

BIBLICAL CHRONOLOGY

Vol. IV, No. 9-10

James B. Jordan, 1992

Sept./Oct., 1992

MEREDITH G. KLINE AND THE MYTH OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

by James B. Jordan

As we go from Old Testament chronology to New Testament chronology, it will be a good idea to examine a deep-seated myth that is profoundly intertwined with Biblical Christianity. I have in mind the myth that there is in the Bible such a thing as a collection of books called the Old Testament, and another collection of books called the New Testament.

At one level, of course, we can say, "Obviously, there are these two collections of books. Our Bibles have them clearly marked off from one another." Indeed, some Bibles start the page numbering over with Matthew chapter 1, putting it on a new "page 1."

But that is not the matter we are addressing here. Most Christians know that the chapter and verse divisions in the Bible are not part of the inspired text of Scripture. They were added later on to help people conveniently find things in the Bible, but they are not inspired and are not part of the text of God's Word as such. The same thing is true of the division between Old Testament and New Testament. There is no Biblical basis for making this division. There is nothing inside the Bible to indicate that it should be divided into two collections of books.

The word "testament" refers to a will, as in "last will and testament." Neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament, nor the Bible as a whole, is a testament. The Biblical concept that has been confused with a testament is the concept of *covenant*. At the "Last Supper," Jesus inaugurated the Lord's Supper as a memorial (a way of reminding God) of the covenant. Because this was His last meal, the covenant became confused with a last will and testament; but there is no Biblical basis for considering the covenant between God and man to be a testament (as if God had died and left everything to us!).

Well, then, perhaps we should speak of one collection of books as the Old Covenant and the other collection as the New Covenant. This might look at first glance like a useful suggestion, but in fact it is most misleading. The Old Covenant is the arrangement into which God created Adam. All men outside of Christ exist in old-covenant with God. Christians who apostatize from the faith drop back into Adamic old-covenant with God. The New Covenant, by way of contrast, came into force

ration of the Old Covenant, and exists in Christ.

We can put this another way: There is only one covenant, which exists eternally among the three Persons of God. This covenant was applied to the First Adam, who broke it and came under the judgment of alienation from the covenant-life of God. Breaking the covenant meant failing to follow it through and come to the point of transfiguration. This one covenant was then reapplied to the Last Adam, who kept it and arrived at the point of transfiguration into glory. Those who are under the Old Covenant are those who are living in the First Adam and under the judgment of alienation from God. Those who are under the New Covenant, whether by anticipation before Christ or in the fullness of times after Pentecost, are living in the Last Adam and under the blessings of union with the covenant life and fellowship of the Godhead.

The Old Covenant is revealed and discussed in the pages of both the "Old Testament" and the "New Testament," particularly in the book of Hebrews. Similarly, the New Covenant is revealed and discussed in the pages of both "Testaments." Thus, it would not seem to be wise or Biblical to designate these two collections of books by the terms Old and New Covenant.

"But wait! What about this idea: Before Christ the world as a whole existed in the Old Covenant. The principles of sacred geography, sacred calendar, and sacred chronology (space, time, and priest) were in force. All that changed with the coming of Christ. Thus, it is true that the New Covenant is revealed during the Old Covenant epoch, and it is true that the only way people were saved in the Old Covenant epoch was by entering into the New Covenant by anticipation. Also, the Old Covenant is clearly revealed and discussed in the Pauline epistles, and people who reject salvation in the New Covenant epoch will be damned in union with the Adamic Old Covenant. That's how we should think about it."

I think that this is a true description of the content of Biblical theology, but let's be careful what conclusions we draw from it. Shall we say that the "Old Testament" describes the history before Christ, and the "New Testament" describes history after the implementation of the New Covenant in Christ? If we say this, we get into trouble.

judgment of God). He observed the sacrifices, the festivals, the sabbaths, the dietary laws, and the laws of uncleanness (in each case in ways appropriate to His status). Not until the resurrection of Jesus does the New Covenant start to come into play as an historical epoch.

But even that qualification is not enough. The New Covenant as an epoch does not really begin until the Spirit is poured out on Pentecost. Yet, the Old Covenant as an epoch does not end at this point. Rather, the two epochs overlap until the Temple and its sacrifices are brought to an end in A.D. 70. Accordingly, we see Paul taking a Nazirite vow and offering sacrifices in the Temple, and apparently there is nothing wrong with this (Acts 18:18; 21:23-24). After the destruction of the Temple, it is no longer possible to take the Nazirite vow, because its details can no longer be obeyed (Num. 6).

So, what would it mean to call the books written between A.D. 35 and A.D. 67 (or, as some would say, A.D. 97) “the New Covenant”? It would only mean that they were written in the period of time after the New Covenant epoch had begun. This is not a very significant notion.

Meredith G. Kline's Assertions

Now, Meredith G. Kline disagrees. In an essay entitled “Covenantal Bible,” which is contained in his book *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Eerdmans, 1975), Kline asserts strongly that the “Old Testament” and the “New Testament” (hereafter OT and NT, which we shall use as neutral terms) are in fact two different covenant documents and form two different canons, or rules of faith and life. To make this assertion stick, Kline has to find some place in the Bible where the OT (or the NT) is referred to as a collection of books rather than as an arrangement between God and man.

He thinks he has found it in 2 Corinthians 3:14, “But their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ.” Kline asserts that this phrase “the old covenant” must refer to the books of Moses, and by extension, to all the books written before Christ. Thus, he asserts, this verse refers to the OT as a collection of books, which forms a covenant, and thus forms a canon or rule of life (a *different* rule of life from what we as Christians are to follow, since we keep the NT as a canon.)

In order to interpret the verse this way, Kline has to ignore the context, and also ignore the fact that nowhere else in Paul or in the Bible is the phrase “old covenant” used this way. In 2 Corinthians 2-4, Paul is discussing the effects of the revelation of God's covenant to man. To sinners, that revelation has a negative effect. It provokes men to sin, so that they rebel further against God (compare also Romans 7). It smells like death to them, whether revealed by Moses or by Christ or by Paul. When Moses brought the revelation down from Mount Sinai, the unshielded tablets of the Ten Words (the Biblical name for the so-called “Ten Commandments”) blasted Israel because of her sin (Ex. 32). Moses' own face was shining, and Israel could not look at him (Ex. 32-34). Thus, as a judgment against Israel, and also for her protection, Moses hid his own face,

box, the three veils and the four covers of the Tabernacle, etc.; Dt. 10:1-5).

Robert S. Rayburn argued forcefully and persuasively in his dissertation (which, sadly, is not generally available) that the phrase “old covenant” simply means the apostate manifestation of the covenant between God and man. It is the covenant with Adam in its fallen, curse dimension. This, he shows, is what the phrase “old covenant” consistently means in the NT. The “new covenant” is the covenant in the Last Adam in its transfigured, glorifying dimension.

In his view, and I believe a careful reading of 2 Corinthians 2-4 will bear him out, the “reading of the old covenant” in 2 Corinthians 4:14 means the reading of the history of Israel's apostasy. It means the reading of their sin and the judgment that came upon them. What Paul actually refers to is Exodus-32-34, and I think that this is probably what “reading the old covenant” refers to. Paul is saying that the rebellious Israelites did not learn anything from this revelation of judgment. Paul is right: After several more trials, God finally left that generation to perish in the wilderness, because they did not learn and they did not repent. The same thing was about to happen to the Israel of Paul's day. Paul also says, however, that any time someone repented and turned to the Lord (Yahweh), the veil was lifted off from his heart and he understood the true meaning of the covenant (v. 16). Such people had learned rightly from the “reading of the old covenant, the apostasy and judgment of Israel.”

From all this it should be clear that Kline has little footing for his position. In Kline's view, the OT differs from the NT in that the OT ministers judgment, while the NT ministers life. That is not the case. Paul is saying right here that the NT ministers death to apostates. Jesus said that He spoke in parables in order to veil His teaching from apostates (Mt. 13:13-16). The covenant came to Israel as God's “Yes” of blessing, but it turned to curse when Israel fell away. Identically, the gospel comes in the NT as God's “Yes” of blessing, but the epistles are full of statements about rebels, apostates, and those who are falling away. The only difference is that the covenant has now come in its fullness, and the “Yes” of God is going to win out over the “no” of man.

Thus, the “reading of the old covenant” does not mean the reading of the OT, or even the reading of the books of Moses. It means the reading of the apostasy and judgment of Israel, probably Exodus 32-34.

Now, Kline goes on to present as a global argument the notion that we find in the OT these five elements: *law* (Exodus-Deuteronomy), *history* (Genesis, part of Exodus and Numbers, and the historical books), *prophecy* (the prophets), *praise* (Psalter), and *wisdom* (Job, etc.). He then tries to apply these five elements to the NT as well. The problem is that he only can point to history (Gospels and Acts) and prophecy (Epistles and Revelation). He might mention James as wisdom, but what of a book of law and a book of praise?

Well, to be sure, we can find these five elements in the OT and in the NT, in a general way. But we can also find them all along the line. And here is where Kline

ing up to it. Then God gives Abraham laws. He also prophesies the future to Abraham. Abraham prays to God and praises Him. Abraham was a wise man.

Take the Mosaic Covenant. Genesis and Exodus lead up to it, and the history in Numbers accompanies it. Joshua, Judges, and Ruth follow it down. The law-aspect is obvious. We find Moses uttering prophecy in Deuteronomy 33. Moses authors praise in Exodus 15 and Deuteronomy 32. The law is actually full of wisdom, especially in Deuteronomy, which resembles wisdom literature in many places.

For the purposes of this section of our essay, let's just call the Mosaic Covenant the "older covenant." These five books, with Joshua, formed the original "Old Testament." But then a new covenant came about: the Kingdom Covenant. There is history leading up to it in Judges and Samuel. David gives new laws for its organization in 1 Chronicles. David utters prophecies. David writes the Psalter. Solomon organizes the wisdom literature.

But then there is more history delineating the decline of the Kingdom Covenant (the book of Kings). And afterwards we have a new covenant, the Restoration Covenant. We find its preliminary history in Daniel and Ezekiel, the history of its implementation in Ezra-Nehemiah, and the history of its decline in Malachi and in the Gospels. There are new laws, found in the last chapters of Ezekiel and in Nehemiah's reorganization of the nation. Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi utter prophecies. And we find prayers of praise in Ezra-Nehemiah and Daniel.

From this we see that there are a series of "Old Testaments" in what we call the OT. Each time God renews the covenant, there are new writings. What we call the NT is simply the last of these, and the culmination of the series.

Each of these covenants had a canon for itself. In the Noahic Covenant, all flesh might be eaten, but no blood, and any clean animal might be sacrificed. With the Abrahamic Covenant, the sacrificial animals were limited to five (Gen. 15). With the Mosaic Covenant, the Israelites were given a restricted diet of flesh. With the Davidic Covenant, the house of God was reorganized with new "chief priests" put into place between the High Priest and the other priests. With the Remnant Covenant (Elijah and Elisha), the people looked to prophets instead of Levites as pastors. With the Restoration Covenant, Nehemiah led the people to reorganize the tax system, and Zechariah put the Davidic crown upon the head of the High Priest (sending the line of Davidic kings underground until the time of Christ). (For an extended discussion of this series of covenants and canons, see James B. Jordan, *Through New Eyes*, available from ICE.)

From this discussion, we can see that Kline's attempt to separate the Bible into two collections of books and two canonical documents is groundless.

The Incompleteness of the "Old Testament"

The Bible is a unity. It was intended by God to be a unity, and it was incomplete until it was finished. The Jews realized this fully. They knew that what they had

way was the way of legalism. The Jews invented the notion of an oral law that God had given to Moses, which had been passed down through the centuries and which filled in the gaps in the written law. (One such gap is seen in the law for the purification or sin offering. We are told in Leviticus 4 & 16 and Numbers 15 precisely which animal is to be brought by the high priest when he sins, when his family sins, and when he leads the nation in sin [a bull]. And we are told precisely which animal the nation as a whole, a civil leader, and an ordinary citizen is to bring for his own sin [he-goat in the first two cases, she-goat or ewe in the last]. Nowhere are we told which animal an ordinary priest is to bring for his own sin. For a full discussion, write for Biblical Horizons Nos. 29& 30 from *Biblical Horizons*, Box 1096, Niceville, FL 32588.)

The other way of completing the Bible is the way of typology and prophecy. Jesus said that the entire OT pointed to Him. He repeatedly rebuked the disciples for failing to interpret the Bible typologically and symbolically. For instance, when He spoke of the leaven of the Pharisees, He had to rebuke the disciples for thinking He spoke of physical bread (Mt. 16:6-12).

The Jews eventually wrote down their oral law, and this is called the Mishnah. It is the completion of the OT for legalists. Christ provided the NT to complete what was lacking in the OT.

So the question is: Which is the true Bible? Is it the OT plus the Mishnah, or the OT plus the NT? For us the answer is clear: The total Bible is the OT plus the NT. But what this means for us is that the Bible is a complete unit. It is not divided into two parts.

The Impact of the Myth

Kline's error arises from long and erroneous traditions in the Church, traditions we need to call into question. The liturgies of the Church tell us to have a lesson from the Old Testament, and then an Epistle lesson and a Gospel lesson. This tradition leads people to believe that we are dealing with the "Bible, Part 1" and the "Bible, Part 2." It might be better to call the first lesson (OT) "Prophecy" and the second (NT) "Fulfillment."

Similarly, Calvin and others insisted that Lord's Day sermons should only be preached from the "New Testament," and put the exposition of the "Old Testament" at other times. This notion leads people to believe that the OT has less to do with Christ than the NT.

Similarly, our seminaries have Departments of Old Testament Studies and of New Testament Studies. We have Old Testament Theology and New Testament Theology, built around the assumption that the two can be studied in relative isolation from one another. The effect of this has been that books on "New Testament Theology" generally display a grave ignorance of the OT foundations of the NT. It has also meant that the Hebrew background of NT Greek has often been minimized. (The NT is not really written in Koine Greek, but in Hellenized Koine Greek.)

We can speak of Biblical theology. We can speak of the distinctive perspectives of Johannine theology, of Pauline theology, of Mosaic theology. We can speak of the distinctive perspectives of individual books like Ro-

For instance, if we clearly understood that holy baptism is the fulfillment of the many sprinklings in Leviticus and of the crossing of the Red Sea and of the Jordan River, we would have no problem seeing that baptism is by sprinkling and that it includes children (because the children went through those rivers, too). By putting a wall between the OT and the NT, and by reinforcing this myth in the way we organize our preaching, seminars, and theology texts, we obscure the teaching of the Bible.

Another effect of this division of the Bible is that the Psalter has become alienated from "New Testament" Christians. They want to write new hymns, and this is not wrong in itself, but their new hymns reflect their ignorance of the theology of the whole Bible. Similarly, the so-called "law of Moses" has come to be viewed as something for "Old Testament" believers only. Also, we see a proliferation of sects that claim to be "New Testament Christians."

All of these aberrations, and many more, arise from the false notion that the Bible consists of two collections of books. "As a man thinks in his heart, so is he." Rather, we should see the Bible as one long story, a seamless garment. We need to take out the page that divides the OT from the NT, and stop using these terms. We need to speak of the Bible and of particular books and authors, but we should eliminate the terms "Old Testament" and "New Testament" from our vocabulary. I doubt if this is going to happen, but I think it would be

a good thing if it did.

Application to Chronology

Books on Biblical chronology deal only with OT chronology. They assume that there is an unbridgeable gap in the text of the Bible between the end of the OT epoch and the beginning of the Gospel history. We have seen that each time there is a seeming break in the chronology, it comes at a time when the covenant is renewed. We have also seen that each of these breaks can be bridged by taking into account other information provided in the text. (A complete set of back issues of Biblical Chronology can be ordered for \$8.00 from *Biblical Horizons*, Box 1096, Niceville, FL 32588.)

It is true that we don't have a chronology that takes us from the time of Nehemiah to the time of Christ. But we do have a way to bridge over that break, and that way is the 70 weeks of prophetic years of Daniel 9. Daniel 9 tells us that there will be 487 years from the first year of Cyrus, as set out in the Bible, to the year of Christ's crucifixion. This bridge cannot be discerned until we stop thinking of the Bible as consisting of two different collections of books, and start thinking of it as one collection, one document.

There is a continuous chronology from the creation of the world to end of the apostolic age, just before the destruction of Jerusalem. We shall continue our examination of that chronology in the next paper in this series.