The Religious Calendar in Dersim Alevism (Raa Haqi): Gağan, Xızır/Hızır, Black Wednesday (Kara Çarşamba), and Hawtemal/Heftemal

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Summary
This entry provides a comprehensive analysis of the sacred days and periods that constitute the religious calendar of Dersim Alevism (Raa Haqi)—with particular attention to Gağan, Hızır, Black Wednesday (Kara Çarşamba), and Hawtemal/Heftemal—drawing on ethnographic data, oral narratives, and historical sources. It examines in detail the regionally varying names and dates of these observances, the simultaneous use of the Rumi and Gregorian (Miladi) calendars, and their connections to winter-based folk calendars and çile periodisations (çile referring to ritually significant forty-day periods). The study further discusses the cultural and cosmological continuities underlying calendrical diversity through elements such as the Thursday-centred logic of ritual closure, the initiation of ceremonies on the preceding night, cemetery visits, fasting practices, and beliefs surrounding cemre (the progressive warming of air, water, and earth). By comparing the tripartite Hawtemal system specific to Dersim with the bipartite forms found in regions such as Koçgiri, Varto, and Sarız, the entry demonstrates how calendrical changes, climatic observations, and historical transformations are reflected in religious practice. Finally, the similarities identified with ancient Iranian calendars and Iranian traditions—while striking—also raise a number of important questions.

Keywords: Alevi Calendar, Alevi Takvimi, Black Wednesday, Dersim, Dersim Alevi Calendar, Dersim Alevi Takvimi, Dersim Alevism, Gağan, Hawtemal, Heftemal, Hewtemal, Hızır Fast, Hızır Orucu, Kara Çarşamba, Raa Haq, Xızır

Introduction[i]

In March, an important observance known as *Hawtemal/Heftemal* is celebrated by Alevis in Dersim and the surrounding provinces. Among speakers of Kırmancki, this day is referred to as *Hawtemal* (also rendered as *Hautemal* or *Houtemal*), while Kurmanci speakers call it

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Heftemal (*Haftemal*). The term *hawt* or *heft* means “seven,” whereas *mal* is generally translated as “house” or “family.”

The timing of Hawtemal/Heftemal and the qualifiers attached to it vary by region. Dedicated to welcoming the arrival of spring on 21 March-and, according to older traditions, the beginning of the new year-this observance is notable for being celebrated with different dates and designations even in geographically close areas. Beyond Dersim, Hawtemal/Heftemal is known under these names among Kurdish Alevis living particularly in Koçgiri (Sivas), Erzincan, Bingöl, Erzurum, Varto, Sarız, Gümüşhane, and Kars. In some regions, it is marked under three different dates and names-*qız/quçik* (small), *wertên* (middle), and *pil/mezin* (large)-while in others it is observed in two forms only, as “small” and “large.” For example, in the Koçgiri region it is celebrated in two phases, *Heftemala Quçik* and *Heftemala Mezin*. In contrast, in Dersim it is designated by three names: *Hawtemalo Qız* (Small Hawtemal), *Hawtemalo Wertên* (Middle Hawtemal), and *Hawtemalo Pil* (Large Hawtemal). In the Varto area, as in Koçgiri, it is likewise divided into small and large Heftemal. As will be discussed below, the dates assigned to these celebrations also vary.

In fact, the confusion surrounding dating is not limited to Hawtemal/Heftemal alone. All of the major observances encountered in these regions-such as Gağan, Hızır, and Black Wednesday (Kara Çarşamba)-face similar issues of timing. The dates of the Hızır fast, for instance, may differ from one locality to another, and multiple dates can likewise be reported for Black Wednesday. Unlike Hawtemal/Heftemal, however, these days are not designated with different qualifiers: even when observed on different dates, there is only one Hızır Fast, and one does not encounter distinctions such as a “Small” or “Large” Hızır Fast. With Hawtemal/Heftemal, precisely this multiplicity is at issue. While one would normally expect the first day of the new year to correspond to a single date, the presence of two or even three different days makes this phenomenon far from self-evident.

Sacred Days

At the outset, it should be emphasised that what is described here as a “problem” does not imply something “incorrect.” On the contrary, as will become clear in the course of the discussion, all of the differing dates encountered reflect traces of past traditions and historical transformations. In order to explain this, it is necessary to address briefly these important days other than Hawtemal/Heftemal.

Khalo Gağan

Khalo Gağan (Elder Gağan). Following 21 December, which marks the beginning of winter, fasting is observed on the first Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday thereafter. The fast is concluded on Thursday evening with a celebration. On this evening, an entertaining performance featuring the distinctive figures known as *Alık* and *Fatık* takes place. Children, accompanied by loud noises, go from house to house collecting food; meals are then prepared from these offerings and shared communally. Fires are lit, and the festivities continue in a lively manner until late at night. In the Dersim region, Khalo Gağan generally coincides with the last Thursday of December.[ii] In some localities, however, this festival is celebrated at the beginning of January.[iii] Gağan also marks the day on which dervishes begin their forty-day *çile* period (*çile* referring to a ritually significant forty-day phase).

Xızır/Hızır

This immortal figure is primarily known as the saviour in times of distress. The fast observed for Hızır, the cem ritual held in his name, and the sacrificial offerings made for him occupy a central place within the belief system. Most commonly, the Hızır fast lasts three days; in some regions, however, it is observed for seven days. Unmarried young people refrain from drinking water after the fast on Thursday; it is believed that the person who gives them water in their dreams that night will be the one they marry.

Although in recent years Alevi institutions in Turkey have designated 13-15 February as the dates for the Hızır fast,[iv] there is a widespread understanding that it properly falls on 30 January.[v] In practice, however, the Hızır fast extends over a period of nearly a month: it begins after the second week of January and is observed sequentially in different localities, continuing until the third week of February.[vi] Two explanations are commonly offered for this pattern: first, that Hızır, being old, cannot reach all places at once; and second, that the *pirs* who participate in the cem held at the conclusion of the Hızır fast can only do so by spreading their participation over several weeks. With the beginning of the Hızır fast, dervishes also bring their forty-day *çile* period to an end.[vii] Their participation in the Hızır Cem adds an additional dimension to the ritual.

Çarseme Şai/Çarşemiye Reş (Qêre Çarseme)/Black Wednesday (Kara Çarşamba)

Although it is generally given as the first Wednesday of March, there are also regions that take the second Wednesday, or the Wednesday preceding Hawtemal/Heftemal, as the reference point.[viii] It is defined as an inauspicious day, against which a number of rituals are performed. *Talips* are passed three times through a ring made from the branches of rosehip (*Şilan*). Houses and stables are ritually cleansed with water (*apsu*) against the evil eye and misfortune. Likewise, cords are tied in order to avert possible harm. In some places, stones representing the members of the household are placed on rooftops or around haystacks. In the morning, it is believed that whichever stone has an insect beneath it indicates that the person it represents will have a fortunate year. It is also stated that Black Wednesday was the day on which Ana Fatma received the news of the events of Karbala. Some people observe a one-day fast in order to share in her mourning. According to the narrative, when Ana Fatma heard the news, she was boiling water in a cauldron to wash clothes; upon receiving the news, she overturned the cauldron. For this reason, no laundry is washed and no bathing takes place on

Wednesdays.

Hawtemal/Heftemal

Hawtemal/Heftemal is celebrated within a broad time frame corresponding to the beginning of March and April. In some parts of Dersim, the three Hawtemals are assigned respectively to the first, second, and third Thursdays of March; the third Thursday falls on 20-21 March or on dates close to it. In other areas of Dersim, the small, middle, and large Hawtemal are associated respectively with 7, 17, and 21 March. In the Koçgiri region, the first Heftemal is accepted as 20 March, while the large Heftemal is observed on 30 March. In Varto as well, Heftemal is celebrated after 30 March.[ix] On this day, it is believed that life begins anew and that everything enters a state of reverence. Thorough household cleaning is carried out, the household starter (*maya*) is renewed, and after bathing with water brought from a flowing stream, clean clothes are worn. Cemeteries are visited collectively, prayers are recited, and offerings (*lokma*) are distributed.[x] Upon returning to the village, people share a communal meal. Rituals also performed on Black Wednesday-such as passing through a ring made of rosehip branches or placing stones on rooftops-are likewise carried out during Heftemal.[xi]

Newê Marti/Nehey Mardi

This day falls on 22 March, corresponding to the day following the conclusion of Hawtemal/Heftemal. As it is the first day after 21 March, a one-day fast is observed as an expression of gratitude.[xii]

It should be noted that the days and festivals listed here are not observed among other Alevi communities in Anatolia. Among them, only Hızır occupies a high status across all Alevi groups, yet the practice of fasting in his name during January-February is absent in most of them. Among Anatolian Alevis, the festival of *Hıdırellez*, celebrated on 5-6 May in association with Hızır, is described as a spring

festival and a day of wishes.[xiii] The Hıdırellez festival, or the dates 5-6 May, does not form part of the traditional festive calendar of Dersim and is in fact largely unknown there. Hızır is a highly significant figure for Arab Alevis in the Hatay region as well; however, among them, belief in Hızır is expressed not through fasting but around shrines and pilgrimage sites.[xiv] Likewise, 21 March is commemorated by some Alevi groups-most notably Bektashis-under the name "Sultan Nevruz" as the birthday of Ali. On this day, prayers are recited in his name and cem rituals are held.[xv]

Accordingly, the information presented here derives from compilations concerning Dersim and communities connected to this region. It should be borne in mind that this belief community lacks centralised institutions. Moreover, even where central structures exist, it is well known that until relatively recently it was not easy to determine dates on the basis of astronomical or climatic conditions, and that this posed difficulties for many belief communities in establishing the calendars of religious festivals. We possess limited knowledge of the criteria by which people in the region-especially in remote areas-sought to determine time in the past. Nevertheless, it is evident that certain rules were applied with regard to the dates presented here.

The first of these concerns the fact that concluding ceremonies are always held on Thursdays. For this reason, fasts and festivals are observed by taking as their reference the Thursday following (or sometimes preceding) the designated day. Thus, for example, whether 21 December falls on a Thursday does not constitute a problem: the fast is in any case begun on the first Tuesday thereafter and concluded on Thursday. Likewise, the specific weekday on which 30 January falls is of no consequence; fasting may be observed on the Tuesday-Wednesday-Thursday preceding or following that date.

Another noteworthy feature relates to the determination of dates by counting back from the final day. For this reason,

instead of 21 March, when spring begins, 20 March-the last day of winter-is marked; that is, according to the Rumi calendar, rather than indicating 8 March as the first day of the new year, the final day, 7 March, is specified. This means that ceremonies or celebrations are initiated on the preceding night.[xvi]

Finally, it is evident that a significant portion of the religious days observed by Alevis in the region-excluding the fasts of the Twelve Imams-take place during the winter season. The winter period opens with Khalo Gağan on 21 December; toward its end, around 20 March, one encounters Black Wednesday, Hawtemal/Heftemal, and Newê Marti. Since the Hızır fasts are observed forty days after Gağan, and Hawtemal/Heftemal is celebrated ninety days later, the starting date of Gağan naturally also determines the timing of the Hızır fast and of Hawtemal/Heftemal.

It is clear that the winter period occupied the community to a considerable degree and played a decisive role in the determination of significant days. In order for life to continue, it was necessary to endure this season, characterised throughout the region by severe cold, long nights, restricted mobility, and reliance on provisions accumulated through the labour of the entire year. Moreover, the challenge extended beyond human survival alone: feeding livestock and bringing them safely into spring constituted a problem of a magnitude difficult to imagine today. For this reason, in order to determine how the dates of these sacred days were established and whether there is an interrelationship among them, it is necessary to examine calendars and winter traditions more closely.

When elders in the region assign dates to religious days and festivals, they make reference to three calendars. The first is the Hijri calendar, which is used exclusively to determine the fasts of the Twelve Imams. For the days and festivals listed above, however, the Rumi calendar (also known as *hesabê khan* or “the old calculation”) and the Gregorian (Miladi) calendar come into play. There is a difference of thirteen

days between the Rumi and Gregorian calendars. Accordingly, 7 March according to the Rumi calendar-given for the small Heftemal-corresponds to 20 March in the Gregorian calendar, while 17 March according to the Rumi calendar-associated with the large Heftemal-falls on 30 March.

Winter Calendar

Alongside these observances, there also exist folk calendars that incorporate experiential knowledge related to nature and climatic conditions. According to the dominant traditional understanding in Anatolia, the year was divided into two seasons: summer, which begins on 6 May, lasts 186 days, and is called *Hızır*; and winter, which begins on 8 November, lasts 180 days, and is known as *Kasım*. The final ninety-day period of winter is further divided into distinct phases. The first forty-day phase, beginning on 21 December, is called *çile* (also rendered as *çele*) or *zemheri*. The term *çile* derives from *çel* (*çhel*), meaning "forty" in Kurmanci and Persian.

The first *çile* period is generally recognised everywhere. With regard to the second part of winter-that is, the remaining fifty days-different forms of periodisation are encountered: (1) a single block of fifty days; (2) forty plus ten days; (3) twenty plus thirty days; and (4) twenty plus forty days. These divisions are presented according to the Rumi and Gregorian (Miladi) calendars in Tables 1 and 2.

It is useful to examine these four possibilities more closely, since the ways in which the ninety-day winter season is subdivided provide important clues for understanding the sacred days discussed here.

1) 40-50

Various researchers have noted that, in the folk calendars used across Anatolia, a periodisation of the winter season into forty plus fifty days is encountered. The first phase is called *Zemheri* or *Erbain* (from Arabic *arbaʿīn*, meaning

forty), while the second is known as *Hamsin* (from Arabic, meaning fifty).[xvii] If this division is taken as a basis, it helps clarify at least three important sacred days. Gağan begins on 21 December; forty days later comes Hızır; and fifty days after Hızır follows Hawtemal/Heftemal on 20 March. According to the old calendar, these correspond to 7 December, 17 January, and 7 March. Within this scheme, however, no satisfactory explanation emerges for Black Wednesday, nor for the Hızır fast and Hawtemal celebrations that are observed over extended and varying periods.

2) 10-40-40

The existence of this division is reported in a study examining the winter traditions of Kurds living in the Konya-Kulu region.[xviii] Although the extent to which such a folk calendar was widespread remains a matter requiring further research, it nonetheless allows for certain observations.[xix] In a ninety-day winter season divided into 10-40-40, the crucial question concerns the placement of the ten-day segment.

The cited study mentions three possibilities, the first of which is the period from 21 to 30 December, referred to as *Zivistana Romê* ("Roman Winter," *Karakış*). If this option is adopted, it becomes possible to explain why Gağan would begin not on 21 December but after 30 December; why Hızır would fall not on 30 January but after 9 February;[xx] and why Hawtemal would coincide with 21 March. However, the additional ten days might also precede Hawtemal rather than stand at the beginning, because if *Zivistana Romê* denotes *karakış*-the harshest phase of winter-it should relate to the most difficult and severe final period of the season. Moreover, the commonly cited date of 30 January for the Hızır fast in the region supports the assumption that the first *çile* period begins on 21 December. In this case, 21 December, 30 January, 10/11 March, and 20-21 March emerge as critical turning points. Such a periodisation indicates a transition around 10/11 March, which may offer an explanation for the likely timing of Black Wednesday. The

most arduous and severe phase of winter may have been associated with misfortune and thus linked to this day.

If we set aside the ten-day segment, we encounter the sequence of two consecutive forties in rituals surrounding childbirth in the Dersim region as well. According to this belief, forty days before a woman gives birth, a *meleke* (angelic being) comes to assist her each day. These beings are called *Çewres Milaketu* (Forty Angels). The last of the forty is the oldest and most accomplished; when she arrives, the count is completed and the birth takes place. After birth, one *meleke* leaves the house each day. On the fortieth day, when the leader of the angels-the old woman-also departs, the child's "forty" is completed and the most critical threshold is crossed. Since the first three days after birth are regarded as dangerous, special rituals are performed to protect the mother from the evil eye and malevolent beings. The two forties, with the three-day Hızır fast observed between them, may likewise be understood-as here-as symbolising the birth of a new year. From this perspective, the 40-40 approach finds support from a different angle.[xxi]

3) 40-20-30

A third form of winter periodisation encountered is the 40-20-30 division. There is evidence that this was applied in popular practice in eastern regions. Accordingly, the first forty days are called *Büyük Çile* (Great Çile), while the following twenty-day period is known as *Küçük Çile* (Small Çile).[xxii] This division offers another perspective for determining sacred days. Within this calendar, 20-21 December, 30 January, 20 February, and 20-21 March appear as key dates. The period from 30 January to 21 February also encompasses the time during which the Hızır fasts are observed. This final cold phase of winter is known for the blowing of harsh winds; according to belief, these winds signal that Hızır is travelling on his horse, and this difficult period is overcome with his assistance. This periodisation thus provides a third explanation for why the Hızır fasts extend until 21 February.

4) 40-20-40

This possibility is reported by Edward Noel, who was present in the regions of Maraş, Malatya, Diyarbakır, and Mardin between 1918 and 1920. Having spent considerable time among the Atma and Sinemilli tribes, which held significant influence in the region, Noel records a winter periodisation not of ninety but of one hundred days, divided into 40-20-40 and accompanied by distinct designations. According to his account, the first forty (*chille*) runs from 23 December to 3 February; the second twenty (*baicha*) from 3 February to 24 February; and the final forty (*chik a bahari*) from 24 February to 3 April.[xxiii] Noel's scheme appears problematic. First, he does not explain why 23 December, rather than 21 December, is taken as the beginning of winter. If this is not a recording error, then a *çile* period beginning on 23 December should end on 1 February rather than on 3 February. More importantly, his timetable does not include 20-21 March, which everywhere else appears as the first day of Hawtemal/Heftemal. Nonetheless, this periodisation is significant in that it indicates the existence of a calendrical search aimed at explaining why the "new day," or the Great Hawtemal/Heftemal accepted as 30 March, should be celebrated in early April.

Therefore, in order to understand the different Hawtemal/Heftemal dates, we must return to the 40-20-30 division, which covers the final thirty-day period leading up to 21 March. This also allows us to evaluate an important set of data. A widespread belief in the region holds that nature warms in stages, and the arrival of spring is explained through the symbol of *cemre*.[xxiv] According to this view, the small, middle, and large Hawtemal/Heftemal correspond to the periods in which the *cemre* appears. Belief in *cemre* is a widespread phenomenon in Anatolia, expressed through various descriptions, and generally understood to fall at weekly intervals-first into the air, then into the water, and finally into the earth.[xxv] In Dersim, however, it is said that the *cemre* appears first in the soil, then along waterways, and finally in trees and in the air. Once it appears in the air,

the arrival of spring can no longer be postponed. This warming of the air, referred to as *cemre*, is identified through the appearance of a small insect called *vıske hurdi*. This fragile and short-lived insect first appears along paths trodden by humans and animals, where the snow has been worn away; it then appears near water sources, and finally among trees and in the air.

In many parts of Anatolia, belief in *cemre* is structured around three periods at one-week intervals: the first is said to fall on 21 February according to the Gregorian calendar, the second on 28 February, and the third on 6 March. If this timing is taken as a basis, Hawtemal/Heftemal should fall not on 21 March but on 7 March.

If we assume that warming does not occur at the same time in every region-and that it begins later, especially in mountainous areas-then it is reasonable to accept that this process unfolds at a later stage. This aligns with the timing observed in some areas, where the three Heftemals are assigned to the first, second, and third Thursdays of March. This interpretation is further supported by the belief, found in certain places, that there are three Black Wednesdays in March. However, the fixed dates of 7, 17, and 21 March given for the three Hawtemals compel us to consider another factor.

It must be recalled that three Hawtemal/Heftemal observances are encountered only in the Dersim region. In places such as Koçgiri, Sarız, and Varto, Hawtemal is celebrated in two forms only, as small and large. For these, the dates given are 7 and 17 March according to the Rumi calendar, corresponding to 20 and 30 March in the Gregorian calendar. This suggests that, of the dates 7, 17, and 21 March specified in Dersim according to the Gregorian calendar, 7 and 17 March may in fact be figures inherited from the old calendar and maintained without conversion into the new system. If this is accepted, we must then explain why 7 March and 20-21 March-although referring to the same days-are perceived as two different

dates, and why 17 March is designated as the Great Heftemal in some regions but as the Middle Heftemal in Dersim. To address this, it is necessary once again to return to the 40-20-30 framework.

Ancient Iran

The fact that this type of periodisation is encountered primarily in eastern regions is not coincidental. The division of winter into 40-20-30 segments was a dominant practice among ancient Iranian peoples. They referred to the first forty days as the Great *Çile* (*čella-ye bozorg*), and to the subsequent twenty days as the Small *Çile* (*čella-ye kūček*), calculated as twenty days and twenty nights. The following thirty days were devoted to preparations for the arrival of spring.[xxvi] A historical problem related precisely to this final thirty-day period is particularly instructive for our discussion. The solar calendar used in ancient Iran consisted of 360 days, divided into twelve months of thirty days each, with sacred days and festivals fixed accordingly. During their expansion, Iranians encountered the 365-day calendar used in Egypt; however, its adoption within Iran occurred only through a reform implemented in the early third century CE during the Sasanian period. Five days were added to the end of the old calendar, and these were called the Gatha days.

As a result, sacred days and festivals were shifted forward by five days. Because this reform was not accepted by traditional strata, they continued to celebrate according to the old dates, leading to the emergence of two dates for each festival. This posed a particularly serious problem for Newroz, the festival symbolising the completion of creation and the beginning of the new year. As a solution, different designations were adopted: Newroz celebrated on the old calendar date was called “Small Newroz,” while the day celebrated five days later according to the new calendar was termed “Large Newroz.”[xxvii]

A similar development resulting from the introduction of a new calendar can also be observed in the case of Hawtemal.

During the Ottoman period, the Hijri calendar was used until the Tanzimat reforms; from 1840 onward, the Rumi calendar also came into use. From 1917, the transition to the Gregorian (Miladi) calendar eliminated the thirteen-day difference between the Rumi and Gregorian systems. In the Republican period, a full transition to the Gregorian calendar took place from 1 January 1926 onward.[xxviii] It is evident that this most recent calendrical reform, which occurred relatively recently, was not adopted at the same pace by all segments of society. From this perspective, the dates given for Hawtemal-7, 17, and 21 March-reflect two transformations that can be associated with calendar changes.

Initially, Hawtemal was celebrated on 7 March according to the Rumi calendar (that is, 20-21 March in the Gregorian system).

The designation *Hefta Adarê/Hefta Marti* ("the Seventh of March"), still used today in the Mazgirt area for Hawtemal, also dates back to the period when the old calendar was in use.[xxix] It is likely that Black Wednesday took place before this day, since the widespread belief that Black Wednesday falls on the first Wednesday of March strongly supports this assumption. It is also probable that Hawtemal, beginning on the evening of 7 March according to the Rumi calendar, continued on 8 March with cemetery visits, prayers, and shared meals, and that on 9 March the new year observances concluded with the Mart Dokuzu fast.[xxx] These data indicate that Hawtemal/Heftemal constituted the central axis of religious practices carried out in March, with Black Wednesday and the Mart Dokuzu fast organised around it. They also show that when a new date for Hawtemal/Heftemal came to the fore, an effort was made to determine a new date for Black Wednesday as well, whereas this did not apply to the Mart Dokuzu fast-no alternative such as a "Mart Ondokuzu" was established.

It is clear that the first attempt at change concerned 17 March (that is, 30 March). Although it is difficult to

determine when this was implemented, two factors can be considered in assessing the conditions under which it occurred. The calendar discussed thus far for the winter season is an astronomical one, based on calculations derived from the angle at which the Earth receives the sun's rays. According to this system, winter begins on 21 December and spring on 21 March; 21 December is also known as the longest night. However, the winter calendar determined through astronomical calculation does not always coincide with lived meteorological realities. Cold weather may begin much earlier or later than 21 December, and spring may arrive after 21 March. It is frequently observed that winter lasts longer than expected and manifests itself once more after 21 March, usually for a period of around ten days extending to the end of March.[xxxi] Consequently, the idea that true spring begins in April-and that Hawtemal, or the new year, should therefore be celebrated on the first Thursday of April-may have gained currency among at least some groups. That this view was not generally accepted is evident from the introduction of the small-large distinction.

A second reason that may support the decision to mark 17 March/30 March can be derived from the traditions of related groups in the region. In this respect, Wednesday celebrations in the Iranian cultural sphere offer a point of comparison.[xxxii] Without going too far afield, however, it is instructive to consider the Yazidis, who inhabit a region much closer to Alevi communities. They call the new year *Çarşemiya Sor* (Red Wednesday) and celebrate it on the first Wednesday of April, believing that creation was completed on that day.[xxxiii] They also refer to the Wednesday two weeks before the new year as "Black Wednesday." It should be noted, however, that the tradition of Red Wednesday is maintained particularly by Yazidis in Iraq; Yazidis living in Turkey tend to regard Wednesday primarily as an inauspicious day.[xxxiv] Some scholars explain the celebration of the new year in April among Yazidis with reference to Mesopotamian traditions.[xxxv] According to the ancient Babylonian and Assyrian calendars, 1 April

marked the beginning of the new year. From this perspective, Rumi 17 March may be seen as an intervention introduced by tribes familiar, in some form, with this older tradition. That this was not a minor intervention is evident from the designation of 17 March as the Great Heftemal and from the associated search for a 40-20-40 winter calendar.

The second issue requiring explanation-the overlap between Rumi 7 March and Gregorian 20 March-reflects developments of a more recent period. As noted above, the transition to the Gregorian calendar was completed in the early years of the Republic. Accordingly, the marking of Hawtemal as 21 March could only have emerged in a process that began after this period. The fact that this was not implemented everywhere is apparent from the range of dates given for Hawtemal. Earlier, it was noted that the designation of 21 March (Gregorian) as the Great Heftemal is found only in the Dersim region, and not throughout Dersim as a whole but particularly in the mountainous area known as Inner Dersim. In Inner Dersim, the festival referred to as the Middle Heftemal according to the Gregorian calendar corresponds to what is designated as the Great Heftemal elsewhere, based on the Rumi calendar. In regions such as Koçgiri, Sarız, or Varto-areas associated with Dersim-origin tribes or forming part of the Dersim cultural and religious geography-the dates of 7 and 17 March continued to be observed according to the Rumi calendar.[xxxvi] The fact that the Gregorian calendar, which came into force in the early twentieth century, exerted its influence first in the most traditional, mountainous areas of Inner Dersim is related to recent history. Compared to other parts of Dersim, the post-1938 deportations particularly affected the settled population of these mountainous regions. Consequently, when these communities encountered the new calendar earlier and adopted Hawtemal as 21 March (Gregorian), other regions were still operating according to the dates of the old calendar.[xxxvii] For this reason, it is highly likely that those who came under the influence of the new calendar designated this date, following a familiar

method, as “large,” while referring to the others as “small” and “middle.”

The parallels observed between the sacred days discussed here and the ancient Iranian religious calendar also reveal important aspects of the cultural histories of Alevi groups in Turkey. This is because parallels with ancient Iranian culture and traditions cannot be overlooked not only in explaining why three different dates are given for Hawtemal, but also with regard to all sacred days observed during the winter season. Among Iranians, one of the most important festivals was known as *Yalda* and was celebrated on 21 December. As the first and longest night of winter was regarded as the evening on which Ahriman-the embodiment of evil-was at his most powerful, fires were lit throughout the night in an effort to overcome him.[xxxviii] Forty days after the Yalda festival, on 30 January-marking the transition from the Great *Çile* to the Small *Çile*-the festival of *Sada* was celebrated. Since the night of this day was believed to be the coldest night of the year, the Sada festival began on 30 January and lasted for three days. Fires were lit and meals were shared communally. The embers left from the fire were taken home by women at the end of the festival, with the belief that they would bring abundance. Sada was celebrated as a form of reverence for Huşeng, the discoverer of fire, and for fire itself, with the hope that it would overcome darkness and cold.[xxxix] Eventually, Newroz arrived-the crown of festivals and the symbol of the completion of creation.

On the day preceding Newroz, cemeteries were visited and the dead were commemorated. Afterwards, houses were cleaned and new clothes were worn, and Newroz was celebrated joyfully in the belief that light would triumph over darkness and cold, ensuring the continuation of life.[xl] It was believed that during the ten days before Newroz, angels wandered the earth and visited households.[xli] On the final Wednesday before Newroz, the festival known as *Çarşamba Suri* was held, and it was believed that the fires lit on this day protected people from illness and misfortune.[xlii]

This cultural commonality may also help explain why the "new day," known among other Iranian communities as Newroz or Red Wednesday, is referred to as Hawtemal/Heftemal within this community. The reference to the number seven (*hawt/heft*) is certainly not coincidental. In Zoroastrianism, Newroz symbolised creation as consisting of seven stages and seven acts. There were seasonal festivals known as *Gahambar/Gahanbar*, organised in honour of the six helpers of Ahura Mazda; the seventh and most important of these was dedicated to Ahura Mazda himself and celebrated his victory. For this reason, the number seven was indispensable in Newroz rituals.[xliii] It is therefore necessary to reflect on the relationship between the elements of "seven" and "household/family" embedded in the name Hawtemal/Heftemal and this older tradition.

Beyond these similarities, however, there is an important difference that must be taken into account. If Zoroastrianism is accepted as the representative belief of ancient Iran, it should not be overlooked that fasting was not part of its ritual tradition. Zoroastrianism did not interpret the relationship between body and soul through a dichotomy of good and evil. Since the human being was regarded as a whole created by God, abstaining from food-fasting-was understood as inflicting suffering upon the body, and was therefore viewed negatively. In contrast, fasting constitutes an indispensable element in the traditions that form the subject of this study. For this reason, even if it is accepted that these traditions share a common calendrical origin, the question of when fasting became incorporated into the rituals of this community is a historically significant and thought-provoking issue. Addressing this question may yield important insights, particularly for rethinking the strong Hızır tradition in the region and for explaining the transformations through which it has taken shape.

Conclusion

This entry demonstrates that the religious calendar of Dersim Alevism is not a fixed or uniform system; rather, it

exhibits a multi-layered structure shaped by historical, geographical, and cultural interactions, and one that remains sensitive to local practices. The fact that sacred days and periods such as Gağan, Hızır, Black Wednesday (Kara Çarşamba), and Hawtemal/Heftemal are commemorated on different dates across regions shows that this diversity is not a "deviation," but a fundamental characteristic of the Raa Haqi belief universe. The study emphasises that the concurrent use of the Rumi and Gregorian calendars, winter-oriented folk calendars, concepts of *çile* and *kırk* (forty-day periods), and the practice of concluding rituals on Thursdays constitute the principal elements shaping the internal logic of the religious calendar.

The findings further indicate that calendrical arrangements are not confined to the measurement of time alone; rather, they are directly connected to cosmology, narratives of creation, seasonal cycles, and collective memory. Differences between the tripartite Hawtemal system centred in Dersim and the bipartite or singular forms observed in regions such as Koçgiri, Varto, and Sarız reveal how religious practice is continually reproduced in accordance with local ecologies and historical experiences. Moreover, comparisons with calendrical traditions of Iranian and Mesopotamian origin show that the religious calendar is situated within a broader cultural geography, while acquiring a distinctive form through local oral traditions and ritual practices.

In conclusion, this entry shows that the religious calendar in Dersim Alevism constitutes a dynamic system that exists in constant interaction with nature, history, and collective experience, rather than a rigid dogmatic structure. By approaching Alevi religious practices not through singular and normative schemes but by foregrounding their plural, local, and historical character, this perspective provides a distinctive and productive analytical framework.

Endnotes

[i] For the English version of this article, see Erdal Gezik,

"Kurdish Alevi Calendar of Cultural and Religious Dates," in Kurdish Alevis and the Case of Dersim: Historical and Contemporary Insights, ed. Erdal Gezik and Ahmet K. Gültekin (New York: Lexington Books, 2019), 75-96.

[ii] For information indicating that Gağan is celebrated in late December, see Gülsün Fırat 1997, 99; Kemal Astare 2001, 157; Mehmet Nuri Dersimi 1988, 31; Seyfi Cengiz n.d., 4; Munzur Çem 2011, 57; Mehmet Şerif Fırat 1983, 205-206; Alirıza D. Gülçiçek 2004, 836. In his study describing the traditions of the Zeriqi tribe living in the Sivas-Koçgiri region, Yusuf Zeri notes that Gağan is celebrated on 31 December (Zeri 2011, 117). For a comprehensive discussion of this festival, see also Ali Kılıç 2009a; 2009b.

[iii] For the Koçgiri region, see Ali Koçak n.d., who gives the Thursday falling between 21-25 December; Fırat Bulut 2013, who records 4 January; and Irene Mélikoff 1994, 84. The date of 10 January for Gağan is also given for the Sarız region, where tribes of Koçgiri and Dersim origin reside (Aziz Atlı 2014, 581). For Dersim-Mazgirt, information that Gağan is celebrated in the first days of January comes only from Seyfi Muxundi (Muxundi 2001, 62). Naşit Uluğ, who was in Dersim in the 1920s, likewise states that Gağan was celebrated toward the end of the first week of January (Uluğ 1939, 98).

[iv] Unfortunately, it has not been possible to obtain information on who made this decision or on what grounds it was taken (see also note 17). For the Hızır fasts, Irene Mélikoff likewise gives the dates 11-14 February (Mélikoff 1994, 83).

[v] For authors who date the Hızır fast to 30 January, see Yusuf Zeri 2011, 295; Gülsün Fırat 1997, 101; Mehmet Nuri Dersimi 1988, 31; Kemal Astare 2001, 155; Burhan Kocadağ 1987, 254; Munzur Çem 2011, 60; see also Ali Koçak n.d.

[vi] A popular saying holds that Hızır has one foot in January

and the other in February. For this reason, the period during which the Hızır fasts are most commonly observed is the final week of January and the first week of February.

[vii] In the Mazgirt region, the Hızır fast is referred to as Chele Roze Xızır ("the Forty of the Hızır Fast") (Gülsün Fırat 1997, 101).

[viii] Gülsün Fırat, who conducted research in villages of the Pülümür-Nazımiye area, reports that Black Wednesday is celebrated on the last Wednesday of March. On this day, villagers wash their faces in the stream and bathe children with this water, believing that it may have mixed with water drunk by Hızır (Gülsün Fırat 1997, 102). Edip Yavuz, who served in official positions in the region from the 1940s onward, states that in Pülümür and Ovacık Black Wednesday is celebrated on the first Wednesday of March. On this day, adult men smear black marks on their faces and then wash them off in running water; this is believed to bring good fortune and to protect against illness (Yavuz 1968, 426). In Sivas-Zara, it is reported that there are three Black Wednesdays in March (Özen n.d.). Gülçiçek notes that Black Wednesday is generally celebrated on the first or second Wednesday of March, and in some places on the first or third Wednesday (Gülçiçek 2004, 834).

[ix] It is noted that throughout Dersim, the dates of 7 and 17 March according to the Rumi calendar are particularly prominent (Bıra n.d.). In the Koçgiri region, Fırat Bulut reports that Small Heftemal is celebrated on 20 March and Large Heftemal on 30 March (Bulut 2013). The same dates are given for Small and Large Heftemal in the Sarız region (Aziz Atlı 2014, 582). Irene Mélikoff, without specifying which calendar is used, records the dates 7-12 March for Heftemal (Mélikoff 1994, 85). In his study of the Lolan tribe living in the Bingöl and Varto regions, Burhan Kocadağ refers to only a single Heftemal, noting that it corresponds to 17 March in the Rumi calendar and to early April in the Gregorian calendar (Kocadağ 1987, 265). Similarly, Mehmet

Şerif Fırat gives only Rumi 17 March as New Year's Day (Fırat 1983, 207). In an interview conducted with a person from the Erzincan region, it is stated that Newroz is celebrated as Heftemal or Black Wednesday on 27 March (Aydın n.d.). This has been interpreted as the Large Hawtemal, with Rumi 27 March corresponding to 8 April in the Gregorian calendar (Cengiz n.d., 6). No other testimony has been found indicating that Hawtemal is celebrated on 8 April or later.

[x] In some regions, Hawtemal/Heftemal is associated primarily with cemetery visits and prayers recited for the dead.

[xi] For an example, see Gülsün Fırat 1997, 102. In the Pülümür region, many practices associated with Hawtemal-such as visiting graves and distributing lokma-are also carried out on Black Wednesday. A large proportion of the rituals listed for Black Wednesday are performed in Varto within the framework of Heftemal (Kocadağ 1987, 265). It is also observed that some days and traditions have merged. For instance, in certain regions Black Wednesday, Hawtemal, and the Mart Dokuzu fast have been reduced to a single day, with rituals being maintained under the name Hawtemal/Heftemal or Black Wednesday without distinction between them. According to Munzur Çem, in the Kığı region Newrozê Marti, Qere Çarşemeyê Marti, and Hawtemalo Pil are known as the same days (Çem 2011, 61). A person from the Erzincan region likewise states that Heftemal and Black Wednesday fall on the same days (Aydın n.d.). In the Sivas region, the names Sultan Nevruz, Mart Dokuzu, and Black Wednesday are reported to be used for the celebrations on 21 March (Özen n.d.). This may be considered a relatively recent development. Indeed, it is noted that whereas Small and Large Heftemal were formerly observed on separate days in Varto, a tendency emerged from the 1970s onward to reduce these observances to a single day. For this reason, apart from a more religiously conservative tribe, Heftemal is said to have become a one-day festival today in much of the

region (personal correspondence: N. Gedik). Regional differences are also noteworthy. For example, some sources from Dersim report that in the past a seven-layered kömbe/çörek was prepared for Hawtemal and distributed to seven households. It is stated that this tradition has been maintained by Alevis who migrated from Koçgiri and Dersim to the Çorum region, but that they perform this practice during the Hızır fasts, distributing a seven-layered kömbe to seven households after fasting for seven days.

[xii] For this day, see Seyfi Muxundi n.d., "1-9 March Fast."

[xiii] For Hızır and Hıdrellez traditions, see Selahattin Döğüş 2015. In a study on Tahtacı Alevis living in the Mersin region, it is reported that elders observe a three-day Hızır fast in the first or second week of February, and that Hıdrellez is also celebrated on 6 May (Selçuk 2004, 132, 277). It is learned from Yusuf Ziya Yörükan that the Hızır fast tradition does not encompass all Tahtacı communities. In his comprehensive study of Tahtacıs living in Western Anatolia, Yörükan does not mention this fast (Yörükan 2002).

[xiv] For Arab Alevis and the Hızır tradition, see Hüseyin Türk 2002. In the Hatay region alone, a total of fifty-one shrines dedicated to Hızır have been identified.

[xv] On the websites of Alevi institutions and associations, among the important days listed as part of the Alevi calendar, reference is made only to the Hızır fast and to 21 March Sultan Nevruz. Among Bektashis, Nevruz is called Nevrûziyye and acquires a Shi'i content through couplets in which ʿAli is frequently invoked (Birge 1937, 109, 219-231; Noyan 1998). Fuat Bozkurt notes that the Nevruz tradition is preserved primarily among Aegean Alevis as a festivity closely intertwined with religious ceremonies (Bozkurt 1990, 209). Among the Tahtacıs of Mersin, 21 March is celebrated as Nevruz; it is believed to be the day when night and day are united, a ram or rooster is sacrificed, and celebrations-including commemoration of the dead-are held in cemeteries

(Selçuk 2004, 275). According to Yusuf Ziya Yörükan, however, Tahtacıs do not attach as much importance to Nevruz as Bektashis and Alevis, and the tradition of reciting Nevrûziyye was adopted relatively recently (Yörükan 2002, 288).

[xvi] The practice of beginning rituals on the preceding evening is associated with the idea of welcoming the new day-understood as beginning at sunrise-in a state of preparedness (personal correspondence: Ç. Balaban).

[xvii] See Neşet Çağatay 1952, 137.

[xviii] See Xallkoni n.d.

[xix] Ali Koçak, who provides information on traditions in the Koçgiri region, refers to the existence of three çile periods. According to his account, the first çile begins on 21 December, the second on 31 January, and the third on 21 March, ending on 5/6 May. Although Koçak does not state this explicitly, the timetable he provides suggests that the additional ten days most likely fall in the period preceding 21 March (Koçak n.d.).

[xx] Those who place the Hızır fast between 12 and 15 February do not offer a clear explanation for this dating. According to some researchers, however, 30 January marks the beginning of the Hızır fast according to the Rumi calendar; when converted to the Gregorian calendar, this corresponds to a date after 11 February (Zeri 2011, 295; Gülçiçek 2004, 799). This explanation is problematic, however, since in regions that take 30 January as the reference point for the Hızır fast, Gağan is observed as beginning on 21 December-that is, forty days before the fast. Information that the Hızır fast ended on 9 February comes from M. F. Grenard, who was present in the region in the late nineteenth century; Grenard reports that after being observed for seven days, the Hızır fast concluded with a festival on 9 February (Grenard 1904, 518).

[xxi] The number forty, which carries significant meaning in many cultures and belief systems, is often characterised as denoting "preparation and completion" (Schimmel 2000, 265-273).

[xxii] For the Ağrı region, see İsmet Alpaslan 1995, 253. According to the author, in Ağrı the first çile is called "small," while the second çile, beginning after 30 January and coinciding with the coldest period of the year, is termed "large." By contrast, a report on Doğubeyazıt states that the first çile period is identified as the Great Çile (Eren 2015). For the Iğdır region, see Şimşek 1998, 132. According to Şimşek, in Iğdır the three-day Hıdır Nebi days begin on 21 February, at the end of the Small Çile. While the author does not specify whether fasting is observed on these days, he notes that they are marked primarily by games and entertainment. It is further reported that the performance staged at Gağan under the names Alık and Fatık in Dersim and its surroundings is performed in Iğdır during the Hıdır Nebi days under the name Kosa. In the region, the thirty-day period following the Small Çile is referred to as the "pre-festival" period.

[xxiii] Edward W. C. Noel likewise reports that 21 February is referred to as Hıdır Nebi (Noel 1920, 61).

[xxiv] For examples, see Ali Koçak n.d.; see also Seyfi Muxundi n.d., "1-9 March Fast."

[xxv] For a comprehensive overview of cemre traditions in Anatolia, see Hamarat. The author notes that in different regions of Turkey the dominant belief is that the cemre falls first into the air, then into the water, and finally into the earth; however, he argues that the correct sequence of warming is soil, water, and air. This concept and belief, often attributed to Arab sources, were widely debated in medieval Arabic and Persian writings.

[xxvi] This periodisation can also be observed in

compilations of folk beliefs from the Iran-Khorasan region produced in the first half of the twentieth century (Donaldson 1938, 95).

[xxvii] See Boyce 1983, 806; see also Boyce 1970.

[xxviii] Çağatay 1952, 136.

[xxix] Yusuf Zeri states that only the Great Heftemal exists and that it is celebrated on 7 March according to the old calendar (Zeri 2011, 175).

[xxx] As one possible explanation, when Hawtemal was celebrated in earlier times on the first Thursday of March, there was-at least once every six or seven years-the possibility that the preceding day would be Black Wednesday. Since New Year celebrations began on the evening of the previous day, situations could arise in which Black Wednesday and Hawtemal overlapped. Over time, this may have contributed to the two days being conflated.

[xxxi] In Anatolia, this period is also referred to as Kocakarı Soğuğu ("Old Woman's Cold") (Çağatay 1952, 137). In Dersim, the prolongation of winter is explained through a narrative centred on an old woman known as Pire (Gezik and Çakmak 2010, 215-216).

[xxxii] For Wednesday traditions in Iran, see Kasheff & Sīrjānī. In Iran and among Kurds, Red Wednesday is generally celebrated on the Wednesday preceding Newroz.

[xxxiii] Yazidis believe that on Wednesday, the fourth day, the four fundamental elements of creation (earth, water, air, and fire) were completed and that God descended to the earth on that day (Rodziewicz 2016, 351).

[xxxiv] Black Wednesday is known not only among Yazidis but also in the Botan and Hakkâri regions as the Wednesday two weeks before Newroz. Defined as an inauspicious day,

hair is not cut, bathing is avoided, and laundry is not done; in Nusaybin it is reported that people leave their homes on this day in order to protect themselves from misfortune. For a comprehensive discussion of Black Wednesday as observed among Kurds, see Turgut 2013. In his study of tribes living in the Urfa region, İbrahim Bozkurt notes that within local traditions Black Wednesday is regarded as an unlucky day; for this reason, laundry is not done and no work is begun on that day. According to Bozkurt, however, it is unclear which Wednesday this refers to (Bozkurt n.d., 76). In another study, the same author reports that in the Urfa region the practice of placing stones on rooftops (dama taş indirme) is carried out on 1 March, and that on 13 March the stones are removed and what lies beneath them is examined (Bozkurt 2003, 87). A nineteenth-century study of Kurdish traditions likewise records that the last Wednesday of February-without specifying according to which calendar-is called Karaçarşamba, that ceremonies are held on this day, meals are eaten for happiness, and hostility is avoided (Beyazıdi 1998, 43). In his memoirs, Mehdi Zana recalls Black Wednesday in his childhood in Silvan as a largely joyful and festive day. Defined as the welcoming of spring, it was marked by families cutting a lock of hair from one another at dawn, followed by celebrations in the countryside with songs and halay dances, accompanied by meals prepared the previous evening (Zana 1991, 25).

[xxxv] For the New Year festival known as Sarê Sal, celebrated on the first Wednesday of April, see Kreyenbroek 1995, 151. It is noteworthy that Thursday is sacred for Alevis, while Wednesday occupies this position for Yazidis, creating a meaningful contrast. Yazidis also observe a three-day fast at the beginning of winter, which they call Serê Chille ("the Beginning of the Forty"), and again during the Hızır period. According to their belief, the New Year-that is, Newroz-likewise arrives in stages; following the articulation of air, water, and earth in sequence, the birth of the new year takes place (Düchting and Ateş 1992, 169).

[xxxvi] It is also reported that in the Mazgirt region, which lies outside Inner Dersim, Heftemal is celebrated on 7 and 17 March according to the Rumi calendar (Muxundi n.d., "1-9 March Fast").

[xxxvii] This transformation can also be traced in the dates provided. Traditionally, Rumi 7 March-that is, the evening of 20 March according to the Gregorian calendar-is accepted as the beginning of Hawtemal. As noted in earlier sections, this is related to the practice of commencing the festival on the preceding evening. By contrast, in practices that take the Gregorian calendar as their reference, the festival is directly associated with the date of 21 March.

[xxxviii] For this festival, also known as Shab-e Chelleh ("the Night of the Forties"), see Omidsalar n.d.

[xxxix] For the Sada festival, see Krasnowolska n.d.; see also Boyce 1983, 799-801.

[xl] For further information, see Boyce n.d., "Festivals I. Zoroastrian"; see also Boyce n.d., "Nowruz I. In the Pre-Islamic Period."

[xli] The formation of this ten-day period likewise developed through calendar reform. Newroz celebrations began on the night preceding the day itself. Iranians believed that the souls of their ancestors (Fravirdun) visited their homes from that night onward. After the calendar reform, the five additional days were also regarded as days on which the spirits roamed. When, at the end of the first year, those who continued to celebrate Newroz on the old traditional date added the preceding five days, the Fravirdun days thus began ten days before the official Newroz. (This ten-day period recalls the issue of the additional ten days in the 40-40-10 folk calendar.)

[xlii] For this day, known as the "last Wednesday evening" festival before the New Year, see Donaldson 1938, 120. It

has been suggested that this tradition was originally observed six days before Newroz, but over time assumed its current form under the influence of Arab traditions that regarded Wednesday as inauspicious. This practice is still maintained in Iran today. In some regions it extends across the final three weeks, and in others across the final four weeks preceding Newroz. In the village of Bozorgabad near Urmia, it is reported that the last four Wednesdays of the year are celebrated under different names, of which only the third Wednesday is called Black Wednesday (Kasheff and Sīrjānī n.d.).

[xliii] Newroz is most likely a festival inherited from ancient times and later reinterpreted by Zoroaster in accordance with his teachings. Nevertheless, the term itself does not appear in either the Old Avesta or the Young Avesta; it is first encountered in texts from the Pahlavi period (Boyce n.d., "Nowruz I. In the Pre-Islamic Period"). For the significance of the number seven in Newroz and other Iranian traditions, see Shahbazi n.d., "Haft." It is also well known that in Yazidi and Ahl-i Haq belief systems the number seven (heptad, haft tan) holds a central importance, shaping both their cosmologies and their religious organisation. Some elderly informants from Dersim likewise state that creation is founded upon seven lights (angels). According to these testimonies, this group of seven is most often listed as Gabriel, Michael, Israfil, Azrael, Muhammad, Ali, and Hızır; in one narrative, however, the final three are given as Hızır, İlyas, and Melek-i Tavus.

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