-Dov, Horowitz and Steele, 2011).

More significant for the present purpose is the use of a schematic year in the religious sphere, where the need to ascertain the temporal efficacy of rituals made writers resort to official formulary. Ritual texts thus merge the passionate feelings of the anxious individual with the punctilious record keeping of the clerk. A particularly interesting example comes from the Old Babylonian period, in the city of Der, in a tablet held at the Iraq Museum in Baghdad (de Meyer, 1982).²

O God! My Divine mistress Ninsianna
 Accept this prayer
 Be present in the course of my prayer
 Establish an oracle of life and well-being
 for Ur.Utu, your servant.
 For Ur.Utu, your servant, maintain your presence,
 For the sake of the prayer hereby offered
 From the 20th day of Nisannu
 Until the 20th day of Nisannu of the coming year,
 6X60 days, 6X60 nights...
 Will Ur.Utu have or not have life and well-being?

The name of the petitioner, Ur.Utu, means 'the Dog of the Sun God'. Concerned about the well-being of his family, he presents a sacrifice to the goddess, accompanied by a prayer. The divination priests then check the liver of the slaughtered animal and provide him with an oracle. The liver was called 'the writing-tablet of the gods', and the experts, after acquiring a particular expertise, were able to read it and declare the future (Annus, 2010). Ur.Utu was required to stipulate a period of time for the expiry of his query. The gods then decide whether or not to grant the entire requested period of validity. A long and elaborate procedure follows: there is a series of coefficients and multiplications that are based on parts of the specific liver, and they

produce the ultimate expiry date for the prophecy. The bottom line is that the validity of the omen depends on the agency of time (Winitzer, 2011).

Ur.Utu fixes the validity of his oracle inquiry at a period of one complete year, between the 20th of Nisannu in the present year and the same date of the next. The 20th was a holy day for Shamash, the sun god, who was the applicant's patron god, and thus a lucky day for him (Horowitz, 2011). He also takes pains to declare that the next occurrence of the 20th of Nissanu falls within exactly 360 days. The number 360 is written in a stylized way in the sexagesimal cuneiform numbering system, taking the form of 6X60, with the number '60' represented by one large triangular wedge. This ornamental mode of presentation adds to the solemnity of the act, alienating the query from everyday life and increasing its efficacy in the godly realm.³

The number 360 does not reflect the actual number of days from a given date in one year to that in the next in any real calendar, however. In the Mesopotamian lunar calendar, the actual number of days would amount to between 352 and 356, or in a leap year to around 384 days. Rather, 360 is the size of the ideal year. In ancient Mesopotamia, this figure was both a comfortable convention and a divinely ordained number. Astronomers hoped to achieve true harmony with that number when manipulating the vicissitudes of the year in real life (Brown, 2001).

We now move to examine ideal representations of the year in several early Jewish texts, dating from the Hellenistic and Roman period. At this point in time, the emerging Jewish identity was confronted with the imperial challenge. In such a setting, any cultural act on the part of Jews – or similarly by any other minority in the empire – was significant not only as an inward orientated statement but also as a statement vis-à-vis the empire (Schwartz, 2001). Small states, even those with a rich ancient heritage like the Jews, were required to refashion, or sometimes forge their ancient traditions anew, in order to reinforce their corporate identity (Ben-Dov, 2013). The calendrical discourse should be seen as part and parcel of this cultural negotiation, especially in the Roman Empire, which placed time reckoning at the pinnacle of its propaganda (Rüpke, 1995; Stern, 2013).

The following two texts reflect on this relationship. The first one is from the Book of Jubilees (VanderKam, 1989), a second-century BCE sectarian book promoting a solar calendar, in opposition to the lunar calendar of both the Seleucid Empire and the Jerusalem Temple:

Now you command the Israelites to keep the years in this number – 364 days. *Then the year will be complete* [...]. They will neither omit a day nor disturb a festival. [...] lest they forget the covenantal festivals and walk in the festivals of the nations, after their error and after their ignorance. There will be people who carefully observe the moon with lunar observations because it is corrupt (with respect to) the seasons and is early from year to year by ten days (6:28–9).

Contrast a later text from the rabbinic tradition (third century CE), promoting a lunar calendar, this time under the yoke of the Roman Empire:

Thus we learn that Israel reckons according to the moon, while the gentiles reckon according to the sun (Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Pisha 1).

These two sources demonstrate the ideological burden invested in the calendar in early Judaism. No statement could be taken as innocent. Rather, every detail in the calendrical discourse is a cultural statement in the politics of identity.

Not only political interests but also inner-Jewish ideological disagreements on the nature of time played a part in the occasional need to define the essence of the year. While some writers conceived of time as a divine entity, inherent in world order, others made a point that time is a convention placed in human hands, under the direct authority of the human court. This

disagreement entailed different definitions of the year, as follows. On the one hand, a year comprised of lunar months places more emphasis on human agency, because every single step in the calendrical procedure requires human intervention: observing the new moon, determining its adequacy, consecrating a new moon day, and ultimately also inserting an intercalary month. On the other hand, a 364-day year, which is orientated to a full number of weeks ($52 \times 7 = 364$), opposes the human agency, since no human involvement is required in regulating it. Accordingly, the rabbinic notion of a year was simply '12 months', while a priestly-sectarian one was geared to a schematic year of 364 days, which contains a fixed number of weeks (Elior, 2005; Feldman, 2011). This latter position is more geared towards categories of 'complete, perfect, full', stressing the divine character of temporal frameworks; in contrast, the rabbinic position would emphasize the 'nominal' nature of time frames, allowing for less-perfect time frames that render better service for the needs of the human court.

The Book of Jubilees defines a year, most unusually, by the number of weeks it contains:

[...] all the days of the commandments will be 52 weeks of days; (they will make the entire year complete). So it has been ordained and engraved on the heavenly tablets.

One is not allowed to transgress a single year, year by year. Now you command the Israelites to keep the years in this number – 364 days (6:30–32).

In contrast, the rabbinic law of vows defines it as '12 months':

He who vowed to deny himself benefitting from his friend's (possessions) for a year: he counts twelve months from day to day (Tosefta Rosh Hashana 1:9).

The vow is the most loaded point of human liability, being a powerful legal and metaphysical binding act. In this case, when a vow was taken for a year, the question remained how long that year should be taken to last. Recourse is taken here to the linguistic usage of 'a year' in common speech, and thus a normal rabbinic year would last 12 lunar months. Similarly, in a moralistic, narrative context Rabbi Akiva recounts five periods of time – in the past, continuous present or future – that last for one whole year, all amounting to 12 months exactly:

[R. Akiba] also used to say, five matters endure for twelve months: 1) the judgment of the generation of the flood [...], 2) the judgment of Job [...], 3) the judgment of the Egyptians [...], 4) the judgment of Gog and Magog that is to come, 5) the judgment of the wicked in hell (Mishnah 'Eduyot 2:10).

In all five cases, some sort of scriptural reference dictates a period of one year, and Rabbi Akiva's matter-of-fact view sees that year as a period of 12 months. Since no concrete legal implications are involved, no further numerical definition was required. Note that Rabbi Akiva does not use the word 'complete' or 'full' to define the year. In contrast, sectarian sources, preceding Rabbi Akiva by two centuries, adopted a different policy. Thus the Genesis commentary found in a cave at Qumran on the shores of the Dead Sea disagrees with Akiva's measuring of the year of the flood:

In the six hundred and first year of Noah's life, and on the eleventh day of the second month, the earth dried up, on the first day of the week, on that day Noah went forth from the ark *at the end of a complete year of three hundred and sixty-four days* [...] (4Q252).

While the sectarian position shared Akiva's notion that the flood lasted for one complete year, it defined the completeness of the year differently. Curiously, the year of the flood attracted enormous attention on the part of various writers. One should not dwell here on the calendrical details but should rather look at the big picture: at least four different revisers of the biblical account in Genesis 6–9 sought to synchronize that primordial year with *their* unique calendrical ephemeris, manipulating the scriptural data for that purpose. This effort was due to the prestige of the year of the flood as a prime example of a perfect year.

Despite the rabbinic emphasis on man-made time, the rabbis occasionally acknowledged various schematic years when the need arose. At a time when calendrical disputes were so significant, such recognition constitutes a liminal case where ideology (a rabbinic lunar year) clashes with reality (difficulties in long-term calculation); these occasions are therefore crucial for tracking the fashioning of that ideology. We shall focus here on one such case which involves the definition of a year, in a special occasion where scripture dubs the year 'perfect' (*temima*).

Leviticus 25 rules that family land sold in debt is redeemable by the family in the year of Jubilee. With regard to an urban property, however, the law only allows one year for redeeming it, after which it enters the permanent ownership of the buyer. Scripture in Leviticus 25:30 uses the term *shana temima*, 'a complete year', to define that period of time: 'If it is not redeemed before a *complete year* has elapsed, a house that is in a walled city shall pass in perpetuity to the purchaser'. Rabbis in the Roman period set out to reflect upon the special formulation 'complete year'. In what way should this year be more complete than any other standard year? The Mishnah ('Arakhin 9:2, late second century CE) reasons:

He who sells a house [...] in walled cities – he may redeem immediately, and may redeem throughout the entire (period of) twelve months [...]. As it says (in the Bible, Leviticus 25:30): 'before a complete year has elapsed'.

'Complete' – (this word comes in order) to include the intercalary month (in the count).

Rabbi (Judah the Prince) says: (this word comes in order) that he should be given the year plus its epact.

When required to account for the special term 'complete year', the first (anonymous) speaker sees it as an indication for a year that contains an intercalary month, if that happens to occur within the year of the sale. This speaker thus does not deduce from the occurrence of the word 'complete' any exceptional calendrical requirement. A dissenting opinion is voiced, however, by Rabbi Judah the Prince, an authority from the late second century, who also happened to be the editor of the entire Mishnah. Being such a prominent authority he is referred to by the term 'Rabbi' alone. Here, and elsewhere, Rabbi introduces his concept of the year: a 'complete year' equals the year plus the epact, i.e. the 11 days that a solar year is longer than the lunar. In other words, Rabbi Judah defines a 'complete year' as the Julian year.⁴ Whereas a year is usually counted as 12 months, in the special cases where a really full year is required, one must have recourse to the Julian year.

This is an odd statement in rabbinic terms, for both political and theological reasons. In political terms, it is a surprising surrender of the rabbinic insistence on the lunar calendar and thus also a retreat from the official rabbinic line of subversiveness vis-à-vis the Roman calendar. At a time when the Julian year was robustly promoted in the east as part of the imperial propaganda, the rabbis held fast to the traditional lunar calendar (Stern, 2013). The Mishnah tractate of Rosh Hashana, which Rabbi Judah himself edited and published, goes out of its way to oppose the Julian year, celebrating the golden days of the lunar calendar, when the Jerusalem temple was still in existence. In the passage quoted here, however, as well as in a handful of other cases, Rabbi Judah in fact admits that the Julian year is more accurate than the traditional rabbinic one.

In ideological terms, the question at stake here involves the human hegemony over time. Rabbi Judah does not merely use the figure of 365 days as a convenient schematic construct. Rather, he acknowledges it as a closer representation of the ideal year. In this case, his colleagues do acknowledge the meaning of the word 'complete', but still insist that the lunar year overrides

the more realistic Julian one. Rabbi, in contrast, takes a deliberate stance against them by advancing the Julian year. While rabbinic literature elsewhere acknowledges the Julian year as a schematic default, Rabbi goes further by using it as a better approximation of the metaphysical value 'year'.

The challenge now would be to account for Rabbi's outstanding opinion. Rabbinic literature abounds with stories about Rabbi's Roman connections, including recurrent stories about his interaction with the emperor 'Antoninus' (possibly Antoninus Pius, d. 161 CE). However, these stories are usually not taken at face value, and do not unequivocally attest to a Roman orientation by Rabbi Judah (Baumgarten, 1981, cf. Stern, 2003). The question remains, therefore, how much ideology one can extract from Rabbi's statements on the year, which are, after all, rather laconic legal statements. If my suggested reading of Rabbi's opinion is true, it would attest to a dissenting voice within the rabbinic camp about the relationship of time and reality. This would not be the first dissenting voice in rabbinic literature, but we should be aware that our attempts to cast our net on the past traditions are by definition limited, and would only be able to explain the tip of the iceberg. Other parts of the iceberg are bound to appear here and there until a better explanation is achieved.

Conclusion

This discussion has been a preliminary exercise in the methodology of extracting ideological stances from legal and narrative statements about time. Time is a polyvalent concept, which can serve as an important gateway to other symbolic worldviews of human civilization. The texts discussed here were aimed to carry the debate beyond the confines of the legalistic discourse, and focus the reader's attention on various ways of handling the concept of perfection. Cities or mansions could be considered perfect, if surrounded by a strong wall. Equally so, time frames may be considered perfect or imperfect, depending on the eye of the observer. Some observers will not settle for anything less than 'perfect' and will seek ways to enhance the perfectness of a given concept. Others, in contrast, will negotiate the required level of perfectness, especially in cases where it is achieved by compromising other values of the given civilization. A legalistic debate on the details of time reckoning could then reflect an ideological disagreement about perfection and its discontents.



Notes

¹ Translation follows Most (2006).

² Having been published in 1982, I can only hope that it is still intact and remains in its place after the pillage that took place in recent years.

³ For the extra-computational value of numbers, see Chemla, 2004.

⁴ See the phrasing in Babylonian Talmud 'Arakhin 31b, where Rabbi Judah's opinion clearly invokes the number of 365 days.

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Insights

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