

Did a High Priest Die in the Holy of Holies?

by

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Sometimes a person will make an incredulous statement, and a listener will say: "I heard that too." People commonly repeat an incredulous statement they assume or believe, is true. Confirmation by another adds credibility. It happens everywhere, even in religious settings.

Everyone should ponder incredulous religious statements in the light of *plain common sense*. Not doing so can be embarrassing for a speaker or writer, and can result in loss of credibility.

The scriptural admonition to: "seek and reprove all things" is good advice. Why? Because incredulous statements on almost *any* subject can be easily disproved in minutes. Such is the research capability of the Internet.

Yet, seldom does the person making an incredulous statement ever question it, or can identify its source. Doing so would keep that person's credibility intact, especially if a listener subsequently finds out the incredulous statement... is a myth.

Have you ever heard these incredulous statements?

"A rope was tied to the High Priest before he went into the Holy of Holies so his body could be pulled out if he died."

"So many High Priests died in the Holy of Holies because they went in on the wrong day, a rope was tied to them so their body could be pulled out."

There are: "about three hundred (300) high priests in the Second Temple era who are to have died in the Holy of Holies because they went on the wrong day."

These statements involve two *proven* myths.

According to Dr. W. E. Nunnally, Associate Professor of Early Judaism and Christian Origins At Central Bible College, and also Adjunct Professor of Hebrew, The Assemblies of God Theological Seminary:

"The rope on the high priest legend is just that. It has obscure beginnings in the Middle Ages and keeps getting repeated. It cannot be found anywhere in the Bible, the Apocrypha, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Josephus, the Pseudepigrapha, the Talmud, Mishna, or any other Jewish source. It is just not there"

The Origin of the First Myth

The origin of the first myth can be traced to *The Jewish Press*, published by the late Rabbi Sholom Klass. Klass started his small newsletter in the 1900s and it is still printed by his heirs.

The heirs kindly provided a photo image of the May 9, 1997 issue. On page 5. there is a *Questions and Answers* column by Rabbi Klass. The following is an excerpt from a letter sent to him that year (pertinent part):

“...Some while back, I read (but can’t recall where) that only 357 of the priests who entered the Holy of Holies came out alive. A friend who was sitting at the table where we were discussing this recalled that she had read that either a string or a rope was tied around the waist of the priests who entered the Holy of Holies and if the rope or string broke, then the priest to whom the rope was attached did not return.

Can you please set us straight on this? Thank you very much.

Millie Goldstein
Huntsville, Alabama”

Klass responded with (pertinent part):

“...The Gemara (Yoma 9a) states that the first Holy Temple, which stood for 410 years, only had 15 High Priests who served in it. *Tosafot* state that *Diveit Hayamin* (*I Chronicles* 5:36) itemizes only eight High Priests who served.

In the second Holy Temple, which abided for 420 years, more than 300 High Priests served. If you take off there from the 40 years which Shimon the Righteous served, the 80 years which Yochanan the High Priest served or, as some say, the 11 years of Rabbi Eleazar b. Charsum, and count the number of High Priests from then on - you will find that none of them completed his year in office. They all died when they entered the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur to pray for a good year for all Jews. This happened because they were corrupt. They bought the high priestly office for money and accepted bribes.

The people were so accustomed to see the priests die that they tied a rope around them and, when they didn’t walk out from the Holy of Holies, the people knew they had died and they were pulled out for no one else was allowed in the Holy of Holies.”

Notice that Klass quoted only *one* sentence from each source. Apparently, *only* these two sentences in all rabbinic literature and all scripture, were germane to his response.

Also notice in those sources the difference in the *quantity* of High Priests who served in the first Temple.

The source of information in the second and third paragraph of Klass’ response have not been identified, but are likely his own.

Klass said that the death of High Priests was because they were “corrupt.” The inference being the corrupt priests died when they went behind the temple veil into the Holy Presence.

Klass’ incredulous response to Millie Goldstein was read and believed by many of his subscribers because it came from a religious authority figure. Parts of his response were widely repeated.

An internet search on the subject of ‘high priests dying in the Holy of Holies,’ located the web page of Da Naat, a well known bookstore in Jerusalem, Israel. Da Naat stated that it “searched Klass’ statement and found the Rabbi repeated *two myths* which have been *perpetuated* many times.”

Why would Jewish owners of a bookstore in Jerusalem, Israel, say that about a Rabbi?

The answer is obvious when one sees an *image* of the Babylonian Gemara (Yoma 9a), one of the sources Klass cited in his response to Millie Goldstein. Surely the Da Naat bookstore sold the same source. It contains the following applicable sentence:

“The first Temple stood for 410 years, during which time 18 high priests officiated successively, the Second Temple stood 420 years, and during that time more than 300 high priests officiated (9a).”

An analysis of that sentence is very revealing:

(a) The reference does not name *any* High Priest which allegedly *died* in the Holy of Holies.

Plain common sense says the death of even *one* High Priest in the Holy of Holies would have been so sensational it would have been recorded in rabbinic literature, in secular literature, etc., and enemies of Jews would have celebrated the death annually ever since.

(b) The reference does *not* mention the *cause* of death of any High Priest.

Plain common sense begs the question: If the death of a High Priest in the Holy of Holies was so common, why would “more than three hundred” have “bought the high priestly office” when serving would mean certain death?

The Second Myth

The *second myth* repeated by Klass is: “The people were so accustomed to see the priests die that they tied a rope around them.”

Plain common sense says the High Priest would have had private rooms at the Temple. A room would have been used for bathing which was necessary to fulfill the scriptural ordinance for him to be ritually clean. Surely there was an adjoining room where the high priest put on his usual garments. Other things like the breast plate, etc., were likely in the room also.

But on the Day of Atonement *only*, he wore a plain white linen garment which was holy.

It is against plain common sense that a High Priest, once ritually clean and wearing the holy white linen garment, would *then* defile himself by allowing a rope to be tied to him. The scriptures say *nothing* about a rope being tied to a High Priest.

Notice here Klass did *not* cite a rabbinic source to support this part of his response. It is likely he could *not* find anything *more* in rabbinic literature about how, if a High Priest died in the Holy of Holies, was the body to be removed. Most people think the question has no answer.

But the logical answer may be too simple for most people to believe: Clearly, the power of the Almighty Yahweh prevented any High Priest from dying while in the Holy of Holies. It is the obvious conclusion.

But conjecture continues. Some people have supposed the veil to the Holy of Holies was a hand's breadth thick, and constructed of overlapping sections so not to have a see-through seam.

Others have supposed the bottom of the heavy veil rested upon the floor, and the veil itself was configured vertically to form a kind of labyrinth. The high priest could then walk through the labyrinth and into the Holy of Holies without anyone seeing inside, even accidentally.

The bible specifically mentions that on the Day of Atonement the High Priest did *not* wear his usual colored garment which had bells, fringes, etc., around the hem. Thus, there never would have been tinkling sounds indicating movement by the high priest while in the Holy of Holies.

Although 'high priests in the Holy of Holies had a rope tied to them, etc.,' are myths from the middle ages, it appears Rabbi Klass believed them as fact. This is because the myths likely originated from a Jewish sage.

De Naat said that when a respected sage made a profound statement, even if incredulous, it was written down and studied. As time past there was great reluctance to question the validity of his statements. The same is true today.

Why People Repeat Incredulous Statements

Some people repeat incredulous statements without thinking. Some repeat incredulous statements to be noticed. The reasons vary. But be aware, some people in religious settings repeat incredulous statements *purposefully*.

In: *A Calendar Study*, 2004, on page 125., paragraphs from Klass's response are reproduced as shown below. Notice in the *second* paragraph there are *bracketed words in italics*:

“After the Babylonian captivity the Jews carried back with them the Babylonian solar/lunar calendar and used it to determine the dates for high Holy Days. A small bit of math, along with recorded history, reveals a startling fact:

"In the second Mikdash (temple), which abided for 420 years, more than 300 High Priests served. If you take off therefrom the 40 years which Shimeon the Righteous served, the 80 years which Yochanan the High Priest served, the 10 years which Yismael b. Fabi served or, as some say, the 11 years of Rabbi Eleazar b. Charsum, and then count the number of High Priests from then on -- you will find that none of them completed his year in office. They all died when they entered the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur" [*by the "lunar" reckoning*] "to make the atonement and pray for a good year for all Jews. This happened because they were corrupt. They bought the high priestly office for money and also accepted bribes." (Rabbi Sholom Klass, The Jewish Press, p. 5, May 9, 1997.)

Bracketed words in italics are a writer's device to indicate an editorial *insertion* by someone other than the original author. Protocol dictates the other person be identified. The author of *A Calendar Study*, 2004 used Klass' editorialized response, sans literary credit of the other author.

Most people reading the author credit shown in parenthesis at the end of Klass' editorialized paragraph, will assume *all* the words are his because *only* he is identified. A reader likely will not grasp the significance of the italics and brackets, so will assume they are for emphasis.

Readers commonly assume a written statement by an authority figure is true.

Accordingly, people reading the *editorialized* response of Klass in *A Calendar Study* will *assume* the incredulously large quantity of high priests in the second Temple era, did indeed die in the Holy of Holies.

In fact, the author of *A Calendar Study*, 2004, took the editorialized paragraph of Klass verbatim from yet *another* document, because it suited his purpose.

The author of *A Calendar Study* advocates determining the scriptural calendar based upon the *Astronomical* new-moon. The latter is an astronomer's term *without* an equivalent meaning in Aramaic or Hebrew.

An astronomical new-moon occurs the instant the center of the earth, moon, and sun, are aligned each a lunation. It is called a 'lunar conjunction.' The moon is *invisible* to the eye for several days spanning its conjunction because of the glare of the sun.

The author of *A Calendar Study* also incorrectly states it was the Sanhedrin who determined the scriptural calendar, and they based it upon the *invisible* astronomical new-moon.

In fact, the Sanhedrin was a civil court which did *not* decide religious matters. The determination of the scriptural calendar was a religious matter, and the purvey of the High Priest, *only*.

For centuries High Priests determined the scriptural calendar based upon the *visible* new-moon crescent. Plain common sense says for that reason alone, *no* High Priest made a mistake in his own calendar determination, so obviously, *none* went into the Holy of Holies on the *wrong* day.

There is *no* evidence ancient Israelites even knew about a lunar conjunction, much less when it occurred. The instant of conjunction, within a reasonable degree of accuracy, was determined ultimately by Athenian astronomers, *not* Israelites.

The published interval of a lunation is a mathematical *average* over centuries. Over twelve or so months, the interval can vary by several hours above and below the average. This is due to velocity changes of the moon caused by the mass and position of other celestial objects.

In Genesis 1:14 - 19, Elohim gave three celestial objects which the Israelites could *see*: “the *sun*, the *moon*, and the *stars* (star constellations) also,” and the four purposes which these celestial objects were to be used: “for *signs*, for *seasons*, for *days*, and for *years*.”

The High Priest determined the first *day* of the first *month* of the scriptural *new year* at the first *visible* new-moon crescent *after* sunset the day of the ‘Tequfa,’ i.e., Spring Equinox. The same reckoning is used in a scriptural calendar determination today.

The High Priest was responsible for declaring the holy convocations in Leviticus 23. The seventh day Sabbath and the Set-Apart days were declared according to the scriptural calendar which the High Priest had determined. He *declared* the New Year, weekly Sabbaths, Months, and Holy Convocations, at Jerusalem, *only*.

This is because 1 Kings 11:16 states *Jerusalem* is where the Almighty Yahweh choose to put his name. For the same reason, the determination of a Scriptural Calendar today, is reckoned to Jerusalem, *only*.

The Editorialized Response of Klass Which Appeared in: *A Calendar Study*

What can be said about the editorialized response of Klass which appeared in *A Calendar Study*?

(a) Proof that the editorialized insertion: [*by the "lunar" reckoning*], was *not* by Klass is obvious because the insertion does *not* appear in the scanned image of Klass’ *The Jewish Press*, May 9, 1997, issue.

(b) Internet searches revealed the name, and tenure, of the high priests which served in the second temple. Easily viewed lists of Wikipedia, Josephus, the Jewish Encyclopedia, etc., show the *greatest* quantity as being *only* fifty-two priests (i.e., not “more than 300”).

A few list compilers mention it is likely some high priests served *twice*, which would reduce the total even more. One list of high priests contains their name and tenure in office, but *none* mention the cause of their death.

(c) There is *no* indication the High Priests ever changed the way they determined the scriptural calendar. Moses designated Aaron High Priest, and his sons as priests (Exodus 28:1, 47, and 29:1). Only the “sons of Aaron” could be High Priest.

When the last of Aaron's prodigy died, corruption of the high office occurred. But apparently, even the less qualified and corrupt High Priests determined the scriptural calendar the same as had been done for centuries. Likely they did so until the destruction of the second Temple in CE 70.

The Babylonians also observed the new-moon crescent, and recorded its occurrence in Cuneiform on clay tablets. Tablets, found in Iraq, are a *continuous* record of about 8900 sightings from 626 BCE to CE 75. This spans the time when our Savior, Yeshua the Anointed, lived.

Both the Israelites and the Babylonians started their year with the visible new-moon crescent first *after* the Spring Equinox, not *on or before* it. Both utilized a luna-solar calendar, both added an intercalary month periodically, etc. Ezra's adaptation of the name of the Babylonian months are seen on Jewish calendars today.

The Babylonians astronomers were the most skilled of any nation in the region. They could calculate the conjunction of planets, etc. They surely devised a calculated calendar also. Likely the Israelites learned the Babylonian methodology for a calculated calendar during their captivity.

Even with the methodology for a calculated calendar, the numerous Cuneiform clay tablets are evidence the Babylonians relied upon the first *visible* new-moon crescent *after* the day of the Spring Equinox to start a new year.

Likely as a contingency because of increasing Roman oppression, the High Priest began to review the Babylonian methodology for a calculated calendar.

After the last Jewish rebellion was put down about CE 135, the Romans did not allow Jews into Jerusalem for about two hundred years. Accordingly, the visible new-moon, the scriptural calendar, the set-apart days, etc., could *not* be declared there. Thus, a calculated calendar became a necessity and may have been used earlier by Jews living outside Israel.

Confirmation of this likelihood comes from the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, which, speaking of calendar determination by the Israelites, states: "... it began with observation, then observation and calculation, then calculation only."

Inexplicably, the modern calculated the Jewish Calendar can have 1 Nisan, New Year's day, start *on or before* the Spring Equinox (in the *Winter!*), as long as Passover is in the Spring.

Who made the editorialized insertion and why?

An internet search revealed the author and source of the editorialized insertion to Klass' response seen in *A Calendar Study*. It was Mikhael Bauer, author of: *The Jubilee Calendar* (21 pages). Bauer's article can be viewed on the Internet.

Bauer excerpted Klass' response from the latter's *Jewish Press - Questions and Answers* column. He then made the italicized bracketed word insertion to further his own purpose which was to advocate use of *The Jubilee Calendar*.

Bauer's insertion correctly mentions the scriptural calendar in the Second Temple era was determined by *observing* the new-moon crescent. But Bauer's purpose was to contrast the assumed error of their using it, versus *The Jubilee Calendar*.

Bauer stated that, because the Jubilee Calendar was not used after the Babylonian Captivity, "more than three hundred priests died on Yom Kippur because they went in on the wrong day."

Bauer's reason for the alleged deaths is different from Klass,' which recall, was: "because they were corrupt, bought the office for money, and accepted bribes."

The Jubilee Calendar is from the Book of Jubilees, and apparently was the calendar used by the Essenes. Bauer mentions thirteen copies of the Book of Jubilees were with the Dead Sea scrolls found at Qumran.

For that reason alone, Bauer supposed the Jubilee Calendar should have been used by the High Priests in the second temple era, and because it was not, many of them died.

Bauer's article mentions the Jubilee Calendar had 1 Nisan beginning in the 'Spring' time of the year. The first day of the new Jubilee year, 1 Nisan, was determined by designating it the *first Wednesday* after the Spring Equinox.

Apparently this was done because being in the middle of the week, it harkened back to the creation sequence. But doing so does not mention the celestial objects given in Genesis nor were they used for the reasons given.

Bauer continues to quote Klass:

"The Gemara (Yoma 9a) states that the first Holy Mikdash (Temple), which stood for 410 years, only had 18 High Priests who served in it. Tosafot state that Divrei Hayamim (I Chronicles 5:36) itemizes only eight High Priests who served."

Bauer made no effort to explain the difference in the *quantity* of high priests between the two sources, nor did he present a list at other sources.

Bauer continues:

"After the Babylonian captivity the Jews carried back with them the Babylonian solar/lunar calendar and used it to determine the dates for high Holy Days. A small bit of math, along with recorded history, reveals a startling fact:"

Bauer made the supposition that the High Priests used a different calendar *before* the Babylonian Captivity, then assumed it *must* have been the Jubilee Calendar. However, he offered no proof of either.

Bauer said *nothing* about an invisible astronomical new-moon being used to determine a scriptural calendar, as later advocated in *A Calendar Study*.

It just so happened the wording in Bauer's editorialization of Klass' response was utilized by the author of *A Calendar Study* because it fit the latter's purpose.

Recall what Klass said about the deaths of the High Priests: "This happened because they were *corrupt*. They bought the high priestly office for money and also accepted bribes." Klass said *nothing* about the high priests dying because they went in to the Holy of Holies on the *wrong day*.

Klass' incredulous response shows he apparently believed the myths of a sage who is to have said 'High Priests died in the Holy of Holies.' Apparently because of Rabbi Klass' response, Bauer *assumed* the high priests went in on the wrong day and died, because they did not use the Jubilee Calendar.

Bauer also said:

"if one takes 516 years + 50 years it equals 586 years. So if the years of the four 'good' high priests (Shimon The Righteous 40, Yochanan The High Priest 80, Yismael B. Fabi 10, Rabbi Eleazar B. Bharsum 11 years) is subtracted, it would mean there were 141 years when there was no high priest."

The basis for the math is illusionary. The 'traditional' lists of High Priests who served after the Babylonian Captivity to the destruction of the second temple, are referenced herein and can be found at other sources. Bauer did *not* mention specific years time when the temple had no high priest.

There is a list of High Priests in *Antiquities of the Jews*, by Josephus Judah. The quantity there is the fewest of any source. Josephus did *not* mention a time when the temple lacked a High Priest, and he did *not* mention a High Priest who died while inside the Holy of Holies. He surely would have, had it occurred, because it would have been of interest to his Roman sponsor and Roman readers.

But Josephus *did* record the sensational event of the 'Presence' departing from the Temple in CE 66, because it occurred. After the 'Presence' departed during the Second Temple era, was the Ark of the Covenant still in the Holy of Holies? If not, and the Presence having left, was there still danger to a High Priest? These are worthy things to research.

Seek and reprove all things!

In March 2007 the following statement was made in a sacred name cassette tape titled: *Biblical Calendar and the New Year*:

"... about three hundred (300) high priests in the Second Temple era who are to have died in the Holy of Holies because they went on the wrong day."

A listener of the tape would assume the statement, being from a religious authority figure, would be true.

Knowingly not identifying an author, excerpt, or source, smacks of plagiarism. Not doing so can put doubt in the mind of a listener about the speaker's credibility, if the listener subsequently learns the statement is wrong.

As has been shown herein, the speaker on the tape *Biblical Calendar and the New Year* took the statement verbatim from *A Calendar Study*, whose author had previously taken it verbatim from *The Jubilee Calendar*.

Both the author of *A Calendar Study* and the speaker on the tape *Biblical Calendar and the New Year*, advocate the scriptural calendar be determined by the *invisible* moon at conjunction. This may explain why the latter considered it acceptable to lift Bauer's statement from the former without giving the other author, or Bauer, literary credit.

Conclusion

Plain common sense and a little research is a sure way to invalidate an incredulous statement.

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