

Six Thousand Years?

CARL G. TULAND

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Holy Writ leaves many questions that Christians have not been able to answer. Some of these problems will not be explained fully until the chapter of an imperfect world is closed and a new chapter is opened with no limitations on perfect knowledge. As the apostle Paul says: "Our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away. . . . Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood" (1 Corinthians 13:9, 12 RSV). Ellen G. White offers a capsulation of the thought: "Those who refuse to accept and obey God's word until every objection has been removed, and there is no longer an opportunity for doubt, will never come to the light."¹

Also, we must distinguish between (*a*) imperfect understanding of a subject and (*b*) refusing to accept the evidence. In some problems of interpretation, we are inclined to oppose all views that disagree with our personal concepts, although the text may allow for several interpretations. In this respect, the first chapter of the Bible furnishes an excellent illustration. Do the first two verses of Genesis refer to the seven-day creation of our earth? Or do they apply to the creation of the whole universe, before the specific reference to our earth (verses 3-31)?

As we recognize that our convictions rest on faith in divine revelation, we ought also to acknowledge that our faith is limited by our imperfect understanding of that revelation. There is no "scientific proof" to establish our faith, and an "archaeological faith" is a poor substitute for a living and vibrant experience with God. I accept many things in Scripture as "facts of faith" although they are tenets beyond logical, historical, philosophical, or scientific backing. Nevertheless, to me they are truth — religious truth.

Other problems, also, touch on the history of man. I confess there are many of my own questions that I have not been able to answer, and I am further away

than ever from issuing any apodictic statement about them. I have discussed specifically one topic with various Adventist scholars. Since this topic is considered to be a part of biblical "chronology," it seemed reasonable to expect an answer from them — but the answer never came.

As to my personal conviction and faith in God's word, such problems as biblical chronology do not interfere with my spiritual life. But I know that many are willing to abandon their loyalty to the Bible, or the church, or the church doctrines, because of some seeming, or even actual, discrepancy.

My discussion in this essay centers on a serious chronological problem that has been difficult to solve. My concern is not so much with interpreting certain biblical records, however, as with the fact that within the church there is an attitude of establishing truth by official position statements. What if the statements should prove to be incorrect? Will this not destroy the faith of many?

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I

The age of the earth is a question often discussed by church members. A statement in a 1971 issue of the *Review and Herald* reiterates that which has been accepted by countless persons as the historical age of our planet: "Writing under inspiration, Ellen White records 18 times that this earth of ours is about 6,000 years old or that the span from creation to the present is about 6,000 years."²

According to the genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11 (upon which Archbishop James Ussher based his chronology), the earth was created 4004 B.C. — which, in turn, sets the date of the Flood at A.M. 1656, or 2348 B.C.³ The biblical record declares that the new human race developed from the three sons of Noah — Shem, Ham, and Japheth — and was divided later into many different tongues and nations (Genesis 10:1 ff.). Then followed the building of the tower of Babel and the subsequent scattering of the people over the earth (Genesis 11:1-9) — which, according to traditional biblical chronology, brings us to approximately A.M. 1824, or 2180 B.C.

Until that time — that is, between A.M. 1656 and 1824 — "throughout the earth men spoke the same language, with the same vocabulary" (Genesis 11:1 JB).⁴ Then the Lord confused the language of all the earth (verse 9). Thus, biblical records establish that, until this confusion, there was but one language for all the earth's people. This would mean that there were no differing languages until approximately 2,200 years before Christ and, by implication, no differing nations either.

But history (including biblical sources) seems to provide a completely different picture. If we disregard Egypt's prehistory period of undetermined length and begin with Old Kingdom dynasties One through Six, the dates given for that pe-

riod (as they appear in the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary*) are 2800 to 2150 B.C.⁵

I must emphasize that this is a very conservative figure. Generally, the period of Egyptian high culture is dated from about 3000 B.C. What *is* important is the fact that Adventist sources agree that there was a great nation and an outstanding culture — (a) of a definite (Hamitic) race, (b) with a highly developed method of writing, and (c) with its own language — more than 800 years before the date stated in the Bible for the confusion of tongues and at least 650 years before the date assigned to the Flood.

In *History Begins at Sumer*, Kramer tells of a nation whose existence was hardly known less than a century ago, but whose culture is considered today the most outstanding culture of the ancient Near East.⁶ Cuneiform writing was introduced by the Sumerians about 3000 B.C. Monumental buildings, a vast literature (including textbooks for the education of administrators — with mathematical tables, grammars, etc.), and all the other factors necessary for the development of a culture that compares easily with that of Egypt, were found to exist in the Sumerian civilization 3,000 years before Christ.

At present there is no agreement among scholars as to the racial affinity of the Sumerians. They were the “black-headed people,” with short skulls, broad faces, straight noses, small mouths and lips, and short, stocky bodies. Their agglutinative language had similarities to the Turkish, Finno-Ugric, and Hungarian families. These evidences clearly indicate that there was also in Mesopotamia (at the same time as the Egyptian culture flourished) an equally outstanding civilization of another language and race — neither Hamitic nor Semitic — hundreds of years before the biblical date for the Flood or the confusion of tongues.

Additional cultures could be listed: the Akkadian, the Canaanite, and others whose history *precedes* the dates of 2348 B.C. for the Flood and 2180 B.C. for the dispersion of the people at the tower of Babel. When we consider that each nation required a long period of time in order to develop from a family group into a large national society and a high culture, the gap between dates offered by biblical tradition and history increases by several centuries.

Genesis 10 is a report of the nations that allegedly developed after the Flood. It repeats three times: “These are the sons of . . . in their lands, each with his own language, by their families, and their nations” (verses 5, 20, 31 RSV). Just when this development took place is not explained. The information given reads: “These are the families of the sons of Noah . . . and from these the nations spread abroad on the earth after the flood. Now the whole earth had one language,” or, as the Jerusalem Bible says: “Throughout the earth men spoke the same language,

with the same vocabulary" (Genesis 10:32; 11:1). These texts have always been understood to mark the beginning of the postdiluvial history of humanity.

However, not only is there a problem in reconciling the year 2180 B.C. (the dispersion from the tower of Babel) as the date when the nations with their own independent languages began to form, but difficulties also exist in connection with history after that date. It seems impossible to accommodate the nations and cultures into the very short period from the tower of Babel to the time of Abraham. Terah, Abraham's father, was born in A.M. 1878, or 2126 B.C. (according to Ussher's chronology), and Abraham himself in 1996 B.C., which fixes Abraham's calling by God (at the age of seventy-five, Genesis 14:4) at the year 1921 B.C., according to the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary*.⁷

The dictionary goes on to describe the historico-political situation of the part of Mesopotamia (Ur of the Chaldees) in which Terah and Abraham lived and to state that in 1960 B.C. the third dynasty of Ur had already come to an end. Those who are acquainted with the history of the ancient Near East know that the records of Ur reach back into the beginning of the third millennium B.C. At any rate, Ur had gone through many centuries of cultural supremacy and had begun to decline at the time Abraham was born. The dynasties of Isin and Larsa replaced Ur as a political center of Mesopotamia. Thus, the whole history of the ancient Near East would indicate the impossibility of accommodating the rise and development of the different nations and cultures and their manifold achievements within the short period allotted to them by Ussher's interpretation of the biblical records.

II

Technically or historically, the problem is of a multiple nature. Projecting backward, we find that there were different nations and races with outstanding cultures at least 700 years before the date given in the Bible for the Flood. Several centuries would have to be added to allow for the development of such groups into nations and for the tremendous achievements for which these nations are known.

Thus, contrary to Ussher's chronology, there were different languages approximately a millennium *before* the tower of Babel (Semitic, Hamitic, and even other language families), although the origin of all the different languages is attributed to the descendants of Noah *after* the dispersion in 2180 B.C.

Therefore, if we attempt to project the history of the nations mentioned in Genesis 10 *forward* into the period from the dispersion in 2180 B.C. onward, then we face (in addition to the language factor and their existence as nations many centuries *before* the dates ascribed by the Bible) the impossibility of accommo-

dating them in the extremely limited time from the tower of Babel to the appearance of Abraham — a span of only 250 years. The reality of such known historical dates is recognized in the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary*, but it is difficult to reconcile the dates with biblical data if we adhere to Ussher's chronology.

How old is the earth? By consulting the Septuagint, we could add another 1,000 to Ussher's 6,000 years. But that will hardly solve the problem.

In recent years I attended a summer session at Andrews University. During class one day (in the presence of approximately eighty persons, many of them overseas missionaries), the question was raised about the age of the earth. It was evident that some class members were greatly disturbed and expected an answer that would satisfy all aspects of their inquiry — religious, historical, archaeological, spiritual, intellectual.

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What they received instead was an authoritative statement that left them without an answer. The instructor, whom I hold in great esteem, answered the question by saying (I quote verbatim): "Mrs. White has repeatedly stated that the age of the earth is 6,000 years. It means that either it is 6,000 years or that Mrs. White was not inspired." With these words, the instructor, for the sake of supplying a "definitive" answer, risked Ellen White's authority and inspiration — a position that seems precarious.

I must emphasize again that this study is not to be construed as disbelief in the Bible on my part. I am able to believe in the Scriptures, even though there are things that to my finite mind are not clear and are even contradictory. Such situations have served to make me humble and to prevent me from making final statements regarding certain issues of biblical interpretation.

My concern here, rather, is with the effect on individuals, and on the church as a whole, of pronouncements made by prominent Adventists.

Adventist church members have been brought up to accept many declarations by church leaders as authoritative. To many, even slight changes of interpretation often are considered tantamount to a change of teachings, to "abandoning the platform" or denying "the blueprint" of divine truth. No doubt church leaders are aware of such dangers and are conscious, too, that these dangers are more obvious in today's time of revolutionary developments within religion. Authoritative declarations that can eventually be disproved, or attempts to support truth by doubtful arguments, can only cause perplexity and confusion.

Seventh-day Adventists cannot limit the age of the earth or of the universe to 6,000 years as some do. In passing, we should remind ourselves that, according to Ellen White, Lucifer at the time of his rebellion hoped to carry with him existing *worlds* in a universe of which our planet was merely a small speck.⁸

To those who insist that their views represent the final and absolute truth I say: Only *if* we can harmonize what is called *biblical chronology* of the prediluvial and postdiluvial world with the ancient Near East *historical records* (as they also appear in the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary*) between approximately 3000 and 1800 B.C. can we hope for a workable basis to discuss the overall problem intelligently.

In my interactions with fellow Christians I have found that to admit that Adventists are fallible does not weaken the trust of these persons. To acknowledge that there are problems in the Bible for which Adventists (as others) have no solutions does not weaken faith. On the contrary, such an admission may strengthen confidence in the honesty of spiritual leaders and may offer challenge for intensive study of the Bible and other pertinent fields of knowledge.

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