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WHOM SHALL WE BELIEVE?

by James B. Jordan

As we move into the Persian period of ancient history, and try to reconcile it with Daniel's prophecies, we need to ask some hard questions about the interpretation of the data before us. One question concerns the reliability of the Biblical witness, and beyond that a second question concerns the reliability of secular scholarship, both modern and ancient.

It would be nice if the first question were the only one we had to concern ourselves with. In that case, we could postulate that the Bible is a reliable historical witness, and then reconcile the data and interpretations developed by secular scholars with it. That in fact is what most evangelical commentators today do. They assume that both the Bible and the research of secular scholars are reliable, but that the Bible alone is inerrant, and then they work to reconcile them.

The evangelical assumes that the Bible is reliable for several reasons. At the human level, the Israelites are the only people in the history of the world to have developed more than a rudimentary sense of history. Neither the Greeks nor any other culture of the ancient world thought historically, and thus their view of the past was absorbed in mythology. For the pagan, this world and its affairs were not very important; what mattered was what went on upstairs. Contemplation, escape from history, and endless repetitive ritual were the essence of his outlook. It was only the Israelites who had such things as a doctrine of creation, a concept of linear, non-repetitious time, and a view of progress and eschatology. The gods of the nations neither created nor governed history, while the God of Israel did both. Salvation for the pagan meant escape from the world and history, while salvation for the Israelite meant redemption in space and time and thus the salvation of the world and history. Accordingly, as compared with other nations, we can expect that the historical records of Israel are much more reliable.

Additionally, as has often been pointed out, it is in the Bible and only in the Bible that we have an historical chronology. Other nations of the ancient world could produce king lists with numbers next to them, but only in the Bible do we have the kind of literature we find in the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles: history wedded to chronology. The pagan king lists are open to a variety of interpretations: Were some of the reigns overlapping? Was the nation divided and did some of these kings reign contemporaneously? Are some of the numbers faked in order to make the nation look older than all the other nations? By way of contrast, the Biblical data fits together reign by reign in

Wherever the Bible speaks of history and chronology, it has to be taken as absolutely true – although our interpretations may be ~ ~ ~

Having decided that the Biblical data is true, the evangelical then looks to the world of scholarship to find places where the Bible intersects with the history of the ancient world. Who was the Pharaoh in Joseph's time? Who was Moses' Pharaoh? How long did the Persian empire last? And here is where the trouble begins.

The current scholarly consensus gives little comfort to the evangelical scholar, because at a great many important points the history of the ancient world as reconstructed by secularists contradicts what the Bible says. The evangelical scholar finds two possible ways to deal with this. The first, far and away the most common, is to go back to the Bible and "soften" what the Bible says until it can be fitted to the current secular scholarly consensus. The second way of dealing with the problem is to attack the secular scholarly consensus. This is something few evangelical scholars are willing to do.

Why not? Well, we could be harsh and say that evangelical scholars like their tenured positions at secular and quasi-secular institutions of higher learning, and so don't like to take risks. That would be unfair, however, because some tenured people do take risks, as do some untenured people. In more than a few cases, however, fear doubtless is a factor. Most people, scholars included, like to look good to their peers, and to call into question the work of one's fellows is not the way to get along with them.

The more pervasive reason that evangelical scholars do not challenge the secular system at its root is that modern evangelicals do not believe that the depravity of man seriously infects scholarship. They believe that the secular scholars are simply and disinterestedly pursuing truth. They don't think that secular scholars suppress evidence.

Unfortunately, this view of the secular mind is extremely naive. The Bible tells us in Romans 1:18ff. that the unconverted mind constantly suppresses the truth, and that includes the truths of history. The Bible tells us, again in Romans 1:18ff., that the unbeliever deceives himself continually. In other words, he often is not really aware of his powerful propensity to suppress any truth that threatens his peace of mind.

Further – and I realize that by writing what follows I am opening myself up to ridicule, but it is true nevertheless – the Bible tells us that the unbelieving world, including the world of scholarship, is constantly being led astray by fallen angels who seek to prevent the establishment of

miraculous power of the gospel to break through these ideologies. Warfare at this level is the calling of the Church (Ephesians 6).

Thus, over the course of time, men forget the truth because in their hearts they forsake it. The reason the Bible is so full of memorials to historical events and to the words of God, is that men tend to forget. This is a moral forgetting, not a mere psychological one: Men forget because they don't *want* to remember. Thus, the history of the Bible and of the Church is a history of revivals, of times when what had been suppressed and forgotten is once again remembered. If this is a problem in the Church, how much more is it a **problem outside** of her?

Many readers of this newsletter can remember a time when Christianity was the public religion of the United States, instead of a persecuted minority. We have seen the gradual and then rapid removal of the Bible, of Christian history, and of the Christian world-view from our textbooks. This comes about not so much because of an intellectual conspiracy, but mainly because when the unconverted mind sees Christian things, they seem weird and strange to him and he moves to blot them out.

Consider, for example, how selectively news is reported. While television cameras and reporters swarmed over each other to cover every single event in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, these same people have actively suppressed news about the Anti-Abortion Movement of today. How many Americans are aware that there have been far more arrests of anti-abortion demonstrators, and far more cases of police brutality, than ever took place in the days of the Civil Rights Movement? So-called "human rights violations" in the Republic of South Africa are reported constantly, while the same actions performed by Soviets or Israelis only occasionally get on the news. The nationwide attacks on Christian schools that took place in the late 1970s and early 1980s were almost never carried in the secular media.

Would you believe a history of America written by such people? If not, then why believe a history of the ancient world written by the same class of people? Moreover, why believe the secular newscasters of the ancient world, who "were just as interested in suppressing the facts as modern newscasters are?"

This has everything to do with the chronology and history of the ancient world. The Bible tells us that in Moses' day, the entire Egyptian army was destroyed, the Pharaoh himself included (Ps. 136:15; Ex. 14:8), the firstborn sons of every single family in Egypt were slain, their entire crop for the year destroyed, all their cattle killed, their economy devastated by the Israelites who spoiled them of gold and silver, and their population diminished by two million Israelites plus a huge "mixed multitude." Now, does an event like this fail to leave a mark? According to modern secular and evangelical scholarship, yes. They debate whether this happened in the reign of Thutmose III or Rameses II, both of whose mummies we have, and neither of which suffered any such a disaster.

In order to "soften" the Biblical data, evangelical suggest things like this: The Egyptians refused to record any historical events unfavorable to them, so they just skipped over the exodus, and that's why there is no evidence.

figures the Bible is exaggerating, 'speaking "poetically" or something. But these explanations are silly. An event this huge does not fail to leave a big mark in history.

In fact, the current chronology of the ancient world is clearly and obviously wrong at this point. If the Bible is true, we need to find a place in Egyptian history where a tremendous disaster destroyed the nation – most likely at the beginning of one of the Egyptian dark ages. Courville puts the two dark ages together, and has them beginning with the exodus of the Israelites; Donovan Courville, *The Exodus Problem and its Ramifications*; Loma Linda, CA: Challenge Books, 1971.)

The Bible tells us that the civilized Israelites conquered and enslaved a population of morally and culturally degenerate Canaanites. Thus, there should be a layer of advanced artifacts on top of a layer of primitive ones in the archaeological record of Palestine, dated at this time. In fact, current archaeological dating provides no such evidence. The layer of artifacts that fits the bill is dated much too early. Here again is an historical event that is too big to be ignored, and here again the archaeologically reconstructed sequence of events in Palestine is obviously wrong. (See the discussion of this problem in Courville, chaps. 5, 6, & 6.)

The Bible tells us that under the preaching of Jonah, the city of Nineveh, capital of Assyria, converted to the worship of the one true God. Jonah tells us that three generations converted, which means that for seventy or so years, the city was populated with believers. Presentday secular scholarship finds no such event in Assyrian history. Some evangelical scholars have suggested that perhaps Jonah converted Adadnirari III, and that this is why he and the rulers immediately after him seemed to favor the Jews.

The Bible gives every indication that Nebuchadnezzar, Darius the Mede, Cyrus, and the early Persian kings were or came to be believers in the true God. Secular scholarship, with very little to go on, does not even entertain this idea.

The problem of suppressing information is not at all a modern one. Men hated God and His people and His history in the ancient world just as much as they do today. There is absolutely no reason to grant *prima facie* credibility to the works of pagan "historians" like Ptolemy and Manetho, especially when they contradict the Bible, and especially when various parts of their works have been shown to be fraudulent. Yet, the works of these two pagan writers have been employed by scholars including Christian ones, as if they were virtually inerrant – except where obviously wrong.

Ptolemy is the problem for us at this point in our studies, because it is his king list and his eclipse data that are used to justify the currently accepted chronology of the Persian empire, a chronology that does not jibe with the prophecy of Daniel, if we take that prophecy as predicting 490 literal years. (See *Biblical Chronology* 2:12.)

In conclusion, while we are in no position at this point to be able to reconstruct ancient history and chronology, we are in a position to say that evangelical scholars need to take their theological presuppositions more seriously, and to be far more critical of secular scholarship in this area than they have been heretofore.