

# “BIBLICAL CHRONOLOGY

Vol. 1, No. 1

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October, 1989

## THE EMBARRASSMENT OF BIBLICAL CHRONOLOGY

And Arpachshad lived thirty-five years, and became the father of **Shelah** . . . And **Shelah** lived thirty years, and became the father of Eber . . . and Eber lived ~~thirty-four years and became the father of Peleg~~ . . . and ~~Peleg~~ lived thirty years, and became the father of Reu. (Genesis 11 :12ff.).

The fact that the Bible contains chronological information cannot be disputed. What can and often has been disputed is whether or not that chronological information has any real value, either theologically or historically. It is my conviction, and that of many others including the sponsor of this newsletter, that Biblical chronology is extremely important, both theologically and historically.

Chronology is the backbone of history. This is rather obvious and no one would question it. When we look into the matter, however, we are confronted with the question: What in fact is the chronology of events in the ancient near east? What is the chronology that forms the backbone for our understanding of the events we know happened during the millennia before Christ?

This is where the “rubber meets the road” as far as Biblical chronology is concerned, because the Bible seems to provide a chronology from creation to the cross, but it is not the same as the chronology of the ancient world that is in use today both in secular and in evangelical Christian circles. The secularist chronology is a speculative composite of various pieces of data, loosely hinged on a chronology of Egypt compiled by Manetho (flourished 300 B.C.). Everyone admits, however, that **Manetho's** chronology is in error at numerous points. The result is that the secularist chronology of the ancient near east has very little foundation.

Biblical chronology is regarded as an unacceptable alternative, however, because it is too short. If there was a global flood (or even a local near eastern flood) around 2350 B. C., as the Bible maintains, then the Egyptian civilization could not have arisen around 4000 B. C., or even 3000 B.C. Egypt would have arisen shortly before 2000 B. C., and this is regarded as too late by twentieth century secularist scholars. Though the secularist chronology shifts from time to time, and indeed has become shorter in the twentieth century, it never becomes anywhere near short enough to accommodate the chronology of the Bible.

The secularists maintain a veritable army of **state-university-sponsored** archaeologists, translators (of ancient writings), and historians, all maintaining the standard secularist line in the area of ancient near east chronology. Against this formidable array of scholarship and speculation, the pitiable forces of evangelical, traditionalist, and mod-

Eastern Orthodox), with his vague commitment to Biblical authority, this is not much of a problem. For the evangelical (and for strict **Biblicists** among the traditionalistic groups), this ~~is a major problem~~.

The problem arises from the fact that if the Bible is inerrant, then its chronology is inerrant. If the Bible's chronology is inerrant, then a great deal of secularist speculation about the ancient near east is in error. If this is true, the Bible-believing community is confronted with a massive revisionist project. The entire history of the ancient near east will have to be reassessed. This will not be acceptable to the secularists, and Christianity will lose even more academic respectability. Six-day creationism is bad enough; Biblical chronology is impossible – such is the attitude pervasive in Bible-believing circles.

### Accommodation and Credibility

To explain the true faith in such a way as to offset the ridicule of our cultured despisers is in itself a laudable objective. It has been part of the goal of Christian apologetics since the beginning. If, however, there is no way to avoid confrontation over an issue, then we must be faithful to Christ and to the Scriptures, even if we lose credibility.

The evangelical world has lost credibility on this point anyway. For nearly a century, the evangelical world has maintained that there are “gaps” in the Biblical chronology, and that therefore we cannot say the world was created around 4000 B.C. This belief makes possible an accommodation to the proposals coming from the world of secularist speculation and scholarship. (In a later essay we shall take up the origin of this “gap” theory.)

Far from making orthodox Christianity more acceptable, this accommodation has made it seem silly. Secularists and modernists can read Genesis 5 and 11, and they can see clearly that these chapters both intend to provide a chronology and in fact do provide a chronology. They don't believe this chronology is accurate, but they can see that it is present. As a result, they regard the modern evangelical position as stupid and ridiculous. “If you really believe the Bible is inerrant,” they say, “then you have to take this chronology seriously. You're just making fools of yourselves by trying to evade the information contained in these **chapters**.”<sup>1</sup>

There can be little question but that the reason for evangelical reassessments of the chronology was the rise of evolutionary geology and archeology. In order to protect the Bible from the charge of error in its detailing of the

<sup>1</sup> See Dewey M. Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility* (Grand Rap-

in order to reconcile "Genesis 1 with the assured results of modern scientific inquiry. The chronology of the Bible also proved an embarrassment, in that scholars were confident that archeological remains from civilizations dating from before 4000 B.C. had been unearthed. Evangelical were forced either to reconcile the Bible to these hypotheses or else to eschew scholarly respectability while advocating their own peculiar interpretative schema for geology and archaeology. A few "creationist" scholars maintained the traditional Christian view of geology, but until very recently there has been no similar movement in the realm of archaeology. For the most part, the chronological data of Genesis 5 and 11 have been put aside. **Beegle's summary serves to highlight the embarrassing aspect of the matter:**

Until geological information disproved the 4004 date, most Jews and Christians (including many alert, even brilliant, persons) thought the genealogy in Genesis 5 was intended to **show the consecutive history of man. Inasmuch as some evangelical in the nineteenth century felt the force of the new geological information, they were inclined to stretch the genealogy enough to provide gaps for the scientific data. But how did this relate to the intent of the author? If the geological and other scientific data known today had not been made available to us, would we have doubted that Genesis 5 was intended to be chronological? Not likely. The Biblical evidence is too explicit at this point. It is our scientific knowledge that causes us to ignore the clear meaning of the passage. Obviously, then, the intent of the Biblical writer can hardly be accommodated to the scientific facts made available from generation to generation.**<sup>2</sup>

Is **Beegle** correct in what he implies? Have evangelical scholars simply drummed up some artificial and nugatory arguments against Biblical chronology in order to retain academic respectability, or are there in fact aspects of the prob-

Now of course, if in fact the **Bible** shows that the chronologies of Genesis 5 and 11 have gaps, and therefore cannot be taken rigorously, then that's another matter. We must not let ourselves be brow-beaten by the secularists and modernists, and forced by their ridicule to adopt an unsound position.

Let me provide an analogy. A few years ago a family was on trial for sending their children to an unregistered Christian school. The attorneys came up with a list of questions that they would ask to find out if these people were really serious Christians or not. The purpose was to see if this was really a "matter of conscience." Among the questions asked were things like this: "Do you have a television in your home? Do you drink alcohol? Do you smoke?" Now, as a matter of fact, there is nothing in the Bible and the Christian religion against having a television or drinking and smoking in moderation. These attorneys were totally out of line in imposing *their* definition of "conscientious Christianity" on these parents.

Just so, we cannot permit the James Barrs, Dewey Beegles, and Stephen Davises of this world to bludgeon us into accepting Biblical chronology just on their say-so. The ultimate question remains whether or not the Bible in fact gives a chronology. The point I am making here, however, is that the evangelical capitulation on this point has not gained intellectual credibility for the faith. Quite the contrary. Capitulation on the question of chronology has made evangelical Christianity look ridiculous.

In conclusion, there is no way to evade the embarrassment of Biblical chronology. If we try to pretend that Genesis 5 and 11 do not provide a chronology, we shall be ridiculed by intelligent unbelievers, who can plainly see that there is a Biblical chronology. If we accept the Biblical chronology and enter into the task of rethinking the secularist chronology of the ancient near east, we shall be regarded as foolish and quixotic. Either way, we shall lose "respectability." This being the case, let us not worry about what others may think, and ask the question: What say the Scriptures?

2. Beegle, p 187f.