

7. Chronology (1990)

[147] The goal of chronology is to determine the correct order of events and, if possible, their absolute date. Given the conflicting historical data in the Bible and the disagreement between the Bible and other ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman sources, this goal is not easily achieved. In some cases an *absolute* chronology is possible, i.e., the events can be dated by some external CALENDAR and can be computed to either the exact date or to within a few years. On the other hand, one must often be content with a *relative* chronology in which events can be dated and arranged in reference to each other, but whose precise historical reckoning can only be approximated.

[148] The canonical text of the Bible begins with an account of creation and the pre-Abrahamic ancestors, which includes elaborate genealogical records. From data, Bishop James Ussher (1581-1656) calculated that the world was created in 4004 B.C.E. Though few today would consider this an historical datum, we are beginning to understand, at least in part, the elaborate chronological system worked out by those who compiled the biblical tradition. Theirs was a theological agenda, not an historical one in the modern sense.

The chronological information about ABRAHAM, ISAAC, and JACOB in Genesis was arranged according to a mathematical scheme, which may be illustrated in terms of their respective ages at death.

	Age at Death	Sum of Digits
Abraham	$175 = 7 \times 5^2$	$[7 + 5 + 5 = 17]$
Isaac	$180 = 5 \times 6^2$	$[5 + 6 + 6 = 17]$
Jacob	$147 = 3 \times 7^2$	$[3 + 7 + 7 = 17]$

This rather simple scheme is in turn part of what appears to be an elaborate mathematical system worked out by ancient chronologers, which runs through the Hebrew Bible.

Particular numbers are associated with specific eras as one moves through the Pentateuch and beyond. The larger scheme seems to be oriented toward the manner in which ancient scribes thought about the future. In the modern period we face the future; people in the ancient Near East faced the past. To determine the future, they simply read the events of the past and projected them, as it were, behind themselves into the future, which then became a “rerun” of the past in reverse. The picture may be diagrammed as follows:

JOSHUA/JOSEPH \Rightarrow NEW ISRAEL \Rightarrow NEW CREATION

Both JOSHUA and JOSEPH in this scheme are allotted 110 years, and together serve as a narrative frame to bracket the appearance of a new MOSES (perhaps originally understood in terms of the promulgation of the Torah as canonical scripture in ancient Israel, the historical moment in which the scheme was worked out). since Israel consisted of twelve tribes, those ancient chronologers apparently chose the sum of the squares of the digits one through twelve, namely 650. The number associated with the Fathers is 140, the sum of the squares of the digits one through seven. Abraham was 140 years of age when Isaac married REBEKAH, a marriage which lasted 140 years. Rebekah was barren for twenty years before she gave birth to the twins Jacob and ESAU, who are identified before their birth as two nations (i.e., Israel and Edom). Since Isaac was sixty years old at the birth of Jacob and Esau (Gen 25:26), the twins were 120

when Jacob fled to Aram shortly before the death of Isaac at age 180. After serving LABAN for twenty years (Gen 31:38), Jacob returned following his wrestling match with the mysterious night visitor at the JABBOK. Jacob/Israel was thus 140 years old when he reentered the land of Canaan to encounter his brother Esau who, of course, was also 140. The 140 years allotted JOB (42:16) after his time of testing place him within this same scheme among the Fathers of Genesis.

Within the narrative tradition in Genesis, Abraham was 160 years old at the birth of his grandson Jacob/Israel. Isaac was sixty when Jacob was born; and Jacob lived with Isaac for sixty-three years and with Laban for twenty. At the time of Joseph's descent into Egypt at age seventeen, Isaac was thus 160 years old (60 + 63 + 20 + 17). Moreover, the number of years between the birth of Shem and Terah in Gen 11 is 320, which is twice 160. Since the sum of the numbers 110 (Joshua/Joseph) + 650 (Israel) + 140 (the Fathers) is 900, it is interesting to note that $900 \times 160 = 144,000$. This curious number, which becomes the community of the elect within apocalyptic speculation (see Rev 14:1), apparently began in ancient Israel as simply the symbolic lapse of time in a chronological scheme from the promulgation of the Torah of Moses to the *eschaton*, conceived in terms of a grand reversal of past events in ancient Israel according to the formula:

$$\begin{array}{ccccccc} \text{JOSHUA/JOSEPH} & \Rightarrow & \text{NEW ISRAEL} & \Rightarrow & \text{FATHERS} & \Rightarrow & \text{NEW CREATION} \\ (110 & + & 650 & + & 140) & \times & 160 = 144,000 \end{array}$$

It is not possible to construct an absolute chronology so far as the PATRIARCHS of Genesis are concerned, since none of the people or events of the narrative can be correlated to external events of their era. While it is true that these narratives reflect certain customs that can be documented in Amorite and Hurrian cultures of the early second millennium B.C.E., dating the Fathers remains problematic. In recent years the *Patriarchs* have been dated as early as the twenty-second century B.C.E., and their literary creation as late as the sixth century B.C.E.. The majority of scholars, however, still prefer a relative chronology of ca. 2000-1850 for Abraham, ca. 1900-1750 for Isaac, and Jacob around 1800-1700. Joseph and the entrance into Egypt are dated around 1750-1650 B.C.E.

The date of the EXODUS is also uncertain. The scholarly consensus for a thirteenth century date has been challenged recently by those who would place it two centuries earlier. From 1 Kgs 6:1 we learn that the Exodus was established by ancient chronologers as having occurred 480 years before the founding of the Temple in King SOLOMON's fourth year. The Bible thus dates the Exodus to sometime in the fifteenth century, during the reign of Thutmose III (1490). J. Bimson has defended this traditional view on the basis that whereas there is no archaeological evidence for the destruction of such cities as JERICHO, AI, GIBEON, HEBRON, Hormah, ARAD, DEBIR, LACHISH, and HAZOR during the Late Bronze Age, when the thirteenth century option would necessitate the Conquest, there is evidence for this shortly before 1400 B.C.E. This solution, however, creates as many problems as it solves, since the period of the Judges in Israel would then last 600 years. Moreover, Exod 1:11 states that the Hebrews were building the cities of Pithom and Ramses, which were largely built by RAMSES II (1290-24). Furthermore, if the conquest had occurred in 1410 B.C.E., then why does the book of Judges make no reference to the Asiatic campaigns of Seti I (1319-1301) and Ramses II (1301-1234)? From the Merneptah Stele (ca. 1220 B.C.E.) we learn that Israel was among the peoples in Palestine that Merneptah (ca. 1224-1214) defeated. The archaeological evidence for the

destruction of a number of biblical sites in the thirteenth century suggests that this is the setting of the Conquest. Most scholars still date the Exodus to ca. 1290-1260 B.C.E. and the Conquest to about a half century later.

With the rise of the monarchy in ancient Israel historians have their first opportunity to establish an absolute chronology, but even here there are problems. The biblical data in the books of Kings can be cross-referenced with known Assyrian and Babylonian king lists, which have been precisely dated by means of calculating the exact dates of solar and lunar eclipses to which these lists (called *limmu* or eponym lists) refer. Two dates in the biblical text have consequently been established beyond reasonable doubt: the 149 date for the battle of Qarqar in which King Ahab fought (853 B.C.E.) and Jehu's giving of tribute to the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III (841 B.C.E.). From these two fixed dates, the rest of the dates of the kings of Israel and Judah can be obtained by careful reckoning.

It must be noted, however, that the figures for the reigns of individual kings in Israel and Judah are not as clear as one would hope. There are numerous problems in matters of detail, which E. Thiele has resolved, though not to the satisfaction of all historians. Prior to Thiele, the two sets of figures given in the regnal summaries for the kings of Israel and Judah could not be made to agree without textual emendation. Thiele has demonstrated that the system of cross-referencing is in agreement, once one understands three complex factors. First, there are several implied co-regencies in the text, which would explain some of the excess years in these lists. Second, there were two systems for counting regnal years in the ancient Near East: the accession-year system, in which the rule of the kings was counted to have begun only with the beginning of the first new year, and the nonaccession-year system, which counted the year in which the coronation took place as a full year. A year in which there was a royal transfer of power was counted twice by this latter method, which accounts for some of the problems in the biblical data, since both systems were used at different points in time. Finally, there were two different calendars in use in the ancient Near East. One began in the spring with the month Nisan (Israel), while the other began in the fall with the month of Tishri (Judah). Complicating matters still further, Thiele argues that each of the kingdoms switched their methods of dating, and then switched back after a time. None of these factors, however, is explicitly cited by the text, and can only be deduced by careful reasoning and cross-checking with other ancient Near Eastern sources.

The positing of unmentioned co-regencies remains a problem to some historians, who see Thiele's method as overly subjective. While most current scholars side with Thiele, others hold to the older Albright chronology. Since there is still room for debate, both chronologies are given.

Kings of Israel & Judah	Thiele	Albright
[*indicates Judah]		
*Rehoboam	931/30-913	922-915
Jeroboam	931/30-910/09	922-901
*Abijah	913-911/10	915-913
*Asa	911/10-870-873	913-873
Nadab	910/09-909/8	901-900
Baasha	909/8-886/85	900-877
Elah	886/85-885/84	877-876
Zimri	885/84	876
Omri	885/84-874/73	876-869
*Jehoshaphat	874/73-848	873-849
Ahab	874/73-853	869-850
Ahaziah	853-852	850-849
*Jehoram	853-841	849-842
Jehoram	852-841	849-842
*Ahaziah	841	842
Jehu	841-814/13	842-815
*Athaliah	841-835	842-837
*Jehoash	835-796	837-800
Jehoahaz	814/13-798	815-801
Joash	798-782/81	801-786
*Amaziah	796-767	800-783
Jeroboam II	793/92-753	786-746
*Azariah/Uzziah	792/1-740/39	783-742
Zechariah	753-752	746-745
Shallum	752	745
Menahem	752-742/41	745-738
*Jotham	750-732/31	750-735
Pekahiah	742/41-740/39	738-737
Pekah	752-732/31	737-732
*Jehoahaz [= Ahaz] I	735-716/15	735-715
Hoshea	732/31-723/22	732-724
*Hezekiah	716/15-687/86	715-687
*Manasseh	697/96-643/42	687-642
*Amon	643/42-641/40	642-640
*Josiah	641/40-609	642-609
*Jehoahaz II	609	609
*Jehoiakim	609-598	609-598
*Jehoiachin	598-597	598
*Zedekiah	597-586	598-587

The fall of JERUSALEM and the Babylonian exile can be precisely dated by Babylonian documents. According to these texts, the fall of Jerusalem occurred on the second of Adar, i.e., 16/15 March of either 598 or 597 B.C.E. The ultimate destruction of Jerusalem and a second

deportation occurred in the fall of 587 B.C.E. The third deportation recorded in Jer 52 is usually dated to 582/1 B.C.E. The Exile came to an end with the fall of Babylon under the Persian general Cyrus, who issued a decree allowing the exiles to return home in 539 B.C.E.

The events of the return of the Jews to Palestine and the restoration in Jerusalem are harder to date with absolute precision. While the work on the restoration of the Second Temple began in the second year of the return (Ezra 3:8), this work was suspended until the second year of Darius I in 520 (Ezra 4:24) and completed in 515 B.C.E. (Ezra 6:15).

If one correlates the traditional dates of EZRA and NEHEMIAH with Persian king lists, the respective dates for these two men would be 458 and 445 B.C.E. Because of inconsistencies in the biblical text, however, many scholars are convinced that the work of Ezra presupposes that of Nehemiah. Some who hold this view argue that Ezra returned in the seventh year of Artaxerxes II in 398 B.C.E., rather than Artaxerxes I. Others suggest that a mistake has slipped into the biblical record, and that Ezra 7:7 originally read the *thirty-seventh* year of Artaxerxes I, namely 428 B.C.E.

Any chronology of the NT must take into account the Roman hegemony over the Jewish people established on 10 Tishri in 63 B.C.E. under the Roman general Pompey. Though much is known about the subsequent history of Roman rule in Palestine, the data do not match up well with what is given in the NT.

The birth of JESUS is particularly difficult to ascertain with certainty. In Matt 2:1 we learn that he was born during the reign of Herod the Great, and Luke 2:2 speaks of a census at the time Quirinius was governor of Syria. It has been argued that the census mentioned here is to be associated with one that Augustus initiated in either 9 C.E. or 6 C.E., which would place the birth of Jesus in 8/7 or 5/4 C.E. Another possibility is that the star was connected with Haley's comet in 12 B.C.E. Others argue for an otherwise undocumented census in 4 B.C.E., to which Luke refers, or simply posit an error on Luke's part.

An equally difficult chronological problem lies in trying to ascertain the precise dates for the ministry of Jesus. Not only do we know exactly when he began his public ministry, we do not know exactly how many years it lasted. Scholars have debated whether it lasted one year, in connection with the order of events connected with Jesus' trip to Jerusalem as presented in the Synoptics, or three years based on the three trips to Jerusalem recorded in the Gospel of John. Some have also argued that a two-year ministry is possible. The usual solution is to give the nod to John, and posit a three-year ministry, with the possibility of a two-year ministry based on the fact that some of the trips to Jerusalem recorded in John actually occurred in the same year. Luke 3:1-2 dates the baptism of Jesus to the precise date of the fifteenth year of TIBERIAS, whose rule can be interpreted to have begun in three different manners. In short, the majority of scholars date the beginning of Jesus' ministry to the years 27, 28 or 29 C.E. The crucifixion would then have occurred either one, two, or three years afterwards, depending on the length of his ministry. Thus Jesus died somewhere between 27 and 32 C.E.

The basic problem with establishing a Pauline chronology lies in the discrepancies that exist between Paul's own account of things, as portrayed in his letters, and the account of his life offered in Acts. PAUL mentions two trips to Jerusalem in Gal 1-2 whereas the record in Acts records five. Such discrepancies make it difficult to reconstruct the life of Paul with absolute confidence. Nonetheless, some dates can be given with certainty thanks to the Gallio inscription, which enables the historian to place the events of Acts 18:12 in the year 51 C.E. From this fixed point the biblical historian can work backward and forward. The two most recent treatments of this problem are those of P. Jewett and G. Luedemann, which may be summarized as follows:

Dates according to:

Luedemann	Jewett	Event
27(30)	Oct 34	Paul's conversion
33 (36)	Oct 37	First Jerusalem visit
34 (37)	40-45	Mission in Europe: Philippi, Thessalonica
	43-45	First missionary journey: Cyprus, Pamphylia, Galatia
	46-51	Second missionary journey: Galatia, Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth
41	49	Claudius expelled jews
41	50	Paul in Corinth
47 (50)	Aug-Oct 51	Second Jerusalem visit (Jerusalem Conference)
Summer 48 (51)	47	Paul in Galatia
	52-57	Third missionary journey
50 (53)	53-55	Paul in Ephesus
Winter 49/50	Winter 54/5	Ephesian imprisonment?
Spring 50 (53)		Journey to Macedonia
Summer 50 (53)		Corinthian correspondence
Winter 50/1 (53/4)		Paul in Macedonia
Spr/Sum 51 (54)		Journey to Corinth
Winter 51/2 (54/5)		Paul in Corinth (Romans)
Spring 52 (55)	April 57	Departure for Jerusalem
	June 57	Arrival in Jerusalem
	June 57-59	Imprisonment in Caesarea
	July 59	Paul before Festus
	Oct 59	Departure from Fair Havens
	Nov 59-Feb 60	Paul in Malta
	March 60	Arrival in Rome
	March 62	Paul's execution

It should be noted that these two studies depart from traditional reconstructions of Paul's life in several ways. The JERUSALEM COUNCIL is generally placed around 48-49 C.E., between the first and second missionary journeys. Many scholars posit a Roman imprisonment in 62-64 C.E., and others, a trip to Spain after this, based on the information in the pastoral epistles.

Though NT chronology ends with Paul in Rome, some books such as the Revelation probably came from the time of Domitian's persecution of the Christians in 95 C.E. Beyond 100 C.E. the era of the apostolic fathers begins.

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