

A Chronological Revolution

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Centuries of Darkness, by Peter James (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993) xxii, 434 pages, bibliography, index.

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Many readers know of the revision of ancient chronology by Donovan Courville (*The Exodus Problem and its Ramifications*) in which he brings events in the ancient world into better fit with the Bible by eliminating a spurious period of Egyptian history. The establishment, both Evangelical and pagan, disregarded Courville's work. Now a monumental study by a team of establishment scholars proposes a chronology similar to Courville's. First published in 1991 in the UK by Jonathan Cape, Ltd., it has been issued in America by Rutgers University Press and featured as an "Editor's Choice" by the Ancient and Medieval History Book Club.

The author, Peter James (now doing postgraduate research at University College, London), writes on behalf of a team of experts including I.J. Thorpe, Nikos Kokkinos, Robert Morkot and John Frankish. They show that archaeological and chronological conundrums across the Mediterranean and Europe are attributable to cross-dating from the crucial documentary chronologies of Assyria and, especially, Egypt. The problems are mainly of two types: 1) contradictions between the chronological sequences of two regions which can be cross-dated by artifacts, and 2) a Dark Age of about 250 years abruptly and inexplicably interrupting what otherwise appears to be a continuous cultural development.

Why It Matters

The chronological problem is significant in Biblical studies due to a very bad fit between the events of the Exodus and Conquest, as well as the material conditions of the reign of Solomon, and the archaeological record when it is organized according to the standard chronology. Some Evangelical scholars adhere to the Bible's chronology while admitting that they cannot account for the archaeological difficulties, especially the lack of large scale destruction at the time of the Conquest. More frequently, the Exodus has been dated later to conform to the chronological dicta of the priests of Egypt in preference to the teaching of the Bible. Even the nature of the Conquest under Joshua had to be recast as a gradual infiltration by scattered tribes, greatly exaggerated and compressed in the Biblical

account. One cannot, it is said, deny the plain facts. Such teachings have been used by the liberals in the Christian Reformed Church, for example, to undermine the faith of the members, and soften them for neo-orthodox, feminist, and increasingly more open liberal and New Age teaching. The pattern is similar in other denominations.

Even those Evangelical scholars who accept the Biblical account generally treat the Exodus and Conquest as a minor matter in world affairs, except to the eyes of faith. It is as though the dramatic events central to Israel's history were quietly done in a corner with no impact on the world, much like the Evangelicals' own religion. And yet the crippling plagues on Egypt, the destruction of its king and army, the wars against the Amalekites, the mass movement of an entire nation, and the Conquest of the major Canaanite city-states must have had a great impact in their day. Such an impact cannot be discerned in the texts and archeology fitting the standard chronology. Thus Evangelical scholars habitually minimize their account of the Exodus in order that the discrepancies might not be outrageously blatant.

While the authors frankly reject Biblical authority—taking swipes at that “devout breed of archaeologist happy to dig with a trowel in one hand and a Bible in the other”—they also emphasize that the Bible is frequently subjected to unreasonable and hostile criticism from “those whose skepticism can be as blind as faith itself”. They add: “The dates the Old Testament gives, even those for historical periods which are potentially useful to archeology, have been altered, mangled or rejected in an arbitrary fashion. It seems that the Bible has suffered from this kind of hypercritical treatment simply because it is the Bible. A similar approach would never have been taken with the sacred literature of other ancient Near Eastern societies.” (p. 162)

The authors consider it a merit of their chronological revision that it treats the Bible as a factual historical record within the outline of the chronology provided by the Bible itself. For example, Jericho existed and was destroyed at the right time. Whether this was caused by an earthquake, as the authors prefer to believe, or a blast by the priests' trumpets, does not disturb the chronological reconstruction.

Mediterranean Mysteries

The first chapter is an introduction to the history of speculation and scholarship on ancient chronology. The following chapters take up particular regions whose well developed sequence of archaeological remains provides a relative regional chronology, but with few or no points that can be fixed to absolute dates. One layer of building or a pottery style will be replaced by another with perhaps technical or artistic developments, or evidence of economic change, but without a direct indication of the number of years that have passed, other than the limits of plausible explanation. Such assessments of the rate and extent of change that is possible in a particular situation are subjective, but not worthless. Again and again we find archaeologists stretching the data to the limit, and still not able to close the gap between different periods.

The dates of the Western Mediterranean depend on the East, because the West lacks literary documents from early times. The dates, then, are established by trade goods, or influences from the Eastern Mediterranean world. Thus dated, the archeology shows two eras of prosperity: the 13th-12th centuries BC and the time following the 8th century. Lands north of the Alps, Italy, Sicily, the Aeolian islands, Malta, Sardinia, and Spain all have times of archaeological “silence” or miss-matches between populations and remains (Sicily has cemeteries with no related settlements), and sudden appearances or disappearances of very active populations.

Eastern Mediterranean accounts of trade or settlement by Greeks and Phoenicians also seem to be off by centuries from the archaeological remains. When periods are re-dated to the limits of plausibility to close one time gap, another gap and new inconsistencies appear somewhere else. These problems are solved, the authors insist, by dating the Late Bronze age in the Western Mediterranean several centuries later. The problem, though, is that the Western Mediterranean can be cross dated with Mycenaean chronology, and it too would have to be changed.

Troy has always been a magnet for archaeologists and chronological investigators. Even in ancient times numerous attempts were made, from many genealogies and chronologies then available, to date the destruction of Troy. Trojan archeology has also been the graveyard of theories as identifications of various levels, with the Homeric account have been proclaimed and then overturned. Only this year there was an announcement of extensive new discoveries at the site, purportedly discrediting previous theories.

Another problem is that a claimed 2000 years of occupation ended abruptly in the 12th-century BC, then resumed abruptly around 700 BC, yet showing signs of continuity. For example, the “same distinctive, lustrous gray ware” was used. There were also shards of 8th century geometric pottery in both the pre-Dark Age Troy VIIB and post-gap Troy VIII, and a house was found which seem to have been continuously occupied from VIIB in VIII. This is representative of the confusion that exists at other sites in Anatolia and the Balkans as well. There is evidence which creates great pressure to date remains in the Iron Age, and other evidence relegating these strata to the Bronze Age.

The Link: Greece

It is the presence in the western and northern Mediterranean of pottery from the Greek world that provides the late and early dates toward which the evidence strains. Once again the local evidence is at odds with the standard Mycenaean and Archaic Greek chronologies. Complicating the problem is the very limited radio-carbon dating available.

In Greece the story is repeated:

Yet it is conspicuous that the archeology and chronology of Greece itself presents severe difficulties for the same time-span as the dependent European

areas, roughly between 1200 and 700 BC. The concept of a Dark Age which is supposed to have descended on Greece after the end of the Late Bronze has crystallized into a picture which is now highly developed and detailed. Nevertheless, the current scheme for the history of this period still seems to fall short of adequate explanations for the archaeological evidence. Instead, the Greek Dark Age is notorious for the bitter controversies initiated in the 1880s, involving the repeated shuffling of artifacts and even buildings and strata across the span of this period. (p. 69)

Yet when Greek civilization revived after this long hiatus it inexplicably displayed features of continuity. The manufacture of luxury goods, for example of ivory carvings showing the same artistic tradition, spans the Dark Age. The same is true of pottery paintings. Archaeologists have to dream up scenarios in which artisans fled to some safe, remote sanctuary to carry on the tradition, from which they returned to their homeland after the passage of centuries.

Another puzzle is writing. Mycenaean (that is pre-Dark Age) Greeks used the Linear B syllabic script. After the Dark Age they wrote with an alphabet. Supposedly with the revival of civilization came the need for extensive writing and the borrowing of the Phoenician alphabet. Recently it has become clear, however, that the Greek alphabet did not develop from the Phoenician but from pre-Dark Age "Proto-Canaanite" of the 11th century BC, but the Greeks don't seem to have used it (nothing datable survives) until the 8th century!

The Hittites

The Hittites are another striking problem. A mighty empire with outposts on the Aegean and Black seas and frontiers in Mesopotamia carried on extensive diplomatic correspondence with the other great powers of the day. They even warred with the Egyptians and raided as far as Babylon, sacking the city. Toward the end of the Late Bronze Age, however, at the familiar date of the onset of the Dark Ages, the empire was overrun by somebody (the Sea Peoples are conveniently blamed, as no one knows who they were or where they came from) and its cities destroyed. Yet following the Dark Ages there is a Hittite revival in northern Mesopotamia, in the former Hittite provinces. How did this people suddenly revive culturally and politically after a 200 to 300 year gap, and away from their homeland?

Secondly, following the Dark Age, the old Hittite cities are found occupied by Phrygians from the Balkans, until they were overcome by the Cimmerians a century later. But the Phrygian capital Gordion, famous for its Gordian knot (left by Gordius, father of Midas of the golden touch), shows a period of mixed occupation of both Hittite and Phrygian cultures. This introduces post-Dark age pottery into a pre-Dark age strata. In short, there is no gap. This has led to the suggestion that some Hittite cities were not destroyed but lingered on another two or three centuries.

In Cyprus the use of Egyptian dates for pottery creates a conflict between a chronological sequence which works for Cyprus and one which works for Palestine, which can be cross-dated by means of trade goods used in both areas. Naturally the experts in each field hold that those specializing in the other culture are wrong.

Biblical Archeology

The most interesting chapter, of course, is “Biblical archeology Without Egypt”. The problem with Palestinian archeology is that, despite extensive remains, and distinguishable phases, there is very little to pinpoint correlations between its material culture and narratives in the Bible and other documents. According to the standard chronology, the Conquest coincides with the beginning of the Iron Age, and Iron Age II marks the empire of David and Solomon. Joshua, then, is supposed to have destroyed a Late Bronze Age culture (LB I according to the Biblical early date, and LB IIB according to the liberal late Exodus date). Yet such a large scale destruction is not attested to, even at so well studied a site as Jericho.

In the last several years even pagan scholarship has sought a way to locate the Conquest at a time more in keeping with the evidence, with some proposing a Conquest in 2000 BC or even earlier. More plausibly the destruction of the Middle Bronze Canaanite cities is identified as the work of Joshua. This is standardly attributed to an Egyptian invasion in 1550 BC, but that invasion has recently been debunked. With a revision of the Egyptian chronology, Palestinian chronology can be rethought as well, and the authors think the Biblical dates of the Conquest and the end of the Middle Bronze can fit together.

This lack of correlation between archeology and history in the standard dating continues through Biblical history, with the period of the Captivity and exile, especially, causing problems.

At that time richer evidence, such as literary remains and royal seals, is available. An example is the Lachish Letters from Hoshaiiah to his superior Yaosh. These “ostraca” are fragments of pottery used where we would use stationary or note paper. (Our word “ostracism” comes from the Athenian custom of voters scribbling on ostraca to banish officials they disliked.) They were conventionally dated to the time of Jeremiah, and fanciful readings were invented (based on the illegible characters) referring to the retrieval of the prophet Uriah from Egypt. (See Jer. 26:22-23.)

The authors date the letters to the time of Nehemiah. Consider the conclusion of Letter III:

As for the letter of Tobiah servant of the king, which came to Shallum son of Jaddua through the prophet, saying, “Beware!”, thy servant hath sent it to my lord.

This, they say, is the Tobiah of Nehemiah 6. This governor of Ammon tried to disrupt Nehemiah's effort and sent threatening letters and employed prophets to this purpose (e.g. Shemaiah, Neh. 6:10). Further, Nehemiah lists a Hoshaiiah as one of the princes of Judah on his side. (Neh. 12:31-32).

But if level II, where this was found, was post-exilic, it allows them to adjust the date for Lachish III which underlay it. In this way they solve even further problems. Through a succession of such studies they work their way back to the time of Solomon.

Using dates imposed by Egyptian chronology, Solomon is relegated to the unpromising Iron Age (I) IIA. The most exciting thing that archaeologists can turn up here are the so-called Solomonic gates at various cities listed in the Bible. The same sort of gates feature in other cities of the time, as in Philistia, which Solomon did not rebuild. In general it was an era of villages, not cities, and poverty both material and artistic. Furthermore, it is the one time without mining at the only significant ore deposits in Palestine. The same decline is evidenced in Phoenicia, instead of the "great Hiramian age" the Bible leads us to expect. The authors place I IIA well into the divided monarchy.

Lands of the Nile

Circling to Egypt's south border the authors uncover the most striking problem with the standard chronology. The Nubian province was ruled by governors subordinate to the Egyptian Pharaohs during the Late Bronze Age (LBA) - in Egypt, the New Kingdom. Then, during the latter part of the LBA the population disappeared. As one writer put it:

Nubia vanished entirely from history. Its erstwhile Egyptian conquerors had returned to their native soil, and the indigenous population had retreated somewhere into the wilderness of Upper Nubia, when they were to emerge with a vengeance three centuries later. (p. 207)

This emergence from limbo took the form of an independent Nubian kingdom in the 9th century BC which rapidly grew in power, conquered Egypt in the 8th century, and ruled it as the 25th dynasty (the "broken reed" of Isaiah 36:6) until its power was destroyed around 664 BC by an Assyrian invasion. (See Isaiah 18.)

The "solution to the enigmas of the Dark Age lies in drastically reducing the date for the end of the Late Bronze Age. Abundant archaeological evidence makes it certain that the transition from the Late Bronze to Early Iron Age in the Eastern Mediterranean was contemporary with the late 19th and early 20th Dynasties of Egypt." (p. 220) This means that the end of the New Kingdom must have been more recent than the standard chronology allows, and the following Third Intermediate Period (TIP) shorter. The problem is not a lack of evidence for dating this period but "one of a huge quantity of data which needs to be ordered into a coherent historical picture." (p. 222).

The authors attack a fundamental benchmark of Egyptian chronology, the Sothic calendar. The Egyptians considered New Year's Day to begin with the flooding of the Nile. This ideally was when the star Sirius (Sothis) was visible on the eastern horizon just before sunrise. As they are supposed never to have introduced a leap year, or adjusted the calendar, the Sothic date went out of phase with the seasons at the rate of one day every four years, returning to synchronization after 1460 years. Thus, by comparing the Sothic day to New Year's Day in Egyptian records, historians can tell where the date is in the 1460 year Sothic cycle. Of course if the calendar was ever re-calibrated prior to the endpoint where it can be cross-dated with foreign records, then the whole system fails as a source of absolute dates.

Unfortunately a proper modern astronomical calculation of the cycle has still not been done. Further, scholars have questioned the Sothic calendar itself. Could not the Egyptians have used their lunar calendar to re-calibrate the Sothic calendar? In Ptolemaic times, there were several reforms.

In connection with Mesopotamian chronology the authors discuss Robert Newton's *The Crime of Claudius Ptolemy*, in which he charges that, in creating his chronology, Ptolemy fudged and faked the astronomical data he claimed to find in Babylonian sources. Enough Babylonian sources survive, they say, to vindicate Ptolemy. The authors, however, do not cite Newton's other books, e.g. *Ancient Astronomical Observations* and the *Accelerations of the Earth and Moon*, or mention Newton's work on planetary accelerations. In an appendix, "The 'Venus Tablets' of Ammizaduga and the Dating of the 1st Dynasty of Babylon", they cite suggestions that the orbit of Venus was modified by a large body passing through the solar system. They also cite studies suggesting that "there were sizeable cometary bodies in the Solar System during Bronze Age times which have since disintegrated." (p. 337) This suggestion, perhaps even more plausible on creationist assumptions, may mean that ancient observations and their associations in pagan religion do not always refer to the celestial bodies to which we attribute them. The standard view has the 20th through 22nd Dynasties ruling consecutively, with an overlap of the 23rd with the later part of the 22nd, as central government began to break down in the TIP, and a slight overlap of the final TIP 25th Dynasty with the 26th which began the Late Period. The authors suggest instead that the overlapping began already between the later 20th and the early 21st, that the 22nd and 23rd ruled concurrently, followed by the 26th. The 25th was contemporary with the later 22nd and 23rd, running slightly into the 26th as in the standard chronology. The entire 24th Dynasty lasted thirteen years, at most.

There are two chapters on Mesopotamian archeology and king lists, but the evidence here is not as compelling as the other chapters, and the complexity resists summary.

Conclusion

The book is clearly written, and heavily illustrated with charts, regional maps, and well rendered line drawing of archaeological artifacts and site maps. An appendix in

“Dendrochronology [tree rings] and Radiocarbon Dating” is very informative.

The text runs through p. 344, notes 345-394, bibliography 395-426, and index 427-434. Nowhere in any of these is there a mention of Donovan Courville. The end papers are maps tracing the dependencies of cross-dating in 1200 BC and 700 BC.

Anyone with a serious interest in pre-classical ancient history needs to read this book. The benefits are manifold. The re-dating and re-synchronization of events in various nations is of great significance in itself, especially in Biblical studies. Further, there is insight to be gained from the view of the nature of historical evidence, how it is evaluated and how inferences are made from it to other areas. Many history books provide some idea of this but never as much as in this book where fundamental assumptions are being questioned.

It will be very interesting to follow the debate that this book will provoke.¹ The response in the seminaries, once the professors realize that a post-doc student has done what in this whole century they have failed even to attempt, should be most instructive about the mentality and priorities that now prevail there. There is also a great opportunity to extend the revision backward, examining the basis of the chronology of the patriarchal period, and even earlier. Will the chance be seized or squandered?

¹ In the years since this review was written more notable books have appeared, e.g. David M. Rohl's *A Test of Time* series, *Legend: The Genesis of Civilization* (London: Century, 1998), *A Test of Time: The Bible from Myth to History* (London: Century, 1995), American edition: *Pharaohs and Kings: A Biblical Quest* (New York: Crown); and *The Lost Testament* (London: Century, 2002), reprinted as *From Eden to Exile: The Epic History of the People of the Bible* (London, Sydney, Auckland, Parkton SA). A more aggressive revision is found in Roger Henry, *Synchronized Chronology: Rethinking Middle East Antiquity* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2003). There are also discussion groups on Yahoo groups devoted to the New Chronology.