

Can the Bible Establish The Age of the Earth?

by Siegfried H. Horn

The question “Can the Bible establish the age of the earth?” suggests that the Bible, besides fulfilling many purposes, is also a source book of historical chronology. This means that we expect the Bible to provide us with data of a chronological nature in order to obtain dates for biblical events and perhaps even for some secular events. In the search for such data in the Bible, we are not disappointed, because Bible texts do exist which are quite explicit in this respect and contain specific chronological information.

For example, Jeremiah dates the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in terms of two independent dating schemes, namely, in the eleventh year of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah, and also in the nineteenth year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon (Jer. 52:5, 12). Even more explicit is Luke’s chronological statement that the beginning of John the Baptist’s ministry took place in the fifteenth regnal

year of the Emperor Tiberius, when Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, Philip tetrarch of Ituraea and Trachonitis, Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, and Annas and Caiaphas high priests in Jerusalem (Luke 3:1-2).

Yet, while such explicit statements of a chronological nature as the ones quoted do exist in the Bible, not all biblical events can be securely dated, and there are differences in the certainty of dates derived from the available data. Let us review some.

First Millennium B.C.

Only one biblical event is absolutely and securely dated to the day, the month and the year, and that is the conquest of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar under the reign of King Jehoiachin — March 16, 597 B.C. For this date, we have biblical statements (2 Kings 24:10-17) and the Babylonian chronicles.¹ Other events can be dated with almost equal certainty, such as the surrender of Jerusalem by King Jehoiakim to Nebuchadnezzar when Daniel went into exile in 605 B.C., or Nehemiah’s return from Persia to Jerusalem in 444 B.C.

Some biblical events can be dated with a reasonable certainty, namely, with a margin of error that does not exceed one year. The

Siegfried Horn, who took his Ph.D. in Near Eastern Studies at the University of Chicago, is the former chairman of the Old Testament department and dean of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University. He is the editor of the *Adventist Bible Dictionary*.

return of Ezra is an example, an event which took place either in 458 or 457 B.C. If the author of the book of Ezra used the Persian calendar in writing his report, the date of his return to Jerusalem would be 458 B.C. On the other hand, if Ezra used the Jewish calendar, the date would be 457 B.C. Most modern Bible commentators use the former date; we Adventists have always defended the latter. Fortunately, we have a basis for the date of our preference, since literary and archaeological evidence shows that Nehemiah, as well as the Jews in Egypt during the post-exilic period, used the Jewish and not the Persian calendar.²

Even a more recent event such as the death of Christ is difficult to date with absolute certainty. The available evidence points to either A.D. 30 or 31.³ We Adventists prefer the date A.D. 31, because it fits the prophecy of Daniel 9 better than does the year A.D. 30; for the same reason, we defend 457 B.C. for Ezra's return and reject the year 458.

There are other biblical events which can be dated within a margin of possible error that does not exceed a few years. For example, the year 966 B.C. for the beginning of the building of the Jerusalem Temple by Solomon is defended in the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*⁴ on the basis of E. R. Thiele's work,⁵ with which I fully agree in that respect. But, some scholars have dated this event a few years later, although no one differs from our date by more than ten years. While not all biblical scholars agree with regard to the actual year in which Solomon began his building activity, all agree that it happened within a span of ten years of the date quoted above. Hence, a medial date of about 960 B.C. can be considered as correct.

So far I have mentioned only events of the first millennium B.C. and of the first century of the Christian era, because for this period, we are on more or less solid ground as far as chronological dates are concerned. We also have secular sources with which we can correlate biblical data. For the events from Solomon to Nehemiah, some Egyptian kings are mentioned by name in the biblical records which are well known from the

monuments, namely, Shishak, Tirhakah, Necho and Hophra. Several Assyrian kings appear in the Bible, namely, Tiglathpileser, Shalmaneser, Sargon, Sennacherib and Esarhaddon, as well as the Babylonian kings Merodach Baladan, Nebuchadnezzar, Evil Merodach, Belshazzar, and the Persian kings Cyrus, Darius, Ahasuerus and Artaxerxes. We are well acquainted with all of these kings from contemporary hieroglyphic or cuneiform sources.

Furthermore, we also have evidence that comes from the opposite direction. This evidence is provided by Assyrian records which mention the Israelite kings Omri, Ahab, Jehu, Menahem, Pekah and Hoshea, as well as the kings of Judah, Jehoash, Jehoahaz, Azariah, Hezekiah and Manasseh, while Babylonian records refer to Jehoiachin by name and to the last king of Judah, Zedekiah, without preserving his name. Since the Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian chronologies are well established by means of astronomical checks, it is obvious that all these cross references and correlations between biblical and nonbiblical data provide us with a biblical chronology for the first millennium B.C. that is quite reliable, and which can contain only very small and inconsequential errors.

One point I want to make clear before leaving the period of biblical chronology which deals with the first millennium B.C., and that is the fact that even for the dates of this later period we are depending on secular chronological schemes to anchor our biblical data. Whereas the biblical evidence indicates that there were 345 years between Solomon's death and the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, we would not be able to date either the former event nor the latter on the basis of biblical data alone. It is only with the help of the Assyrian and Babylonian records that we can provide the dates 931 B.C. for the death of Solomon and 586 B.C. for the end of the Kingdom of Judah.

Also, for the dating of postexilic events such as those described in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, we depend on secular sources. These events are dated in the Bible in terms of the years of the reigns of Cyrus, Darius, Ahasuerus and Artaxerxes, whose regnal years we can establish only on the

basis of secular records. Let us never forget that without secular sources we would not be able to date any biblical event in terms of a continuous era such as the B.C. or A.D. scheme or any other. We would, for example, not know from the historical records of the Bible that a period of about 400 years passed between Nehemiah's time and that of Jesus Christ. No historical biblical evidence could show us how many years elapsed between Darius II, the last king mentioned in the Old Testament, and the Emperor Augustus or King Herod, the first rulers men-

“It is important to remember that a biblical chronology cannot stand on its own feet and can be established for the historical periods only with the help of nonbiblical material.”

tioned in the New Testament, if we did not have secular source material. It is important to remember that a biblical chronology cannot stand on its own feet and can be established for the historical periods only with the help of nonbiblical material. By saying this, I am fully aware of the fact that we Adventists believe that prophetic statements, such as those of Daniel 9:24-27, can bridge historical gaps in the Bible, but such prophetic passages depend on interpretation to make sense and, therefore, are left out of this historical discussion.

Second Millennium B.C.

Whereas we have thus a biblical chronology covering the first millennium B.C. which is quite well established and about which there are hardly any disagreements among biblical historians, this picture changes suddenly when we go back into the second millennium B.C., where we encounter great differences in the view of biblical scholars, depending on their acceptance or rejection of biblical data.

The main reason for such disagreements is the fact that we do not have a correlation between biblical and secular events. The Bible mentions not one king of Egypt or Mesopotamia by name who has been identified with certainty, and the secular records of the second millennium B.C. do not mention any individual known from the Bible. Egyptian kings are referred to regularly as “pharaohs,” but pharaoh is not a personal name, and Mesopotamian kings mentioned by name such as Amraphel of Shinar or Chedorlaomer of Elam are not yet identifiable from the available records. It is, therefore, not surprising that scholars differ widely with regard to dates of such biblical events of the second millennium B.C. as the Exodus. However, if we leave aside the arguments of those who do not accept clear “chronological statements” in the Bible, but accept such statements as a base for our dates, we can date some important biblical events of the second millennium B.C., such as the Exodus to 1445 B.C. or Abraham's call to leave Haran to 1875 B.C. These earlier dates can be based on well-established dates of later periods, such as the beginning of the building of the Jerusalem Temple by Solomon in 966 B.C.

Hence, the Exodus date is obtained by using 1 Kings 6:1, which tells us that Solomon began to build his Temple in the 480th year after the Exodus, whereas the earlier date is arrived at on the basis of Paul's statement that the Law of Sinai was given 430 years after God entered into a covenant with Abraham (Gal. 3:16-17), which helps us to understand a few ambiguous texts of the Pentateuch, such as Genesis 15:13 and Exodus 12:40-41. Since the date of Solomon's Temple building is reasonably well established as 966 B.C., we easily reach the year 1445 B.C. for the Exodus by counting back 480 years, and by going back another 430 years we reach the year 1875 B.C. for the year in which Abraham was called.

These dates are as far back as we can go on the basis of chronological biblical sources. Before leaving this period of Old Testament history, let me make clear how I am using the

term “chronological statements.” A statement such as the one found in 1 Kings 6:1, which gives us the number of years that had elapsed since the Exodus had taken place at the time Solomon began to build the Jerusalem Temple, is clearly a chronological statement, regardless of whether it is acceptable or not, whether it is considered to be true or false, accurate or exaggerated. Also Jeremiah’s statement, referred to above, that Jerusalem was destroyed in the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign is a chronological statement. It is very important to understand this term and use it accurately, because it is sometimes used by students of the Bible for data to which it does not apply, as will be seen below.

Periods Before Abraham

This leads me to a very important observation. While there are numerous “chronological statements” in the Bible pertaining to the periods from Abraham down through the ages, not a single “chronological statement” can be found in the entire Bible which helps us to date any of the earlier events, whether it be the building of the Tower of Babel, the confusion of tongues, the Flood, or Creation. For the time preceding Abraham, no events recorded in the Bible are connected with any dates, secular kings, or any other chronological peg on which we can hang the biblical stories.

What we have for the pre-Abrahamic periods in the Bible are two genealogical lists, one from Adam to Noah, and a second one from Noah to Abraham (Genesis 5 and 11). These two lists provide us with names of 20 men, usually referred to as patriarchs, from Adam to Abraham. Of each of these patriarchs, the age at the time of the birth of his first son is presented, as well as his age at time of death. For example, the list says that Adam was 130 years old when Seth was born, and that he had reached the age of 930 years when he died (Gen. 5:3, 5). By adding up the ages of the 20 patriarchs at the time of the birth of each one’s first son from Adam’s creation to Abraham’s birth, one reaches, according to our English Bible, the sum of 2,008 years. We could then conclude that Abraham was born 2,008 years after creation.

Many students of the Bible have in this way for centuries built up a biblical chronology which has provided them with dates for the events preceding Abraham’s time. The most famous of these chronologies is that of the Archbishop James Ussher, published 1650-1658, and incorporated into the margins of the King James Bible from 1679 until recent times.

However, the matter is not so easy as it may seem at first sight. The English Bible figures of Genesis 5 and 11 are based on the Hebrew Massoretic Bible manuscripts, and these show great differences with the other ancient versions of the Bible, namely, the Septuagint (the earliest Greek version of the Old Testament, referred to as the LXX) and the Samaritan Pentateuch, as well as with the data given by Josephus.⁶ In the LXX, 15 of the 20 patriarchs from Adam to Abraham have different ages at the time of the birth of their sons than in the Hebrew texts, so that an adding of these figures leads to 3,394 years instead of 2,008 years. The Samaritan Pentateuch shows ten differences with the He-

“There is no biblical basis for any date . . . for a biblical event preceding the birth of Abraham. If an Adventist wants to believe that Creation took place about 4,000 B.C., he should not claim that he bases his belief on a biblical chronology. . . .”

brew text and leads to 2,249 years instead of 2,008 years from Creation to Abraham. Josephus’ account differs in 13 instances and reaches a total number of 3,237 years instead of 2,008 years for the period from Creation to Abraham.

This raises the question: Which of the four ancient sources is the most reliable? Our first choice would be the Hebrew text, because we know that the Jews copied and transmitted the text conscientiously and with great care, and because, traditionally, all

Protestant Bible translations have for several centuries been based on the Hebrew Masoretic text. However, let us not forget that the LXX translation is based on Hebrew manuscripts which no longer exist (except for some of the Dead Sea scroll fragments) and which preceded those now in existence by centuries. Furthermore, we must be very cautious to condemn the LXX version out of hand, since the New Testament writers, with very few exceptions, used the LXX, even in texts where they differed from the Hebrew Bible (cf. Acts 7:14 with Genesis 46:27, or Matthew 21:16 with Psalm 8:2). It is not my purpose to defend the LXX against the Masoretic text over another when they differ, since the authenticity of both is so well attested through the use of inspired writers.

Another difficulty in dealing with genealogies is the fact that they seldom seem to be complete. Let us not confuse accuracy with completeness. I do not say that the genealogical lists are inaccurate; in fact, I believe that each individual statement in a genealogical list can be accurate, although the whole list may be incomplete. If one compares any two genealogies given in the Bible, one of the two is usually shorter than the other. For example, Ezra's genealogy of his own ancestry reaching back to Aaron leaves out several generations (cf. Ezra 7:1-5 with 1 Chron. 6:3-15) and the list of David's descendants on the throne of Judah as presented in Matthew 1:6-11 lacks several kings, as a comparison with 1 Chronicles 3:10-16 shows. Even the two existing biblical lists of the genealogies between Noah and Abraham are not identical, as a comparison between Luke 3 and Genesis 11 shows. Luke in his list presents a Cainan (ch. 3:36) who does not appear in the list of Genesis 11. In the light of these difficulties it must, therefore, be considered possible that the genealogical lists of Genesis 5 and 11 may be incomplete. It is a simple fact that we are still far removed from understanding ancient Israelite genealogies.

The apostle Paul seems to have realized the difficulties connected with the ancient genealogies, because in his writings he warns two of his fellow ministers to avoid discussions that deal with genealogies. In 1 Timothy 1:3, he counsels Timothy not to

occupy himself "with myths and endless genealogies which promote speculations rather than the divine training that is in faith" (RSV), and in his letter to Titus, Paul rates genealogies on the same level as "stupid controversies," "dissensions, and quarrels over the law, for they are unprofitable and futile" (Tit. 3:9, RSV). It is for this reason that in all my ministry of more than four decades, I have avoided getting drawn into discussions on biblical genealogies. Because of the difficulties connected with the genealogical data of the Bible, I have always refused to date any event that precedes Abraham's birth.

It may be argued that there is nothing in the Bible which is unprofitable or that is preserved without a purpose. I would agree. Consequently, one can reason that the genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11 which are in the Bible must have a value and should teach us something. This is true. But I still maintain that we do not fully understand them, and with regard to this lack of understanding, we are in good company, namely in the company of the apostle Paul. More than half of the first book of Chronicles consists of genealogies and lists of names. Their inclusion must either have been of value for the people of the past, or must be of value for the future, but their present importance is difficult to ascertain. Even Ellen White quotes from the first ten chapters of 1 Chronicles only a few times; once from chapter 5, twice from chapter 2, and three times from chapter 10, but never in her voluminous writings quotes even once from the seven chapters, 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8 and 9.

In conclusion, I do maintain that there is no biblical basis for any date in the B.C. scale for a biblical event preceding the birth of Abraham. If an Adventist wants to believe that Creation took place about 4,000 B.C., he should not claim that he bases his belief on a biblical chronology, for he bases it, in reality, on a combination of biblical and secular chronologies for the last 4,000 years, up to about 2000 B.C., and on the Hebrew text of genealogical data for the preceding 2,000 years. It would be much better to say that he bases his defense on the several statements of Ellen White, in which she declares the earth to be about 6,000 years old.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. D. J. Wiseman, *Chronicles of Chaldaean Kings (626-556 B.C.) in the British Museum* (London, 1956).
2. Siegfried H. Horn and Lynn H. Wood, *The Chronology of Ezra 7*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C., 1970).
3. See the discussion of the evidence in the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, pp. 255-265.
4. See *ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 134-135, 749.
5. Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1965). Thiele's chronological work is concerned only with the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah. For this reason, his scheme begins at the time of Solomon's death and Rehoboam's accession in 931 B.C. (see p. 54). However, the early years of Solomon's reign can easily be computed by applying the rules of Thiele's chronology to Solomon. Since that king had come to the throne 40 years earlier, thus in 971 B.C. when his accession year started, his fourth regnal year began in the autumn of 967 and ended in the autumn of 966 B.C. The month Zif, in which the Temple building began, is a spring month, which leads us to the conclusion that the Temple building began in the spring of 966 B.C.
6. See the *SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, pp. 248 and 289 for tabulations of the data mentioned here.