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Covenants and Dates

by James B. Jordan

During my **brief sojourn** as a pastor during the 1980s, I had several occasions to be involved in settling disputes between men in the congregation I served. A typical dispute went like this: Two men formed a company to do business. After a few years, the business went sour, and then both men wanted out. They came to loggerheads over how to divide things up. The **conflict** eventually came before the elders of the church, since the Bible says to bring things to the elders rather than to the **secular** magistrate for resolution.

When we would begin to investigate the problem, we would ask to see the original documents, the contracts, that were drawn up when the business started. That way, we could see who contributed what, what the conditions were, etc., and on that basis we could begin to settle the conflict. Invariably, we found that there were no such contracts. The men, considering each other “honest Christian brothers,” had not bothered to write anything down, and now we only had their word to go on. And, since memory is fallible and often unreliable, the **two** men, of course, **remembered** things differently.

God is not like this. God has given us a written document, His covenant Word, **that is the** basis of our relationship with Him. As creatures made in His image, we should do the same whenever we enter into arrangements with other people. Thus we have marriage covenants. We have political contracts, like the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. And thus we should have business contracts.

(While “contract” and “covenant” are used in a generally synonymous manner, they have a different nuance. A contract is a trade in which each party seeks to benefit: I sell you my **corn** [which you want], and you give me your money [which I want]. A covenant is the reverse: I give things up for you, and you give things up for me. A contract is for reciprocal profit; a covenant is for **reciprocal** sacrifice. Thus, in marriage the wife sacrifices her independence, vowing to obey, and the husband gives up his estate, vowing to “worship” [serve] her with his “body” “ “ “ ” .

is the ancient vow of the husband.])

Such written contracts and covenants are invariably dated. Every wife knows the date of her marriage, even if the “typical American husband” tends to forget the date. No American forgets the 4th of July. Sadly, the Church no longer maintains **dated** covenants for baptisms, though she should.

The Bible as Covenant

The Bible is a covenant document. This is an offense to the modern rationalistic mind. It is offensive to believe in a God who speaks. It is far easier to say that God is “beyond mere speech,” and thus that our words about God are **only** mere pointers to some “ineffable beyond.” But the Bible says that God speaks, and that man, as God’s image, is created with the ability to hear and understand God’s speech. In fact, man **cannot** help understanding God’s speech. Man’s mind was made to fit God’s words as a glove fits a hand.

God not only speaks, He also writes. God wrote the Ten Words on stone, not once but twice, and also wrote on **Belshazzar's** wall (Daniel 5). Writing differs from speech in that **writing is permanent. Our memories** are very fallible. The phenomenon of artificial memory is much in the news these days, as psychiatrists stimulate people to “remember” **being** sexually abused **as** children, **being** forced to worship Satan, etc. Others “remember” previous lives. The game of Gossip is based on the fact that information changes as it is transmitted orally: The first player whispers a sentence into the ear of the person sitting next to him or her, who then whispers it into his or her neighbor, and so on around the ring until it gets back to the original whisperer, generally garbled and distorted.

Writing, thus, creates a memorial. God created man to speak and to write. We must do both. The notion that writing was invented only **after** a few centuries or thousands of years of “oral tradition” is nonsense. **Adam** not **only** spoke but also wrote. He created some kind of written marks to preserve an accurate account of what he knew. It has always **been** so.

the whole book of Leviticus, for instance, was dictated by God to Moses, who wrote it down. This is true of most of Exodus 21-40, large parts of Numbers, and much of the prophets. When Isaiah writes, "Thus says Yahweh" ("Thus saith the LORD"), he is recording God's dictated words.

God writes. God dictates. And God causes things to be written by the inspiration of His Holy Spirit. The rest of the Bible was written in this way. Thus, the entire Bible is the written Word of God.

This written Word of God is not, however, a book of timeless philosophy, nor is it merely a book of historical events. It is a covenant document composed of a series of covenants. And covenants initiate history.

Covenant-Initiated History

Before you were married (assuming for the moment that you are), you had a certain history before you. The day you were married, you entered into a covenant that changed that future history. That marriage covenant dictated certain conditions, which would make your life different from then on. That marriage covenant, thus, changed history by redirecting it. The same is true of the contract(s) that created the United States of America. The same is true of each amendment to the Constitution. The same is true of a business partnership contract.

The really big movements in history are created by documents, by words, that set in motion historical change. Augustine's *De Civitate Dei (Concerning the City of God)* created the so-called Middle Ages. Mohammed's *Quran* created the Islamic world. Thomas Aquinas's writings created the Roman Catholic Church. John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* created the modern Protestant world. Karl Marx's writings created the communist movements. None of these are formally dated covenant/contract documents, but they are history-initiating words nonetheless.

Covenant words are more official, and thus are more precisely dated. We find in the Bible that God creates history by authoring covenants that set in motion a different future. For instance, God's covenants with Abram (Abraham) generated a different future for him and his descendants.

Given that God is a God who writes covenants, and moves history forward along His plan by means of such covenants, we should be very surprised if these covenants were not dated. In fact, of course, they are dated, often very precisely.

And this brings us to the third offense against the modern mind. It is bad enough that Christians believe in a God who speaks; it is worse that Christians believe in a God who does not leave things to oral tradition but actually writes things down. But it seems to be supremely offensive to believe in a God who actually dates His writings. That is, nonetheless, exactly what God has done.

Let us consider the actual dates of the various covenants. When we do this, we find that the covenants are dated in three ways. **First** of all, some covenants are dated

approximately.

The Structure of History

It seems reasonable to suppose that the most important history-initiating covenants are those dated with the most precision. These are:

O. The Creation Covenant, year O, day 6.

1. The Noahic Covenant, dated in the 601st year of Noah's life, the second month, the 27th day (**Gen. 8:13-14, 20ff.**).

2. The Sinaitic Covenant, dated 430 years after Abraham's entrance into Canaan, month 3, several days into the month, and renewed 40 years later in the eleventh month, day 1 (**Ex. 12:40-41; 19:1-16; 24:1ff.; Dt. 1:3**).

3. The Restoration Covenant, dated in the second year of Darius, the eleventh month, the 24th day (**Zech. 1:7**).

Following the covenants that come after creation (which I have numbered 1, 2, & 3), we find in each case a second covenant that is not quite so precisely dated:

1. The Noahic Covenant.

1a. The Patriarchal Covenant, made in Genesis 15 & 17. Genesis 15 can probably be dated three years after Abram entered the land, which puts it in his 78th year, but the text does not explicitly say this. Genesis 17, however, is expressly dated in Abram's 99th year (**Gen. 17:1**). Neither month nor date are provided (though from Gen. 18:14 we know that it was in the spring).

2. The Sinaitic Covenant.

2a. The Kingdom Covenant. The key date here is the founding of the Temple, 480 years after the exodus, in the 4th year of Solomon, the second month (1 Ki. 6:1). No date is given.

2b. The Remnant Covenant. The key date here is the accession year of Jehoram of Israel (2 Ki. 1:17; 3:1), for right at that time Elijah ascended into heaven and a Pentecostal endowment of the Spirit came upon Elisha (2 Ki. 2).

3. The Restoration Covenant.

3a. The New Covenant. The key date here is the Passover of the year Christ was crucified. The fact that this is Passover establishes the month and date (first month, **fifteenth** day), but the year is not stated.

Surrounding these covenants are other covenants that are dated more approximately still. These are discussed below.

The structure I have just provided seems strange. We are accustomed to making more of the Abrahamic (Patriarchal) Covenant, and surely more of the New Covenant. There is, however, a logic to the Biblical scheme—a Trinitarian logic.

Briefly, the period from creation to Sinai is the Age of the Father, and thus overall the Patriarchal Age. The time from creation to Noah is a time when God's people served without ruling, for the right to exercise capital punishment had not been given; thus, they were priests but not kings. With Noah comes the right to exercise kingly rule. With the Tower of Babel, that kingly rule is shattered.

In terms of this general history, the **Noahic** Covenant is central. At this point, the world starts anew. Though the covenant is initiated with Noah, it does not really come into full force until Abram. Abram's life shows what fatherhood means, both human and divine. Thus, in the Patriarchal Covenant, the Age of the Father comes to full bloom.

The Patriarchal Covenant, **being** a prophetic era, is also an anticipatory or preliminary phase of the Age of the Son, or the Age of the Law. Abraham is said to have "kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws" (**Gen. 26:5**). In Genesis 15 the number of sacrificial animals is reduced from "every clean animal and bird" in Noah's day, to the five animals that are used later in the **Sinaitic** sacrificial system. The Patriarchal Covenant emphasizes not just fatherhood, but also sonship, and thus anticipates the Age of the Son.

The first part of the Age of the Son, which actually initiates it, is the **Sinaitic** Covenant, when Yahweh becomes King of Israel. **Because** this covenant formally initiates the law, it is precisely dated, and all else flows out from it. The second part of the Age of the Son is the Kingdom Covenant, which is the climax of the era, and is less precisely dated. These are the priestly and kingly phases, respectively. The third, or prophetic phase, begins with the Remnant Covenant brought about by Elijah and Elisha. It, too, is more generally dated. This event begins the third great phase of Bible writing: the prophets.

The Remnant Covenant, being a prophetic era, is also an anticipatory or preliminary phase of the Age of the Spirit. The coming of a double portion of Elijah's spirit upon Elisha signals this fact. It is also **signalled** by the fact that the prophets address not only the kings of Israel and Judah, but also the nations around. The coming universal kingship of the Son, through the Spirit, is thus anticipated.

The Restoration Covenant, which follows, is actually the beginning of the New Covenant. It is the initial fulfillment of the promise that the Spirit will be poured out (**Zech. 4**), that the law will be written on the hearts, that the Word will go out to all nations, etc. Thus, it begins the Age of the Spirit, **and** this is why it is precisely dated. Because the Restoration era is so little studied, its Spiritual character has eluded most Bible students in recent times (though it did not elude, for instance, John Calvin). The climax of the coming of the new age, however, arrives with the work of Christ and the full outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost. Accordingly, in keeping with the pattern, it is not as precisely dated.

Now, I need to mention that the Age of the Spirit is also a second Age of the Son. The first Age of the Son concerned **His** rule over Israel, preliminarily in the patriarchs, through the priesthood after Sinai, through both kings and priests during the Kingdom era, and then through the prophets bringing judgment. The second Age of the Son concerns **His rule** over the whole world, first as **His** witnesses are sent out in priestly service during the Restoration era, and then as He Himself is made **King** at

cycle.

For the sake of completeness, let me add that the just as the Son is not superseded but glorified with the coming of the Age of the Spirit, so the Father is not superseded but glorified and reglorified in the two ages that follow the patriarchal eras.

Covenantal Chronology

Let us now consider these dated covenants in order, returning to our original point, which is that God has dated His covenants with humanity.

The first covenant was made with Adam on the sixth day of the world.

The covenant with Noah was made exactly 1657 years after the creation, in the second month, on the 27th day of the month, according to Genesis **8:14, 20ff**.

The covenant with Abraham was made progressively on several occasions. God spoke to Abram in Ur and sent him forth to Canaan, though Abram sojourned in Haran (the wilderness) until his father (the older generation) died. This word from God (**Gen. 12: 1-3; Acts 7:4**) is undated.

God actually made covenant with Abram in Genesis 15, **tying** him to the land. The animals ordered to be sacrificed were three years old. Their separation into two parts signified Abram's separation from the land. They were symbolically resurrected and reunited by the Spirit of God, who passed between the parts of the animals, signifying that God was tying Abram to the land. The fact that these animals were 3 years old indicates that Abram had been estranged from the land for 3 years. Abram entered the land in 2083, and thus this covenant was made in 2086.

The second part of God's covenant with Abram, guaranteeing him a seed, was made in the year 2107, when Abram was 99 years old, according to Genesis 17.

God **renewed** the covenant with Abraham in Genesis 22, with Isaac in Genesis 26, and with Jacob in Genesis 28 and 35, but these events are undated. They are not the covenant-initiating events.

The **Sinaitic** covenant was made in the year 2513, in the third month, on the 8th and 9th days of the month. The covenant was renewed a couple of months later (Genesis 32). Moses renewed the covenant again 40 (lunar) years later, in the (solar) year 2554, the eleventh month, the first day (Deuteronomy y). In a sense, this event is the climax of the whole covenant-making enterprise, and thus is dated.

The **Sinaitic** covenant is renewed by Joshua in Joshua 24, an undated event, being only a renewal.

We now come to the covenant of the Kingdom. This covenant is phased in gradually, with a couple of indirectly dated covenant-making events. The first is recorded in 1 Samuel 11:14-12:25, when Saul was made king. This was at the beginning of Saul's 40-year reign, which is followed by David's 40-year reign, which is followed by four years of Solomon's reign, which takes us to 480 years after the exodus (1 Kings 6: 1), the year 2993. This being Solomon's fourth year, his first year was 2990, and Saul's first year

him, recorded in 2 Samuel 7. This happened after David had already reigned 7 years (2 Sam. 5:4-5), thus the year 2957 or thereafter. From these verses and those that follow, it seems that David immediately captured Jerusalem, rapidly built a house there, fought the Philistine very soon thereafter, and then brought God's throne to the city, proclaiming Yahweh as True High King. It was at this point that Nathan proclaimed the Kingdom Covenant to him. Thus, we are provided an approximate date, around 2957/8, for this covenant.

As mentioned above, much more precise dates are provided for the **building** of the Temple, which is the climax of any covenant-making event. It began in the year 2993, in the second month, and the building itself was completed in the year 3000, the eighth month (1 Ki. 6:1, 38). The **furniture** of the Temple, which included Solomon's palace, took 13 more years to complete (1 Ki. 7:1). God entered the Temple at the Feast of Tabernacles in the seventh month of the year 3013 (1 Ki. 8). The feast came after the dedication of the Temple, which accordingly took place on the fifteenth day of the month. We are able to calculate this **date**, but we note that the text does not give formal expression to it.

The Remnant Covenant, which comes next, is generally overlooked. As I wrote in *Through New Eyes* (p. 312): "Elijah is a clear Moses figure, challenging the **Pharaonic** kings of Northern Israel, and finally **being** taken to heaven in the very place Moses died (2 Ki. 2:1-11, 16-18). After this, Elisha, a new Joshua, crosses the Jordan and reconquers Jericho (2 Ki. 2:13-22). A series of miracle stories follows this, in which Elisha sets up the kingdom in a new form: the Remnant Church (2 Ki. 4-6). Note the Exodus themes of borrowing, and of deliverance from slavery, in 2 Ki. 4:1-7, the restoration of a firstborn son in 2 Ki. 4:8-37, healing of food in 2 Ki. 4:38-41, manna in 2 Ki. 4:42-44, and especially the building of a new house for God's new people in 2 Ki. 6:1-7. This new period of history, following Elijah and Elisha, is the period of the Writing Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Amos, Joel, etc.).ⁿ There is, thus, very much a new covenant introduced at this point. Even though the word "covenant" is not used, all the earmarks of covenant-making are present, and very definitely a new order of life is brought into being: a prophetic church not tied to priests, **Levites**, or kings. A new testament begins to be written, **after** a **couple** of centuries of literary silence.

The central event in this **covenant-making** enterprise is the death of Elijah and the coming of the Spirit upon Elisha, which as I **mentioned** above took place in the first year of **Jehoram** of Israel. In our previous studies we have found this to be the year 3108.

We come now to the Restoration Covenant. A new covenant had been prophesied by Joel, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. **While** the fullness of this new covenant tames with Jesus and the sending of the Spirit in **AD** 30, the first fulfillment of **these** prophecies takes place in the restoration from the exile. The covenant-making event is described in **Zechariah** 1-6: the sins of the people are taken away, vast reserves of Spiritual power are released, and the people are **spread** out over the world as witnesses. These visions **run** from sundown to sunup, with the crucial events taking place at midnight. The date is precisely given: Darius year 2, month 11, day 24.

The Bible gives us all the information we need to calculate this date. We need only follow the chronology of the kings of Judah and Israel, take into account the various periods of 70 years predicted by Jeremiah and recorded in 2 Chronicles and **Zechariah**, and we can figure out the year. Of course, given the various difficulties in the period of the kings, this is hard to do. Our previous studies have led us to the year 3490 as the second year of Darius.

Finally, as concerns the New Covenant, we have seen that the Bible gives us a calendar **date** for its beginning, but does not formally provide a year. We can, however, figure out the year, and thus date this covenant also. It took place 487 years after the accession of Cyrus, the beginning of Daniel's 70 weeks, as we have previously seen (Dan. 9). The political year is solar, and thus starts in the fall. After 69 weeks of years (483 years), we have one-half of a week to go, or 3% years, which would be mid-way through year 487, or in the spring of that year. This is likely the year 3960, or **AD** 30.

Conclusion

Offensive though it is to the modern mind, the Bible does indeed provide a chronology. It is not a bare chronology, but is intimately tied to God's own covenant-making events. Those covenants structure history, and like all covenants, are signed, sealed, dated, and delivered: Signed as God's written word, sealed by the blood of the covenant, &ted in terms of the chronology of the Bible, and delivered to us. Remove the **dates**, and you start to unravel the entire fabric of the **covenantal** Scriptures.