

BIBLICAL CHRONOLOGY

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THE CAPITULATION OF BIBLICAL CHRONOLOGY

Why is it that Biblical chronology is not taken seriously in evangelical and Reformed circles today? After all, it is among these people that Biblical inerrancy finds its most forceful defenders. We should expect that Biblical chronology would be an important issue among the defenders of an infallible and perfectly accurate Bible. In fact, however, we find that the question of Biblical chronology is largely ignored.

Ancient Problems

There are several problems that Biblical chronology raises, problems that the evangelical scholarly community has sidestepped in recent years. The first is that if Biblical chronology is true, then there are 1656 years between the creation of the world and the Flood, and the world was created sometime around 4000 B.C. If this is true, then the chronologies of ancient civilizations, as we find them in secular encyclopedias and also in evangelical Bible encyclopedias, are drastically wrong.

Consider: According to Biblical chronology, the Flood occurred around 2350 B.C. Now, the

(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975) says that the first and second dynasties of Egypt ran from about 3000 to 2778 B. C., and that the great pyramids were built between 2778 and 2723 (*ZPEB*). This puts these dynasties, and the pyramids, before the Flood.

(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), is a bit more conservative, putting the first two dynasties between 2850 and 2650 B. C., and the pyramid builders between 2650 and 2200 B. C., but this is still too early (*NBD*, p. 340).

It is interesting to look back at Bible encyclopedias from a century ago.

puts the first two dynasties between 5500 and 5000 B.C. Thus, there has been some degree of improvement in the world of chronological scholarship, but not enough to satisfy the Biblical chronology. We should also learn from this that secular scholarship in this area has undergone radical shifts during the present century. The author of the *ISBE* article was quite confident in his 5000 B.C. date, just as the author of the *ZPEB* article is very sure of his 3000 B.C. date. In fact, though, these secular chronological constructions are based on slender evidence, and are also based on the premise that the Biblical chronology is to be ignored.

Persian Problems

A second problem lies in the chronology of Persia. The Bible tells us in Daniel 9:24-27 that there will be "seventy weeks" between the decree to rebuild Jerusalem and the

this prophecy. One is to say that the "seventy weeks" are simply a symbol, and do not mean seventy weeks of years (490 years). In this case, the passage has no chronological relevance.

A second way to interpret the prophecy of the seventy weeks is to say that the 490 years begin with the decree of Cyrus the Great. This in fact is the obvious interpretation of the passage, because the Bible has a great deal to say about the decree of Cyrus and little or nothing to say about any other decree. (We shall discuss this question in detail in later issues of this newsletter, but at this point I am only laying out some problems.) The difficulty with the Cyrus interpretation is this: The currently-agreed-upon secular chronology of Persia puts Cyrus at around 538 B.C., which is about 80 years too early. If the 490 years are real years, and began with Cyrus, then the decree would have to be around 458 B.C.

Thus, a third interpretation has arisen, which says that the decree to rebuild Jerusalem found in Daniel 9 does not refer to Cyrus's decree, but to some later decree by Artaxerxes during the time of Nehemiah. The Bible encyclopedias say that Nehemiah went to Jerusalem in 445 B. C., which is a bit too late.

Problems Everywhere

Now what we can see from this is that there is a lot of confusion in the chronology of the Persian era. Most scholars today believe that the Persian chronology is secure because of eclipse data, but as a later essay in this series will show, eclipse data are unreliable.

In brief, the earth undergoes slight shifts in motion called "accelerations." These accelerations take place both in the earth's rotation and in her revolution around the sun, and they take place in the moon's motions also. In other words, every now and then the earth or the moon will slow down or speed up for a second or so, and then return to normal. This is caused by tidal forces and by the magmatic fluxes under the earth, as well as by other factors as well.

On this, see the various studies by astronomer Robert R. Newton of Johns Hopkins University, such as

(Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1970) and

(Johns Hopkins, 1979). Newton was

forced to do these studies in order to provide accurate data on the solar system to NASA, so that our satellites and space probes would not miss their targets. The studies are highly technical, but very important for the study of ancient chronology.

What all this means is that it is not possible to feed

the moon mean that geographical positions of such eclipses will be off by hundreds of miles. For instance, suppose the computer says that an eclipse of the sun occurred at Nineveh in 600 B.C. In fact, the "accelerations" of the moon and sun during the past 2600 years have shifted things around so that the eclipse actually was visible 500 miles away, and not noticeable at Nineveh at all. This means that attempts to fix dates using ancient records and modern computers are fraught with difficulty.

The farther back we go, the more inaccurate any simple computer scheme becomes. This calls into question not only the Persian chronology, but also those of Assyria and Babylon, to the extent that these have been "corroborated" by eclipse data. Eclipse data may turn out to be of little or no use in the study of ancient history. (More on eclipses in a later essay.)

The Capitulation

At the beginning of this essay we asked how it came about that the evangelical and Reformed community "went to sleep" on this issue. The answer lies in the fact that late in the 19th century, two well-respected theologians at Princeton Theological Seminary – the bulwark of Protestant orthodoxy – capitulated on the question of Biblical chronology. They were William H. Green and Benjamin B. Warfield. Because these two men were widely respected as weighty defenders of Biblical authority and inerrancy, their articles brought a sigh of relief to the intellectual evangelical community. For nearly a century, evangelicals have pointed back to Green and Warfield as proof that the Biblical chronology need not be respected. Few, of course, have read the essays written by these two men. It is simply taken for granted that men such as these could not have made a mistake in this matter.

[William H. Green, "Primeval Chronology,"

Sacra (April, 1890); reprinted in Walter C. Kaiser, ed. *Classical*

(Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1972) – note the title of this book!

and also reprinted in R. C. Newman and H. J. Eckelmann,

(Downers Grove,

IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1977); Benjamin B. Warfield, "On the Antiquity and the Unity of the Human Race,"

Theological 1):1-25; reprinted in Warfield, *Biblical Theological* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1968).]

Both men strain at gnats and swallow a camel when it comes to their interpretation of Genesis 5 and 11, which

of Abraham. In both essays, particularly Warfield's, it is contended that chronology is of little or no theological importance, so that we should not attach much weight to the chronological information in Genesis 5 and 11. Having argued that the matter is not important, both men seek to dismiss the rather obvious fact that in each case the age of the father is given at the time of his son's birth.

Consider: Adam was 130 when Seth was born. Seth was 105 when Enosh was born. Enosh was 90 when Kenan was born (*Gen. 5:3 ff.*). For anyone who can add – and ancient man could add as well as we can – that means that Adam was 235 years old when Enosh was born, and 325 years old when Kenan was born. Even if there are gaps in the here, so that (perhaps) Kenan is the great-grandson rather than the son of Enosh, this does not conflict with the chronological data.

If it is false, the Bible is not inerrant. If it is true, Warfield, Green, and virtually all of modern evangelical scholarship in this area is wrong.

Two things need to be borne in mind on this point. The first is that until the late 19th century, everyone in the Christian Church believed in the chronology of the Bible. As we have seen in a previous essay, Theophilus of Antioch, Augustine of Hippo, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Owen, Matthew Henry, Keil & Delitzsch, and Geerhardus Vos took Biblical chronology seriously. Clearly it entails very tortured reasoning to evade the simple chronological statements of Genesis 5 and 11, and whatever motivations were present that compelled Green and Warfield to formulate their conclusions were simply not present in earlier times.

Second, it is rather obvious that Warfield and Green were trying to accommodate the Bible to the long chronology of 19th century secularist scholarship. This accommodation did not work because anyone who reads and studies Genesis 5 and 11 can see right away that the text intends to provide chronological information, and that the chronology presented is absolutely air-tight.

Great men do stumble, and these two men stumbled here. Their stumbling has put the evangelical and Reformed scholarly communities to sleep. It is time to wake up.

(For an in-depth analysis of Warfield's and Green's essays, see my essay, "The Biblical Chronology Question: An Analysis." It is available for \$3.00 from Biblical Horizons, Box 132011, Tyler, TX 75713.)