

Biblical Chronology. The dating of the events and literature of the Bible, both in relation to one another and in relation to events and literature outside of the Bible.

The Importance of the Chronology of Biblical Events

The dating of particular biblical events can be important for a number of reasons:

(1) *The dating of biblical events increases our ability to study the biblical text in its historical context.* For example, by dating the ministry of Jonah the prophet to the early- to mid-eighth century BC based on his connection to Jeroboam II in 2 Kgs 14:25, one becomes aware of the fact that Jonah was refusing to preach to the capital of Assyria at a time when Assyria was in a period of decline that had allowed Jeroboam II to expand the borders of Israel. Jonah's fear of preaching to the Ninevites, then, was due to his interest in Nineveh's destruction, which could be averted if they repented at his preaching. Further historical study reveals that Assyria would overthrow Israel in 722 BC. This information, available through chronological study, informs the way one reads the book of Jonah.

(2) *The dating of biblical events allows us to reconstruct biblical history beyond what the Bible explicitly reveals.* For example, Scripture does not explicitly reveal the length of Jesus' ministry, but many have argued that the three different Passovers in the Gospel of John (John 2:13; 6:4; 11:55) evidence a ministry that lasted approximately three years (e.g., Ogg, *Chronology*; Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects*, 45–64). Of course, caution must be taken in using biblical data to reconstruct history when it is not within the intention of the biblical author to give historical information (Walton and Sandy, *Lost World*, 199–215).

(3) *The dating of particular biblical events helps affirm the historicity of the biblical narrative.* For example, by locating the exodus at a specific time in history, James Hoffmeier is able to identify evidence in Egyptian history and archaeology that Israel was indeed in Egypt (*Israel in Egypt*).

(4) *Some interpreters believe that biblical chronology helps the reader identify the timing of future events predicted by Scripture.* Few will go so far as to identify the exact date or year of Jesus' return (e.g., Whisenant, *88 Reasons; Camping, 1994?*; *Camping, Time*). Most scholars argue that this cannot be known since Jesus says, "about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mark 13:32, NIV). But some still map out a future chronology to show that the time is near (e.g., Hagee, *Jerusalem Countdown*). Many scholars question this approach, though. Some argue that passages normally taken to refer to future events refer figuratively to events that have already occurred (e.g., on Mark 13 and parallels, see Wright, *Jesus*, 339-367). Others argue that the images of Revelation refer to timeless truths rather than to a series of events that can be placed on a chronological map (e.g., deSilva, *Seeing Things*). Thus this final potential benefit of biblical chronology is questioned by a large percentage of scholars.

The Importance of the Chronology of Biblical Books

Biblical chronology also deals with the date of composition of books of the Bible and the traditions behind them. This can be important for two reasons:

(1) *The dating of biblical books may have implications for the reliability of those books.* For example, different scholars date the composition of the book of Acts anywhere between AD 62 (Carson and Moo, *Introduction*, 296-300) and AD 120 (Pervo, *Dating Acts*). Many who date Acts earlier argue that the author experienced some of the events firsthand and had direct access to people who had experienced other events, while many who date Acts later argue that the author was in some places making use of traditions that may have been less reliable and in others being creative in constructing his own history of the early church. Of course, the date of the composition of a book does not *necessarily* impact the reliability of that book, as many biblical

books were composed using sources and traditions that may themselves have a high degree of reliability. Nevertheless, the dating of biblical books does play a role in this discussion.

(2) *The dating of biblical books can help us to interpret them in their historical context.* Most scholars hold that an edition of the Deuteronomistic History (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings) was written during the reign of Josiah, during an effort to stamp out idolatry. Knowledge of this background explains why particular stories are told the way they are, and the intention of these stories is made clearer in light of these backgrounds (Römer, *The So-Called Deuteronomistic History*). By contrast, the intention of the author of 1–2 Chronicles in telling the same stories becomes clear when it is realized that 1–2 Chronicles was written after Israel's return from exile, in a time when Israel was attempting to formulate what Second Temple Judaism would look like (Japhet, *Ideology*).

Chronological Challenges

Biblical chronology is as challenging as it is important, due to a number of factors:

(1) *The lack of a standardized chronological system in Scripture.* Modern interpreters are accustomed to the Gregorian calendar, which allows all dates to be given in relation to the same fixed point, the year that was presumed in the sixth century to be the date that Christ was born (most scholars now assume that the original calculation was off by a few years and that Jesus was born in 6 or 5 BC). So we speak of the destruction of the temple as occurring in 587 BC, whereas the Bible dates the destruction of the temple to "the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar" (2 Kgs 25:8), a date that is helpful only if we know when King Nebuchadnezzar's reign began.

(2) *Variations in reckoning years.* Different biblical texts reckon years in different ways. Some texts use the Egyptian accession-year system, in which the first year of a king is the year in which he accedes to the throne, while others use the Mesopotamian non-accession-year system, in which the first year of a king is the first full calendrical year after his accession. Certain kings also co-reigned with their fathers, further complicating this dating system. Furthermore, there are varying ideas of the length of a year within the history of Israel, and it is still not entirely known at what point and in what places Israel adopted different views.

(3) *Lack of comparative data.* Many biblical accounts fail to name contemporary non-Israelite kings in a way that they could be identified with kings known from non-biblical sources, making chronological precision difficult.

(4) *Textual variants.* There are often discrepancies in chronological data between the Masoretic text, the Septuagint, the Samaritan Pentateuch, and other manuscripts. Sometimes there are even discrepancies between two passages within the Masoretic text itself.

(5) *Imprecise numbering.* Sometimes the significance of numbers is not chronographic. For example, the book of Judges gives lengths of the earlier judges of forty (Othniel, Deborah, Gideon) or eighty years (Ehud). Each of these is preceded by a length of time of oppression. Are these dates exact, or are they estimates because the author is using a source that did not include this data? None of the later judges have such high and round numbers for their lengths, and only two have a number of years of oppression before them (Jephthah and Samson), where the author is likely combining material from different sources. This all suggests that precise chronology is not always within the intention of the biblical authors.

(6) *Gaps in genealogies.* Genealogies are characterized by fluidity in the ancient world and will often not indicate the presence of gaps in the genealogical account (Wilson, *Genealogy and History*). Therefore, while some use the numbers in the genealogies in Gen 5 and 11 to calculate the age of the earth (e.g., Jones, *Chronology*), most Old Testament scholars caution

against this (e.g., Kitchen, *Reliability*, 439-447). Freeman argues that the text of Genesis presupposes that there are no gaps in the Gen 5 and 11 genealogies (“A New Look,” 259–286), but Merrill notes that such an approach produces an age of the earth of about 6000 years, which is problematic on both archaeological and historical evidence, and which creates internal tensions, such as having God call Abram from paganism while Shem is still alive (Merrill, “Chronology,” 119–120). Most of the critical commentaries on Genesis suppose that the numbers are symbolic (Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis*, 111-112) and/or that gaps are likely (e.g., Hamilton, *Genesis*, 254), making the genealogies less valuable for this kind of chronological work.

Conclusion

Biblical chronology is important for identifying the historical context of biblical texts, for reconstructing the history of the people of God, and for defending the historicity of biblical accounts. Nevertheless, as one pursues biblical chronology one must remember that there are many challenges that prevent the reader from doing what a modern might consider straightforward chronological work, including (1) lack of a standard chronological system; (2) variations in reckoning years; (3) lack of comparative data; (4) textual variants; (5) imprecise numbering; and (6) gaps in genealogies.

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