

Easter: Why the Date Changes

By Bob Young

A few days before Easter, my wife observed, "Easter is late this year." A couple of days earlier a friend had remarked on how early Easter was going to be." Can both be right? Can Easter be both early and late in the same year? What are the limits for the date of Easter? How early can it be? How late can it be? And why does the date of Easter change?

The science of calendar making has improved tremendously through the years. The first calendars were lunar and amazingly accurate, being based on the 13 lunar cycles per year (364 days). In the time of Jesus, the lunar and solar cycles were known, but the 12-month calendar we know today (which keeps our calendar in sync with a leap day every four years except in century years divisible by four) had not yet been developed. The Jewish calendar had 12 months which varied from 29-30 days. As a result the Jews had to add a shorter intercalary month periodically to readjust the calendar. Four years out of every 11 were 13-month years. The priests regulated this process to insure that the feasts were observed at the proper time each year.

The Jewish calendar began counting the New Year at the time of Passover (there was also a New Year in the fall—both are mentioned in the Old Testament). These are sometimes described as the religious New Year and the civil New Year. The lack of precision in the Jewish calendar meant that the date of Passover varied from year to year in comparison with the calendar we use today.

Today in the western world (the Eastern Orthodox calculation is different), Easter is observed on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox—the first day of spring, a day when the day and night are of equal length. This calculation allows Easter to fall between March 22 (the earliest possible date—March 21 and a full moon, with the next day being a Sunday) and April 25 (the latest possible date is March 21 + 28 days to a full moon + 6 more days to the next Sunday).

The date of Easter is always close to the date of the Jewish Passover—in 2010 Passover fell on the Monday before Easter. Incidentally, I am glad the first day of Daylight Saving Time has been adjusted. Before the date of the spring time change was moved to the second Sunday of March, Daylight Saving Time began on the first Sunday in April, and the "bad" time change with an hour less sleep sometimes occurred on Easter!