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SIDETRACKED BY THE SEPTUAGINT

One of the problems in the study of Biblical chronology is the fact that various ancient translations of the Old Testament give radically different numbers for the ages of the patriarchs in Genesis 5 and 11. There have been in the past, and continue to be today, numerous students of chronology who choose to go with one or another of these alternate schemes, although by far the majority of scholars go with the Hebrew text.

The question boils down to this: Is the Hebrew text that we have today, which was preserved by the Jews during the early centuries of the Christian era, an accurate copy of the original Hebrew Bible? Or does the Jewish Hebrew Old Testament that we have today reflect perversions introduced into the text by post-Christian Jews, so that we should rely on the Greek translation of the Old Testament that the early Church used? For a variety of reasons, the answer to this question in the Protestant churches has always been that the Hebrew Old Testament is accurate, while the Greek translation is filled with problems. This is now the position of scholars in all traditions of the Church (though occasionally one runs into people who prefer the Greek Old Testament).

What is this Greek translation of the Old Testament? It is known as the Septuagint, and commonly designated by the Roman numerals LXX, because the first part of it (the **pentateuch**) was produced by seventy (actually seventy-two) Jewish scholars living in the **city** of Alexandria sometime around 250 B.C. It is not known for certain how the translation was made, because there are many myths and legends surrounding its production. Bible **Dictionaries** and **Encyclopedias** can be consulted for more information about this.

Because the LXX already existed as a Greek Old Testament in New Testament times, we find that sometimes the New Testament writers quote from the LXX directly. This has led some to say that the New Testament puts its imprimatur on the LXX, and so we should be using the LXX rather than the Hebrew Old Testament. In fact, however, only about half of the quotations from the Old Testament in the New are found in the wording of the LXX. The rest are the writer's own translations from **the** Hebrew, or are taken from other sources. Thus, the New Testament cannot be taken as affirming the primacy of the LXX. (It is mainly Luke, writing to a Gentile audience familiar with the LXX, who quotes from the LXX. Matthew almost never does.)

There are a lot of strange things in the LXX. It contains the Apocrypha, for instance, sometimes mixed in with the inspired text of Old Testament books (as in the case of Daniel). An amusing addition to the LXX occurs in Job: In the Hebrew original of Job, Job's wife simply says to him, "Curse God and die," but in the LXX Mrs. Job has quite

The Chronology Problem

The problem before us, however, is that of the chronologies of Genesis 5 and 11. In Genesis 5, the LXX manages to add about **600 years between** the creation **and the** Flood. The Hebrew Bible says that the number of years between creation and Flood was 1656, but the LXX gives either 2242 or 2262, depending on which LXX version you happen to be using. The way it works is this: The Hebrew Bible says that Adam was 130 when Seth was born; the LXX says 230. The Hebrew says that Seth was 105 when Enosh was born; the LXX says 205. The Hebrew says that **Enosh** was 90 when Cainan was born; the LXX says 190. And so forth. Not every number is changed, but most are.

The LXX makes the same kind of change in the chronology of Genesis 11. The Hebrew says that Eber was 34 when Peleg was born; the LXX says 134. The Hebrew says that Peleg was 30 when Reu was born; the LXX says 130. And so forth. The LXX also adds a name to the list, Cainan, inserting him between Arphaxad and **Salah**, and adding an extra 130 years to the list. Thus, **while** the Hebrew Bible has 352 years from the Flood to the birth of Abram, the LXX has 993. (These figures come from Martin Anstay, *of the Old* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, (1913) 1973], pp. 38ff.)

Thus, in the Hebrew Bible, the period between Creation and the birth of Abram is 2008 years, while in the LXX it is 3249 years.

Why make this change? Scholars are pretty much agreed as to why, **and** we can let Anstay summarize it for us: "The translators of the Hebrew text into the Greek LXX had a very obvious motive for enlarging the Chronology. The history of the **Chaldeans** by Berosus, and the history of the Egyptians by Manetho were published about this time, and they laid claim to a remote antiquity for the beginning of their respective histories. It was natural that the translators of the LXX should augment the Chronology of the period by **centenary** additions, and by the insertion of the second Cainan, in order to carry back the epoch of the Creation and the Flood to a respectable antiquity, so that it might compare more favorably with that claimed for Babylon and Egypt" (Anstay, p. 42).

The LXX translators also performed another trick with the chronology of Genesis 11. In the Hebrew Bible, the first three men born after the Flood lived 400 + years (**Arphaxad**, 438; **Salah**, 433; and **Eber**, 464). Then, with the birth of Peleg we find a sudden drop to 200+ years (**Peleg**, 239; **Reu**, 239; **Serug**, 230). The likely explanation for this is that in Peleg's day "the earth was divided" (**Gen. 10:25**), probably a reference to the Tower of Babel, and thus there was an intensification of judgment on humanity

sudden halving of the human lifespan in the days of Peleg in their chronological revision.

Thus, while it is impossible to give any rational account of the derivation of the Hebrew figures from the LXX, on the supposition that the LXX is the original, it is very easy to account for the manipulation of original Hebrew figures by the LXX. As Anstay puts it, "In the case of the LXX we have unmistakable evidence of a two-fold motive (1) the lengthening of the Chronology and (2) the graduation of the decline in the duration of human life, in order to make the scheme plausible and palatable to the 'Wisdom of the Greeks'" (Anstay, p. 43).

Is There Another Rationale?

It seems clear that the LXX has expanded the years of the Hebrew Bible, and it is reasonable to assume that this was done by compromised Jews living in Alexandria in order to make the Jewish religion look good in the eyes of its cultured despisers. But is there more to it? Let me present at this point an hypothesis advanced by a Presbyterian minister of the last century, in the hopes that one or more of you will be in a position to help me evaluate it.

In 1859, the Rev. R. C. Shimeall published *Our Bible*

Egyptologists York:

A.S. Barnes & Burr.). In this book, Shimeall advances an explanation of the LXX expansion of the chronology that makes a lot of sense, but which he does not prove. His argument is circular, and he provides no hard evidence. Unfortunately, Shimeall advocated a 6000 year scheme of history in this book, with the millennium dawning in 1868; as a result, after 1868 his book disappeared with hardly a trace, and that has meant this his suggestions regarding the LXX have not received notice.

His argument requires us to understand the precession of the equinoxes. The equinox is the band of constellations that is in the same line as the sun travels across the sky (basically above the equator). Every day as the sun rises, it rises in the midst of one of these twelve **equinoctial** constellations. On the day of the vernal equinox in spring, the sun rises in a particular constellation. There is a gradual shift in the equinoxes, however, so that over centuries of time the sun moves from one constellation to the next on the day of the vernal equinox. Roughly speaking, the constellations change every 2000 years, leading (in astrological language) from the Age of Aries to the Age of Pisces, and soon to the Age of Aquarius.

The modern explanation of this phenomenon is as follows. If you spin a gyroscope, you will notice that not only does the wheel inside spin around and around, but also the entire gyroscope begins to make slight circular motions as it slows down, until finally it falls over on its side. These larger motions are called "precession" in the language of modern physics. Thus, it is held, the earth not only rotates on its axis, like the wheel inside the gyroscope, but also precesses very slowly like the gyroscope itself, making a complete turn every 26,000 or so years. This causes the constellations of the equinox to shift every 2000 or so years.

The ancients did not know about the gyroscopic model of precession, but they could and did observe the change in the constellations. Now, it is normally stated today that the precession of the equinoxes was discovered by Hipparchos around 150 B. C., because Hipparchos did yeoman's

1 find it very hard to believe, however, that nobody had ever noticed this phenomenon before. The ancients were extremely concerned to watch the sky, and observed the vernal equinox very carefully. Surely they had noticed that the equinox was processing. Unfortunately, I have not been able to uncover any information on this, and Tyler, Texas, is hardly a researcher's dream in this or any other area! If any of you have access to material on ancient astronomy, or related research, or if you can find anything out on this, please let me know by writing to me at ICE.

There are 360 degrees in a circle, and if one precession takes 26,000 years, then the rate is about 72 years per degree. Shimeall proposed that the Egyptians and Babylonians knew about the **equinoctial** precession, but were using a figure of about 100 years per degree. He further proposed that the Jews knew better, and were using a figure of about 71.5 years per degree.

Now, here's the payoff (if there is one): The number of years from creation to the time the LXX was written, according to the Bible, is about 3725 years. Assume that the LXX translators decided to do some "dynamic equivalence" translating, and that they converted these years into **equinoctial** degrees at the rate of 71.5 years/degree, and then reconverted them back to **years** at the rate of 100 **years/degree** – what do we get? We get 5210 years. Now, the number of years from creation to the time the LXX was written, according to the LXX, is about 5220 years. That's close enough.

This provides us with a good rationale for why the LXX scholars did what they did. They translated the years of the Hebrew Bible into equivalent years of Greek culture by transforming the figures. This enabled them to say that Jewish history was just as old as Egyptian and Babylonian. So that devout Jews would not be confused, they make this change by doing very obvious things to the chronologies of Genesis 5 and 11, basically adding 100 years to every **figure**. Any Jew with a Hebrew text could see exactly what the LXX translators had done, and would not be fooled.

But, for this hypothesis to be anything more than smoke we need some indication that it is possible. Shimeall does not quote anybody to the effect that the Egyptians and Babylonians knew about **equinoctial** precession, or that they were using a rate of 100 years/degree. If this could be confirmed, or even more generally supported, then Shimeall's hypothesis would gain quite a bit of credibility, especially since he uses the same formula to explain the expansion of the chronology in the Samaritan Pentateuch and in Josephus. With a few more facts, this could be a credible hypothesis, one worthy of pursuit. But we need more facts.

Conclusion

There is no reason to set aside the chronology of the Hebrew Bible, and of our English Bibles, in favor of the Greek Septuagint's chronology. That chronology is clearly wrong, as are the chronologies in other ancient versions. The motive for producing this expanded chronology seems clear: to make Jewish history as long as what Manetho was claiming for Egypt. The formula by which the LXX translators performed this expansion is unknown, but an interesting hypothesis by Shimeall is worth looking into.

There is one more problem connected with the LXX, and that is the problem of the name "**Cainan**" in the LXX chronology of Genesis 11. The problem is that Luke includes this name in his genealogy of Jesus in Luke 3. Next month we shall take up this question.