

Notes on Biblical Dates

About Biblical Dates

The Bible, we believe, is God's Word. As such, we believe, it must have been without error in its original manuscripts not only when it spoke of spiritual issues, but also in matters of history and science.

Having said this, however, we immediately come upon a problem. While the *Bible itself* may, as we believe, be without error in its original manuscripts, 1) we no longer possess those manuscripts, and, 2) more importantly, we are not God; therefore, we do not have an automatic understanding of *what those manuscripts* really meant—what they were *intended to communicate*.

Anyone who has engaged in any type of serious translation work—especially a translation between widely divergent cultures—can understand the difficulties of the task. In case you are not aware of the kinds of difficulties cultural differences may create, let me illustrate.

A Bible translator, working with a tribal group in southeast Asia, had come to Luke 13:32 where Jesus is said to have referred to Herod as a "fox." The translator, as all good translators do, would regularly read his work to a group of informants to see if they understood his translation to be conveying what he thought the original text meant.

As he read his translation of Luke 13:32, the men who were listening burst forth with laughter. And not just a little laughter. Some of the men were holding their bellies as they rolled around on the ground.

"'Herod, that fox' is a funny, turn of phrase," the Bible translator said to himself, "but it is not *that* funny! I wonder why these men are laughing so hard?"—So he asked them: "Why are you laughing so hard?"

One of the men was able to control himself long enough to choke out a reply: "If a man is a 'fox,'" he said, "it means"—and here the informant spoke in a high falsetto—"he speaks with a high voice." And the implications of a man speaking with a high voice? Why, he is *effeminate!*

"No! No!" the missionary protested. "Jesus didn't mean *that!* He was saying Herod was *sly, crafty, deceitful.*"

"Oh!" the men replied. "Well, in that case, then, you need to say 'that *mountain lion!*' Herod was a *mountain lion.*"

Ah. Exactly. Just so. . . . Or not? For our purposes here, we will try to sidestep the theological and practical difficulties that the informants' reply raised (would it be a sin to use the linguistically-equivalent word for *mountain lion* in place of *fox*? Would it be better to translate *fox* in more literal terms: "that sly and crafty man"?).

My point is simply this. People around the world often use linguistically identical words to achieve very different purposes. Clearly, Herod was neither a mountain lion *nor* a fox. But in one culture he could be *characterized* as the one animal, and in the other culture he could be characterized as the other. Was Jesus *lying* when he referred to Herod as "that fox"? Was he seeking to *mislead* those of us who are alive today by using this figure of speech? My conviction: no, on both counts.

But similar problems in translation and interpretation occur in *many areas* that we, in our culture, think ought to be *crystal clear* and *beyond misunderstanding*.

Let us return to the issue at hand: the chronology—or *time line*—of events in the Old Testament.

R.K. Harrison notes in his *Introduction to the Old Testament*,

In any attempt to establish a sequence of Old Testament chronology it must always be remembered that the Bible was not designed primarily as a textbook of history or culture; hence, it can hardly be expected to present a carefully formulated and internally consistent pattern of chronological sequences as understood by the occidental [i.e., *western*] mind. In some of the earlier sources from Mesopotamia it is apparent that dates, numbers, and the general computation of time follow certain symbolic configurations whose ratio and overall significance are evidently quite clear to the ancient writers employing them, but whose meaning is completely unknown to the modern western mind. There are still other occasions when the Biblical writers employed dates and numbers as a means of illustrating profound spiritual concepts.¹

We, in our western, American English way of looking at things, may want to think that Harrison is simply trying to "hide" what his "real" intention is (which is to say that the Bible can't be trusted). But that is not what he is saying at all! What he is saying is that *the same words* in different languages *really* and *legitimately* may have *completely different meanings*. No one is "lying." No one need charge the other with "misleading." The fact is, we really do use both literal and figurative forms of speech in different ways. Herod may be a figurative *fox* in one language and *mountain lion* in another. A baby that has just passed through the birth canal may be zero years old (literally speaking) in one culture and a full *year* old (literally speaking) in another (go to China and you'll discover the truth of that statement).

¹Roland Kenneth Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), p. 152.

My purpose in saying these things is not to suggest that “everything is relative.” I am merely attempting to illustrate that translation and interpretation is *not* a “simple” or “mechanically accurate” function. It takes real skill, and knowledge, and insight, and *research*. And *sometimes we just don’t know*.

As Harrison expresses it concerning biblical dates and times:

It would seem evident that while the numbers assigned to the ages of the patriarchs in Genesis had real meaning for those who were responsible for their preservation in the first instance, they cannot be employed in a purely literal sense as a means of computing the length of the various generations mentioned in the text.²

The upshot? We cannot simply decide to trust a man’s *interpretation* of Scripture (say, Archbishop Ussher’s calculations) and say, “He is right, and whoever questions his conclusions is a scoffer and an infidel!”

Tas Walker, a Young-Earth creationist who is on staff with Answers in Genesis of Australia, prefers Ussher’s chronology. He points out that “Biblical chronologies developed by other workers following the same line [as Ussher] agree with Ussher to within 50 years.” Despite this agreement, however, “Larger differences exist between the various biblical source texts.”³

Thus, for example, while Ussher, using the Massoretic text, urges that Adam was created on Sunday, 24 October 4004 BC, if one uses other biblical manuscripts but the same method of calculation that Ussher did, one comes up with the following dates for creation and Noah’s Flood:

Manuscript Source	Date of Creation	Date of the Flood
Massoretic	4004 BC	2348 BC
Samaritan	4305 BC	2998 BC
LXX Vatican	5470 BC	3228 BC
LXX Alexandrian	5390 BC	3128 BC
Josephus	5323 BC	3058 BC

Other researchers, using textual clues alone, come up with much older dates than those suggested by Ussher.

Enter the Old-Earth creationists. These people suggest that, while there is no question that God created the heavens and the earth, and while there is no question the Scriptures are trustworthy, it is not at all clear that we should trust our interpretation of the biblical text *without* attention to scientific data.

They suggest that we need to adjust our interpretation of the age of the Earth and the times of Adam and Noah, etc. not by mere thousands of years, but by at least tens of thousands and possibly hundreds of thousands of years (not to mention millions and billions of years when it comes to the first few “days” [Hebrew: *yomim*] of creation).

In support of their “scientific” view, they point out that we no longer read verses like Joshua 10:12 the way Martin Luther did.⁴ Nor do we read passages like Daniel 4:10-11, and Matthew 4:8 the way members of the Flat Earth Society do. And despite the apparently “clear” testimony of verses like 1 Chronicles 16:30, Psalm 93:1, and Psalm 96:10, most modern Christians are unwilling to be bound by the idea that the Earth is at the immovable center of the universe with all the stars and planets revolving around it on a solid (metal?) vault (the “obvious” reading of Job 37:18, Isaiah 45:12, and 48:13, etc.).

Young-Earth creationists say that their Old-Earth brethren are “compromisers.”

Anti-Christian skeptics point out that, by the standards to which they wish to hold their Old-Earth brethren, most Young-Earthers themselves are “compromisers.” Robert J. Schadewald calls the mainstream Young-Earth creationists “liberal creationists” in comparison to their “moderate” geocentrist and “conservative” flat-earth brethren:

[S]cientific creationism, geocentrism, and flat-earthism are respectively the liberal, moderate and conservative branches of a tree that has often been called Bible-Science. The intense hostility expressed by the scientific creationists towards the flat-earthers, does not extend to the geocentrists, who hover on the edge of respectability among scientific creationists. Indeed, though the Bible is, from Genesis to Revelation, a flat-earth book, the geocentrists have combined forces with liberal creationists to cast the flat-earthers into outer darkness.⁵

Schadewald demonstrates that all three groups “agree on the usefulness of the Bible as a scientific text, the weakness of mere theories, the duplicity of conventional scientists, and the impossibility of reconciling conventional science with the Bible.” But when it comes to “sticking to

⁴ “This fool Copernicus wishes to reverse the entire science of astronomy [by claiming that the Earth spins on its axis and that the Earth revolves around the Sun]; but sacred Scripture tells us that Joshua commanded the sun to stand still and not the earth,” he wrote. — Cited by A.D. White in his *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom*, 1896, republished Appleton, New York & London 1932, vol. I, pg. 126; quoted and referenced in Alan Hayward, *Creation and Evolution* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1985; Sonlight item #RR55), pg. 71.

⁵ Robert J. Schadewald, “Scientific Creationism, Geocentricity, and the Flat Earth,” *Skeptical Inquirer*, Winter 1981-1982. Found at <http://www.lhup.edu/~dsimanek/crea-fe.htm>.

² Ibid.

³ <http://student.uq.edu.au/~s938345/chronol.html>

the text," the flat-earthers have it all over their more "liberal" brethren who defend a Young-Earth creationist stance but reject flat-earthism and a geocentric universe.

Old-Earth creationists ask their "liberal" Young-Earth creationist brethren, "On what grounds are you willing to reject the 'obvious' meaning of the Scripture passages that 'teach' geo-centrism and flat-earthism? If it is modern science that has led you to reject a literal interpretation of these portions of Scripture, why are you unwilling to permit the same science to lead you to consider alternative (older earth) interpretations of Genesis 1-11?"—The Old-Earth creationists believe their Young-Earth creationist brethren who are not also geo-centrists and flat-earthers are being somewhat hypocritical in the way they interpret the Bible.

And so the arguments continue.

But why do I mention these things?

I mention them not to confuse you, but to point out that, 1) despite the claims of many scholars that the Bible is "clear" about the times and dates that various things occurred, the evidence—even the *Scriptural* evidence *apart from* any science—is not without difficulty of interpretation. 2) No matter what date I suggest for Adam or Noah—or even Moses or David—I know I will be skewered by *some* unhappy person who "knows" I am wrong. And, 3) the reason we include "ca." (*circa*—"about") in front of most dates, and sometimes include even *different* dates, is *not* because we question the trustworthiness of Scripture, but, rather, because we question our *interpretation* of Scripture and of the other sources of information that might help us better *understand* the Scriptures at this time.

Therefore, I would like to suggest a few things.

First, with respect to Adam and Eve, let us say that they came on the scene *at least* 4,000 years before Christ. That is the absolute, rock-bottom *minimum* anyone can possibly claim. The *probable* date is far earlier. Noah's Flood: it must have occurred *at least* 2,340 years before Christ. Again, this is an absolute *minimum* date. Almost assuredly, it was a long time before this.⁶

If you prefer a specific date, I will leave it in your hands to supply it.

If it were up to me to explain these earliest dates to my children, I would say, simply, "We really don't know." And if my child pressed me, I would gladly tell him or her what I happen to believe. If I were you and I believed that the Earth is quite young, then I would say so: "I really can't be sure, but I *believe* the Earth is about ___-thousand years

old." And if I were oriented to an older interpretation, then I would say much the same thing: "I really can't be sure. No one knows for sure. But, based on the evidence that I'm aware of, I think it is about _____ years old."

You probably ought not to burden your elementary-age children with the finer difficulties and complexities of interpreting data and weighing the evidence for various interpretations of ancient history. With respect to some of the later figures of Old Testament history, we are able to make informed guesses that bring us much closer to the real date: often within a decade or two, and, at worst, within one or two *centuries* (the date of the Exodus is the most contentious). But even here, our point is that the dates we mention are informed *guesses*. They are *not* "gospel."⁷

Moses

As with other ancient events and personages, the evidence is not altogether clear concerning Moses' dates.

I could bore you with the arguments and counter-arguments on the two most popular opinions held by conservative Christian scholars, but let me summarize the two positions and state just the one or two key pieces of evidence that speak most forcefully for each of the two views.

If there is one item that narrows our focus to two time periods, it is this: according to Acts 7:29-30, Moses stayed in the wilderness of Midian for 40 years, until the pharaoh had died. Only two pharaohs lived longer than 40 years: Thutmose III (ca. 1504-1450 BC) and Ramses II (ca. 1290-1224 BC).

The first perspective places Moses in the 15th century BC, and the Exodus at 1446 BC. The primary pieces of evidence for this view: 1 Kings 6:1 says there were 480 years between the Exodus and Solomon's dedication of the Temple. Since the Temple was dedicated in 966 BC, this places the Exodus at 1446 BC. Moreover, in Judges 11:26, Jephthah indicates Israel has occupied its territory for 300 years. Since he lived about 1100 BC, this would place the conquest at around 1400 BC.

The second perspective places Moses and the Exodus in the 13th century BC, during the reign of Ramses II (who lived ca. 1290-1224 BC). The Israelites were said to have been building the city of Ramses (Exodus 1:11). But perhaps most convincing: the plagues God rained down upon Egypt were of such a nature as to break the back of the nation. Egypt went into irreversible decline about the time of Ramses II.

Conservative biblical scholars seem to prefer the earlier rather than the later date. ■

⁶ For further discussion of this topic, please see the article "Young-Earth Creationism, Old-Earth Creationism and Biblical History: When Did it All Occur?" in any of our science manuals.

⁷ www.christiananswers.net/archaeology is a wonderful website for biblical dates, events, and the latest on archeological findings.