

BIBLICAL CHRONOLOGY

Vol. 1, No. 3

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December, 1989

THE THEOLOGY OF BIBLICAL CHRONOLOGY

It is widely assumed in **evangelicalism** today that Biblical chronology is of no great theological importance. The **assumption that Biblical chronology is not important lies behind** the easy dismissal of it by late nineteenth century evangelical scholars, and the continual ignoring of it in the twentieth century. The purpose of the present essay is to show that Biblical chronology is, on the contrary, very important to Biblical theology.

To show why this is so, **we** need to consider for a few moments the great counterfeit of true religion, which we can call "Gnosticism," after the movements in the early centuries of the Christian Church that are called by that name. Gnosticism is the tendency to substitute ideology for history. The **gnostics** of the early Church period held that the events of Christ's life, suffering, death, and resurrection were not particularly important. **Following** ancient **paganism**, the **gnostics** wanted a religion of **ideas**. For them, the point was not to trust in a series of historical events, but to get in contact with a set of eternal ideas. The gnostic gods were always dying and **rising again**, and these stories were regarded simply as myths that pointed to the cyclical character of time as a reflection of a static eternity.

Against this idea the Church Fathers took an inflexible stand. Their views are enshrined in the two great early creeds of the Church: the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. These creeds stated that Jesus was "born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under **Pontius Pilate**, was crucified, dead, and buried. **He descended into hell**. The third day **He arose again from the dead**. **He ascended into heaven**, and sits on the right hand of the God the Father Almighty; from whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead." This statement is an affirmation of **irreversible history**. It is an affirmation that Christ's work was done in this world ("under **Pontius Pilate**") in **real chronological** ("third day"). It cannot be repeated: Christ does not die and rise again and again; instead He is coming to judge the world.

Sacred Time

For the gnostics and pagans this was nonsense. For them history was not real. Only the eternal realm of ideas was real. Their system said that there were two kinds of time and space. There was sacred time and sacred space, and there was profane time and profane space. The important religious events took place in sacred time and sacred space, which were in another world.

For the pagans and **gnostics**, sacred time was not **clock-time** as we know it. To express this, they spoke of events in sacred time as taking millions and billions of years, yet instantaneously. Nor was sacred space the same as earthly

to get hold of the power of sacred space and time and bring these into this world as a means of getting life, **power, and knowledge**.

In the Bible there are also sacred space and sacred time, but in a completely different sense. Sacred space in the Old Testament was an area marked off in **this** world. Sacred time was the chronology that took place in that sacred space. But this sacred time was clocked exactly the same way as time outside the boundaries of the sanctuary. In other words, in the Bible sacred space and sacred time are simply the **of the world of space and time**, not some **world of space and time**.

Sacred space in the Bible is always set off by boundaries that are described geometrically. When we find God setting specific dimensions for an object, that object is being enclosed as holy or sacred space. Ultimately, God's "sacred space" is His people. It is they who, gathered around His throne, create His temple.

The human body, proportioned and measured by God in Genesis 2, creates another boundary of "sacred space," which is why in the Old Covenant there were important sacramental laws of diet. The heart beats out time within this human space. For the holy man, the heart beats out sacred time in his sacred body; for the clean man, the heart beats out clean time in his clean body; for the unclean man, the heart beats out unclean time in his unclean body. This is the archetype and the ultimate fulfillment of all other sacred geometry and sacred time in the Old Covenant.

To get this before us, let us briefly look at the Old Testament. The first holy ground was the Garden of Eden. Outside this Garden were the land of Eden and the other lands. The location of sacred space **this world** indicated that sacred space was to **this world**. The boundaries of the Garden (transgressed by Satan) correspond to the **body-boundaries** of the holy people (transgressed by eating the forbidden fruit). It is important to note right away that in Biblical religion, on/y **will** **defile**

Satan did not defile the Garden; Adam and Eve did. The fruit did not defile their **bodies**; their rebellious hearts did (unthankfulness, Rem. 1 :21).

When man sinned, he was cast out of the Garden into the land of Eden. Outside the land of Eden was the "wilderness," which was in some sense "unclean space." Now we have three areas: sacred, "clean," and "unclean." All of these existed in this world. In paganism, there were only two realms: sacred and profane. Also in paganism, these two realms existed impersonally; while in Biblical religion the three realms are brought about by human intention and action. In paganism, the way to get from the profane to the

were God's sanctuary on earth, and the chronology is attached to them. During the Flood Year, however, sacred space was the Ark, whose right-angled dimensions were carefully dictated by God. Genesis 7-8 gives the chronology of the Flood Year in terms of the Ark.

With the call of Abraham, "sacred space" became the community of the special priestly people. Sacred time, then, was measured in the years of the Hebrew Patriarchs. There was a "clean" land around these Patriarchs, and outside the "Promised Land" was the "unclean" land of the "wilderness world." Thus there was "clean time" and "unclean time," but the clocks of sacred, clean, and unclean time ticked at the same rate, and existed in the same world.

In the Mosaic era, sacred space was the Tabernacle and its courtyard. The chronology is given in terms of the Tabernacle and Temple (480 years from the Exodus – which was a departure for a religious festival – to the building of the Temple; Exodus 3:18; 1 Kings 6:1).

When the Temple was built, the palace of the King was made part of its precincts. The chronology of this period is tied to the Kings as New Adamic builders and rebuilder of the Temple. The focus on the person of the King continues the theme that "sacred space and time" are ultimately personal, not geographical.

After the Restoration, sacred space is more sharply focused on the Person of the coming Messiah, and the chronology (Daniel's seventy weeks of years) is tied to the coming of that Messiah.

In the Gospels, sacred space is manifest in the Person of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, and the chronology is tied to the events in His life. Away from His presence is the demonic realm of uncleanness.

With the ascension of Jesus Christ, "sacred space" is positioned in heaven. No longer is there any "holy ground" on the earth. Similarly, "sacred time" is positioned in heaven, and accordingly the New Testament is not concerned to provide a strict chronology of events after Pentecost. At the other end of the scale, "unclean space" and "unclean time" are also removed from this world, and put into hell. Nevertheless,

It is just that the definitive chronology of the New Covenant is being "recorded" in heaven, not in connection with any earthly **sanctuary**. It is Christ's "heartbeat" in heaven which is the measure of the ultimately Personal sacred time.

All of this shows the Intense theological importance of Biblical chronology. The history of the sanctuary, in its various forms, is not an other-worldly history, as in Gnosticism and paganism. Rather, *sanctuary is*

The Church and Chronology

It is interesting to observe, along these lines, that the New Covenant Church on earth is in a sense the "courtyard" of the heavenly sanctuary. It has been the Church that has provided a chronology for the world. It has been the Church that reformed the calendar. It has been the Church that kept accurate chronological records for centuries until the birth of the modern world. Thus, in a "shadow" fashion, the Church as the "center" of the world continues to be the center of chronological time.

Chronology is the backbone of history, and the sanctuary is the center of the world. Agreeable to this is the fact that the core chronology of the world is the chronology of the sanctuary given in the Bible. Christians who understand

other set of garbled pagan records, all of which show the pagan-gnostic tendency to exaggerate numbers greatly in order to point to their brand of mythical "sacred time."

Gnosticism is with us today in the evangelical church. Twenty years ago it was still true that most evangelical scholars held to seven-day creationism. Today it seems that the "orthodox" position is that the seven days of Genesis are not chronological days but Seven Big Ideas. In Calvinistic circles this has been pushed by Meredith G. Kline and his followers, who display a tendency to downplay history across the board. The history of the Old Covenant in these circles to lose any kind of cause and effect and becomes a series of rather random "intrusions" of God. The New Covenant is understood in these circles as a kind of static "common grace" that will someday suddenly be interrupted by a final "intrusion."

Of course, I hasten to add that no evangelical pushes these ideas to their limits. I am not accusing Kline or any of his followers of Gnosticism, but I do believe we see in this way of thinking a gnostic a tendency to downplay the reality of history, of cause and effect, of the impact of the sanctuary on the world. In Biblical perspective, the location of the **sanctuary** (sacred **space/time**) in the world meant the of the sanctuary on the world.

The ascension of Christ to heaven and the relocation of the sanctuary into heaven did not reduce that impact, but strengthened it. This is for two reasons. First, being in heaven, the sanctuary is now readily accessible by all persons anywhere in the world. Second, the continual streaming of the Holy Spirit from the heavenly **sanctuary** provides a far more powerful impact than was ever felt before.

"Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven." In Biblical theology, the principle that heaven impacts the earth and imprints heavenly principles on the earth is called **typology**. In the Old Covenant, the earthly sanctuary **typologically** imprinted heavenly principles on the world beyond its borders. In the New Covenant, the far more powerful heavenly sanctuary **typologically** imprints heavenly principles on the earth through the streaming of the Spirit of life, power, and knowledge.

The modern gnostic tendency tends to separate the sanctuary from the world. This is not new: the nature/grace separation of Medieval theology had the same effect. This separation has had tremendous effects on **liturgics**, since worshipers no longer have any sense of moving into a **Spirit-created** sanctuary and then back out again into the world. It has had tremendous effects on worldview, since Christians do not see their movement back into the world as one of dynamically carrying forth the impact of holiness into all of life. It has had tremendous effects on theology, as the themes of glorification and transfiguration are almost completely ignored. It has had tremendous effects on exegesis, as the principle of typology – of the progressive impact and imprint of sacred space-time (persons) on the world – is not recognized. And it means that Biblical chronology is regarded as unimportant.

Biblical religion, however, is not an Ideology. It is not the legalistic ideology of the Pharisee, the political ideology of the Zealot, or the contemplative Ideology of the Gnostic. Biblical religion, rather, is the gift of the Kingdom, a new life in a new world. That gift and that life have come in history as an historical event, measurable in chronological clock-time, the only time there is. For this reason, chronology is of paramount importance in the recovery of the true faith from the influence of Gnosticism.