

# BIBLICAL CHRONOLOGY

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## GROPING THROUGH THE GAPS

Although nowadays gap theories are associated with dispensationalism, it was not always so. In the nineteenth century, scholars from a variety of backgrounds (Anglican, Reformed, and proto-fundamentalist) seem to have become ~~fascinated by gaps. If you are not familiar with what I am talking about, this newsletter will acquaint you with the problem.~~

### Primeval Gaps

The first gap proposed was between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2. It was argued that God would not have made a "formless and void" world, so clearly there must have been some kind of fall of the cosmos between these two verses: God had created the heavens and the earth. This was supposedly a finished and glorious universe. Also, supposedly there was either a pre-Adamic human race or else a race of angels who ran this world. This race fell into sin and God destroyed the world, leaving it "formless and void." God then remade the world during the six days of Genesis 1.

One can find this notion in numerous older Bible commentaries, including such Presbyterian works as George Bush, Notes (Minneapolis: James & Klock, 1976 [1860]), and J. G. Murphy, Commentary (Minneapolis: James Publications, n.d. [1865]). It is also found advocated in Martin Anstay, *Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1973 [1913]), and of course in the notes of the *Scofield* and in most commentaries issuing from the dispensational camp.

The supposed evidence for this is Isaiah 45:18, which says that God created the world "not a waste place: He formed it to be inhabited." This verse proves nothing, however. It would be just as proper, and better in context, to render it in English, "He established it and did not create it to be a waste place." I recommend the discussion in E. J. Young, *Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 3:211.

Not content with straining out a gap between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2, theologians next set about tossing gaps into Genesis 5 and 11. Supposedly the chronologies in these chapters were not to be taken as complete because of "gaps in the genealogies." We shall take up Genesis 5 and 11 more fully later on. For now, I simply wish to make the point that nineteenth century theologians were fascinated by gaps, and that Reformed and Presbyterian theologians were as guilty as anybody in inventing them. In this case, as I've mentioned before, it was two Princeton theologians, B. B. Warfield and W. H. Green, who bear primary responsibility.

These primeval gaps made room for superficial accommodations with then-current secular science. The dinosaurs, it was ~~argued by~~ some, existed ~~during~~ the aaes of

for evolution. Before the six days of re-creation, the earth was shrouded in clouds, they proposed, and what happened on the fourth day was merely that the sun, moon, and stars became visible to observers on the earth – an interpretation that strains lots of ~~gnats and swallows more~~ than one camel.

Naturally, adding lots of years into the chronologies of Genesis 5 and 11 enabled evangelical to accommodate secular **Egyptologists**, who were saying that the first dynasties of Egypt arose between 6000 and 5000 B.C. Of course, the secularists have had to revise this opinion repeatedly, drawing the first dynasty ever closer and closer to a Biblically-acceptable date.

Problem? It isn't in the Bible, Charlie. There's no evidence for any of these gaps.

### Eschatological Gaps

While Presbyterian theologians tried to make the history of the world longer than the Bible says it is by stuffing gaps into Genesis 1, 5, and 11, the proto-fundamentalist scholars, who today are known as dispensationalists, took to gap thinking with a vengeance. Integral to their system of thinking was the notion that Daniel's seventieth week (Dan. 9:24-27) had been postponed until the end of time, so that the entire Christian era falls into a gap in prophetic chronology.

Other gaps had to be pushed into place as well. For instance, consider 1 Corinthians 15:23-24, "But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming, – [gap] –, ~~then the~~ end, when He delivers up the kingdom to the God ~~and~~ Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power." Well, there's no millennium in those verses. It sure looks as if the Kingdom comes to an end right at the "rapture" of the saints, since the Son gives it to the Father at that point. Guess we're going to have to stuff in a gap, as indicated, where we can put the millennium! There are lots of other places in the Old and New Testaments where either millennial gaps or "Church Age" gaps have to be forced into the text in order to make it jibe with millennial systems.

It wasn't just premillennialists who were zapping gaps into the text right and left. Other forms of gaps also were being entertained. For instance, some Lutheran and **Calvinistic** theologians came up with the idea that in Old Testament prophecy there is a "foreshortening of the **eschatological** horizon." This means that the Old Testament prophets combined the events of the first and second comings of Christ into one event. Now that the Gospel has arrived, we can see that there is in fact a gap between the first coming of Christ "in humility" and His second coming "in **glory.**"

...the ... prop...  
events in a brief space of time, brought momentous **move-**  
**ments** close together in a temporal sense, and took them  
in at a single glance. This is called 'the prophetic **perspec-**  
**pective**,' or, as **Delitzsch** calls it, 'the foreshortening of the  
prophet's horizon.' They looked upon the future as the trav-  
eler does upon a mountain range in the distance. He fan-  
cies that one mountain-top rises up right behind the other,  
when in reality they are miles apart. Cf. the prophecies  
respecting the Day of the Lord, and the twofold coming of  
Christ." Louis Berkhof,  
(Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950), p. 150.

Berkhof and others fall into this trap because they are  
committed to a "literal wherever possible" approach to  
prophecy (p. 152), which ignores the true character of an-  
cient language and literature. On this, see my remarks in  
Jordan,

**World** (Brentwood, TN: **Wolgemuth & Hyatt**, 1988),  
chap. 1. We need to let the Bible interpret itself, and not  
bring to it an artificial and rationalistic rule such as "literal  
wherever possible."

In my opinion, there is no good reason for this notion  
of foreshortening. It was at Christ's first coming that He  
not only suffered and was buried, but also rose again, as-  
cended to sit enthroned at the Father's right hand, sent  
forth the Spirit to inaugurate His reign, and poured out  
wrath on His enemies in A.D. 70.

Problem? It isn't in the Bible, Charlie. If we understand  
the imagery of the Bible properly, there is no need to see  
anything being postponed, and no evidence that any Old  
Testament prophecy "foreshortens" anything.

### Spiritual Gaps

Gaps at the beginning and gaps at the end. All we  
have left are gaps in the middle of history, and nineteenth  
century evangelical were happy to provide these as well.

Another manifestation of gap thinking, found not only  
in dispensational circles but in others as well, is the sug-  
gestion that some of the chronological statements of the  
Bible only pertain to "spiritual years," with "years of car-  
nality" left out. Thus, 1 Kings 6:1 says that the fourth year  
of Solomon's reign came 480 years after Israel came out  
of Egypt. This seems clear enough, until we count up the  
number of years in the books of Judges and Samuel and  
find out that the total figure is 594 (according to Anstay).  
The explanation offered is that if we subtract the years that  
Israel was under foreign rule ("carnal years"), we are left  
with 480 "spiritual years." As you can imagine, a great deal  
of ingenuity goes into making this system work. "Spiritual  
versus carnal years" were also used to explain the **seem-**  
**ing** chronological discrepancies between the books of Kings  
and Chronicles. This approach mars the usefulness both  
of Anstay's book, and of Philip Mauro,

(Swengel, PA: Reiner, 1970 [1933]).

It is far simpler and more obvious to take note of the  
fact that some of the judges of Israel worked at the same  
time. For instance, Samuel, Jephthah, and Samson were

years given

do not require us to take them all in chronological se-  
quence, and thus we are not obliged to do so. From the  
time Israel conquered Canaan to the time of Jephthah was  
300 years (**Jud. 11 :26**). That leaves 140 years to the fourth  
year of Solomon. Subtract 40 for David's reign and 40 for  
Saul's, and we have 56 years left. There were 40 years  
of Philistine oppression at the beginning of this period, eight-  
een of which are included in **Jephthah's** 300 years. During  
the first 20, **Jephthah**, Samuel, and Samson were growing  
up. During the second 20, Samuel and Samson judged **Is-**  
**rael**. The battle of **Mizpah** took place immediately after that,  
in the year Samson died and right at the time Elon the  
Zebulunite, the northern judge, also died (**Jud. 12:7-12**).  
Abdon judged after Elon in the north, but only for eight  
years (**Jud. 12:14**), after which Samuel judged all Israel.  
This leaves 34 years between the battle of **Mizpah** and the  
call of Saul (1 Sam. 8). By my reckoning, Samuel would  
be about 74 years old at this point, an "old man."

Now, this is just a rough sketch. As we go along, I'll try  
to refine the chronology of this period as much as possi-  
ble. Some of the numbers may change. My only point now  
is that gap-thinking is unnecessary and pointless in account-  
ing for the period of the Judges. (In a later essay, we shall  
take up how this harmonizes with Acts 13:17-21.)

Problem? It isn't in the Bible, Charlie. There is simply  
no evidence for this "spiritual years" approach.

### Conclusion

I don't know how to account for the rash of **gap-**  
thinking that broke out in the nineteenth century among  
evangelical. I do know that it was a fairly pervasive phe-  
nomenon, not something limited only to dispensationalists.  
Part of the reason why Biblical chronology has fallen out  
of consideration during this century is because **gap-think-**  
**ing** became so entrenched during the last. It became easy  
to imagine all sorts of chronological gaps between events,  
because supposedly there was evidence for many of them.  
Thus, Biblical chronology became less trustworthy, and the  
speculative constructions of secular scholars became more  
trustworthy.

In fact, however, there is no evidence of any gaps any-  
where in the Biblical chronology. Harmonizing apparent dis-  
crepancies is not difficult, and there is no foundation for  
such notions as the "foreshortening of the eschatological  
horizon" or "spiritual chronology."

There is no evidence for a gap between Genesis 1:1  
and 1:2. All these verses say is that God made the world  
shapeless and empty to start with, and then as a Potter  
works with clay, He made the world we know in six days.  
Nothing could be simpler. There was no pre-Adamic race,  
and angels were never given charge of this earth. That is  
man's job.

And there is no evidence of any gaps in the chronolo-  
gies of Genesis 5 and 11. These passages show us that  
the Flood came 1656 years after the creation of the world,  
and that Abram was born 2008 years after the creation.