

Knowing God in the Word

That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death. Philippians 3:10.

Contradictions in Scripture: Time Reckoning Methods Part 3

The way time is reckoned in the Scriptures can sometimes be confusing and even seem contradictory. Time intervals do not seem to fit, dates do not add up, and altogether it can seem confusing. Do the Scriptures contradict when it comes to time? How can we explain these seeming “contradictions in Scripture”?

In our first message, we examined the idea of inclusive and exclusive time reckoning, whereby one can either include parts of days as full days (inclusive reckoning), or one can exclude parts of days as not being days (exclusive reckoning). We also examined the reigns of kings, and saw that sometimes, from comparing the kings of Israel to the kings of Judah, that we can see that there were gaps between or overlaps between kings, and considered the causes of these things. In our last message, we considered whether Christ was in the grave “three days and three nights” or whether He rose “on the third day.” We discovered that the “third day” was a figure of speech meaning when death was complete, and the Lord truly was a full three twenty-four hour days in the tomb. In this message, we will consider how the Hebrews marked time regarding their hours and days, and then consider the puzzle of Anno Dei versus Anno Mundi time.

Hebrew Time Versus Gentile Time

Another difficulty with time reckoning that can seem contradictory to people, but really stems more from a misunderstanding than a Biblical contradiction, stems from the way Hebrews considered time versus how we consider it. Their view of time and the way they tracked it differed in several ways from our way of thinking and tracking.

First of all, a new Hebrew day began at sunset. Of course, we would say, “That is when night begins,” but I am talking about a day in the 24-hour day sense. We start our days at midnight, count 12 hours to midday, and then 12 hours again to midnight. When you think about it, there is nothing logical or sensible about this. It is just the way we do it. The Hebrews, on the other hand, started their days in the evening at sunset. Then, they counted 12 hours of night, and after that 12 hours of day, for a full 24-hour day.

This can get confusing when we consider things such as the Sabbath day. We think of the Sabbath (at least for the Jews, ignoring the “Christian Sabbath,”) as being Saturday. Yet really, with their way of reckoning days, the Sabbath begins at sunset on Friday night, and is over at sunset on Saturday night. We might become confused if we do not realize this.

In the New Testament also, we have to keep this in mind so we can properly understand what the Bible means when it makes statements like we find in Matthew 27:45.

45. Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour.

If we would think of this according to our clocks, we might assume it was dark from six in the morning to nine in the morning. Yet this would not be right. The sixth hour was around noon, and

the ninth hour around 3:00PM. If we don't remember the time reckoning difference, we will get confused.

Another difference is in their months. Of course, they do not follow the same months as we do, and their months have different names and different starting points. Their years too begin at a very different time than January 1. But perhaps the most significant difference is that they have actual, lunar months. In other words, their months are based on the cycles of the moon. Of course, ours used to be as well, which is why they are called "months" (think "moonths.") Yet the Hebrew months are based on the moon. Since a lunar month is around 30 days, this means a Hebrew year is about 360 days, not 365, as our years are. Of course, this means their calendar would slowly slip forward, until the spring would be in the fall and the fall in the spring and so forth. To avoid this, they would have what we could call a "leap-month," when they would add an extra, 13th month every few years. The technical term for this is an "intercalary month."

The result of this intercalary month is that their dates to our dates vary widely. For example, if one were to try to figure out the date for the Passover, it would not be simple. Even though on their calendar it is always on Nisan 15th, since their years are 360 days with an intercalary month every few years, when Nisan 15th falls on our calendar is a very complicated question. One could say, "Nisan is approximately April, so Nisan 15th is April 15th." Yet that would not at all be accurate. Because of intercalary months, Nisan 15th might fall anywhere from late March to late April. There is no way to set it on a single date on our calendar. Every date in the Hebrew year, then, will vary widely compared to our calendar.

Another sometimes confusing difference can be in when they start their year. We know that according to the Bible, the Passover is in the first month of the year. This month was made the first month by the Lord when He created His religious calendar. However, though the Jews still recognize this religious calendar, their secular calendar does not follow it. The Jewish New Year takes place in what the religious calendar would call the seventh month, not the first. Why this difference exists is hard to say, though some have claimed that Nisan was always the seventh month, and that God changed it only for the purposes of His religious calendar. The secular calendar might therefore be the same as it always was long before God proclaimed that in His sight, Nisan was always going to be the first month.

A final difference in how the Hebrews looked at time versus how we do is more purely philosophical. We always view time with the idea that the past is behind us and the future is in front of us. Therefore we have phrases like "facing the future" or "putting the past behind you." Yet the Hebrews did not think about this way. They had the opposite perspective, and looked at it that the past is in front of you, and the future is behind you.

Without any explanation, this viewpoint might almost seem insane to us, but we just need to get into a different way of thinking. You can look over the past. You can see what has just happened to you, and examine it fully. As things get further back in the past, your view of them might get more clouded, but still you can see them, especially the major events of your life, spread out in front of you and clearly in your vision. Therefore, the past is there in front of you, ready for you to see and examine. The future, however, you cannot see. It is coming up on you from behind, but you cannot actually see it until it "hits" you from behind as it arrives, and then passes you by into the past, where you can finally see it and examine it. Therefore, the future is behind you, where things cannot be seen or examined until they come up on you. When you think about it, this way of looking at things makes a lot of sense, even though it is opposite to our usual way of viewing things.

These things are not major issues to uncover great truths from passages necessarily, but are still important things to keep in mind as we read through the Bible, as they will help us have a right understanding and perspective when the Bible tells us certain things relating to time.

Anno Dei and Anno Mundi Reckoning

Another mysterious instance of time reckoning not seeming to align in different parts of Scripture is in the tally of the years of the children of Israel in the land as they are added up by Paul in the New Testament and as they are added up by the author of Kings in the Old Testament. Paul, in his address in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch, speaks of the length of time the Israelites spent in the land. First, he starts off in Acts 13:18.

18. Now for a time of about forty years He put up with their ways in the wilderness.

Paul speaks of “about” forty years as it was a round number. Two years were spent in coming out of Egypt, coming to the Mount Sinai, making the covenant, etc. The wandering after that took thirty-eight years. Thus a number of forty is achieved. Forty years passed from the exodus from Egypt to the entrance into the land.

Paul then speaks of their entrance into the land.

19. And when He had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, He distributed their land to them by allotment.

20. “After that He gave *them* judges for about four hundred and fifty years, until Samuel the prophet.

So we now have a total of 40 years in the wilderness plus 450 years in the land until Samuel, for a total of 490 years. Next, he speaks of the time of King Saul.

21. And afterward they asked for a king; so God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years.

Here we have another 40 years, for a total of 530 years from the exodus from Egypt to the end of Saul’s reign. Next, Paul speaks of the reign of David.

22. And when He had removed him, He raised up for them David as king, to whom also He gave testimony and said, ‘I have found David the *son* of Jesse, a man after My *own* heart, who will do all My will.

At this point, Paul stops giving numbers, and yet we can figure out how long David’s reign lasted after the death of Saul from I Kings 2:11.

11. The period that David reigned over Israel *was* forty years; seven years he reigned in Hebron, and in Jerusalem he reigned thirty-three years.

So if we add this forty years to the 530 years, we now have a total of 570 years. Yet let us compare this to I Kings 6:1.

1. And it came to pass in the four hundred and eightieth year after the children of Israel had come out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon’s reign over Israel, in the month of Ziv, which is the second month, that he began to build the house of the LORD.

Here, we have reference to the beginning of the building of the temple, the house of the LORD. This takes place in the fourth year of Solomon’s reign. If we use exclusive reckoning, this gives us three years to add to what we already have for a total, and we would get a total of 573 years from the exodus from Egypt until the beginning of the building of the temple. Yet that clashes with this very verse of I Kings 6:1, which says that the building of the temple began 480 years after the exodus from Egypt! Thus, using Paul’s numbers gives us a 93 year difference from the numbers we read of in I Kings! How can this be? Was Paul wrong? Or was the author of Kings wrong? Is this a contradiction in Scripture?

The answer those who believe in contradictions would give is that Paul was wrong. This would seem to be the most likely choice, considering that he was much farther removed from the events

that he was talking about than the author of Kings was. Yet Paul was a most learned Pharisee, scholarly and renowned. Is it really likely that he would make such a mistake? Then, there is the fact that there were some in his audience in Acts 13 who were (or at least became) enemies to the message Paul was proclaiming. If they had noticed such a glaring error in fact in what Paul was saying, would that not have given them an opportunity of speaking against him? They could have said that he could not possibly be a prophet, one sent with words to speak from God, since he did not even get the facts from the Word of God right. Yet we read of no such objection to his words. They seem to have accepted his numbers as accurate, even though they do not seem to match up with I Kings. Let us then look for some other explanation.

It is obvious when we consider the question above that the problem lies in the period of Joshua and the Judges. The length of the wandering in the wilderness, the years of Saul's reign, and the years of David's reign are fairly well established. Therefore, the discrepancy must lie in the period between Joshua and Samuel. The difference is a 93 year difference, so we need to look for something that would at least add up to 93 years in the books of Joshua or Judges.

The book of Judges is a book that follows a pattern that repeats itself over and over throughout. This pattern is explained in Judges 2:11-19.

11. Then the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD, and served the Baals; 12 and they forsook the LORD God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; and they followed other gods from among the gods of the people who were all around them, and they bowed down to them; and they provoked the LORD to anger. 13 They forsook the LORD and served Baal and the Ashtoreths.

The first part of the pattern is that the Israelites forsook the LORD and served the gods of the nations around them instead.

14. And the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel. So He delivered them into the hands of plunderers who despoiled them; and He sold them into the hands of their enemies all around, so that they could no longer stand before their enemies. 15. Wherever they went out, the hand of the LORD was against them for calamity, as the LORD had said, and as the LORD had sworn to them. And they were greatly distressed.

The second part of the pattern is that the LORD gave them up, selling them into the hands of their enemies, rather than acting as their God and saving them.

16. Nevertheless, the LORD raised up judges who delivered them out of the hand of those who plundered them.

Eventually, the LORD would relent and raise them up judges who would rescue them from the hand of their oppressors.

17. Yet they would not listen to their judges, but they played the harlot with other gods, and bowed down to them. They turned quickly from the way in which their fathers walked, in obeying the commandments of the LORD; they did not do so. 18. And when the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge and delivered them out of the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who oppressed them and harassed them. 19. And it came to pass, when the judge was dead, that they reverted and behaved more corruptly than their fathers, by following other gods, to serve them and bow down to them. They did not cease from their own doings nor from their stubborn way.

This shows that the pattern was repeated. The people might follow the LORD for a time under the rule of His judge, yet eventually they would turn from the LORD even in the lifetime of the judge, and when the judge was dead they would return to their same, wicked actions. Then the LORD's anger would be aroused, and the pattern would repeat.

Now how many times did this pattern happen? How many times did the LORD sell them into the hands of their enemies? The first time we read about is in Judges 3:8.

8. Therefore the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel, and He sold them into the hand of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Mesopotamia; and the children of Israel served Cushan-Rishathaim eight years.

So they served this Cushan-Rishathaim for a total of eight years before the LORD sent them a judge to deliver them. They went through the pattern, and the next time they served a people was Moab, as we read in Judges 3:14.

14. So the children of Israel served Eglon king of Moab eighteen years.

So we have 8 years of Cushan-Rishathaim and 18 years of Eglon, for a total of 26 years. Their next oppressor was Jabin king of Canaan who reigned in Hazor. We read of this servitude in Judges 4:3.

3. And the children of Israel cried out to the LORD; for Jabin had nine hundred chariots of iron, and for twenty years he had harshly oppressed the children of Israel.

So if we add this 20 years to our previous total of 26 years, we now have a total of 46 years in servitude. Next, they were delivered into the hands of Midian, as we read in Judges 6:1.

1. Then the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD. So the LORD delivered them into the hand of Midian for seven years,

To our total of 46 years, then, we add another 7, for a total of 53 years. The next servitude was to the people of the Philistines and of Ammon. We read of this in Judges 10:8.

8. From that year they harassed and oppressed the children of Israel for eighteen years—all the children of Israel who were on the other side of the Jordan in the land of the Amorites, in Gilead.

Before we add this 18 years to our total of 53 years and make 71 years of servitude, let us note that this servitude did not involve all the Israelites, however. It specifically says that this servitude only affected the children of Israel who were on the other side (the east side) of the Jordan River in the land of the Amorites, that is, the land of Gilead. Therefore, we will not consider this as another period to add to our periods of servitude, since it only involved two-and-a-half tribes out of the twelve tribes of Israel. Our total, then, stays at 53, rather than moving to 71.

Finally, we have one last servitude in the book of Judges, as is described in Judges 13:1.

1. Again the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD delivered them into the hand of the Philistines for forty years.

This was the longest servitude of all, lasting forty years. If we add 40 to our previous 53 we get a total period of servitude (at least of those tribes in the main part of Israel) of 93 years. Yet notice that this is the exact number of years that are different between the numbers of Paul in Acts 13 and the numbers of the author of Kings in I Kings 6! Is this a coincidence? Or do these two numbers have something to do with each other?

I believe that this is an example of what has been called “*anno Dei*” versus “*anno mundi*” time reckoning (both being Latin phrases.) That is, that years according to God (*anno Dei* reckoning) might be different from the actual years the world experiences (*anno mundi* reckoning.) This might be explained as meaning that God was rejecting His people during these times of servitude, and that therefore during these periods His “prophetic clock,” if you will, had stopped and was not

moving forward, though time according to the world continued to plod along. We can compare this to what is written in the book of Hosea.

**Hosea 1:9. Then God said:
“Call his name Lo-Ammi,
For you are not My people,
And I will not be your God.**

Please note that “Lo-Ammi” means “not My people.” This is what God was doing when He was giving them into the power of their enemies. He was more or less declaring, “You are not My people any longer, so I am selling you into the power of another, your enemies.” However, these periods did not last forever, as we can see in the very next verse of Hosea 1.

**10. “Yet the number of the children of Israel
Shall be as the sand of the sea,
Which cannot be measured or numbered.
And it shall come to pass
In the place where it was said to them,
‘You are not My people,’
There it shall be said to them,
‘You are sons of the living God.’”**

God was not willing to give His people up forever. Always He came back to them and made them His people once again. When this happened, the prophetic time clock started running again, and both *anno Dei* time and *anno mundi* time moved forward together once again.

Therefore, we can understand that the author of I Kings, when he wrote that it was 480 years after the sons of Israel came out of Egypt that Solomon started to build the temple, was not talking about *anno mundi* years, but *anno Dei* years. The 93 years of servitude were skipped, and were not counted in that number. When Paul told the story in Acts 13, however, he was speaking to Israelites and God-fearing Gentiles living outside the land and surrounded by the Greek culture. These people thought in very scientific and straight-forward ways, and something as subtle and difficult as *anno Dei* versus *anno mundi* reckoning might well throw them off. Therefore, Paul told them the number of years that passed according to the world, not according to God’s special time clock. This kind of reckoning would have made immediate sense to them, without a lot of long and complicated explanations.

Therefore, I do not believe that the numbers of either Paul or of Kings are off. They are just using different time reckoning methods. Yet this also has significance for the way the years are calculated in many Bibles. Not understanding the *anno Dei* reckoning that the author of Kings has used, many historians in seeking to work out the calendar of ancient events have used the 480 years number instead of the 573 years number. This means that their dates must not be right. If they end their dates in the right year, this means that they would set the date of the Exodus 93 years later than it actually occurred. If, however, they date Exodus correctly, then they would date the building of the temple 93 years earlier than it actually was. Either way, their failure to note Paul’s years leads them to fill our Bibles and study Bibles with incorrect dates.

Is this a travesty? Is it a tragedy to Biblical study? Really, I do not believe that this is really that big an issue. It is far more important for us to understand the Bible within the internal context of what It says and teaches than that we are able to connect It with our dating schemes and conventions. Perhaps this helps us connect with the fact that these are real events that really happened, but other than this I do not know that being able to set BC dates to Biblical events is really that crucial. Really, much of ancient dating is guesswork anyway, since they did not keep calendars like we do, usually dating things against the reigns of various local kings and so forth. When we try to apply these dates to our system of dating, we have to decide where to place them, and this always requires some guesswork. The further back we go, the more guesses have gone into the setting of any date. Just because you have a reference Bible that tells you “this event happened on this date”

does not mean that statement is at all correct. Yet what matters most is the message of the Bible, and that the Bible is correct in Its dates, whether or not we are correct in how to relate them to our Gentile calendar. To get all worked up about setting Christian dates to ancient events in the Bible is unwise, I think.

Another great lesson we learn from this stems from the fact of *anno mundi* periods. I believe that we today live in an *anno mundi* period, when God's *anno Dei* clock of His kingdom work has come to a stop, and has been stopped ever since the momentous event of Paul's pronouncement at Acts 28:28. That pronouncement stopped *anno Dei* time right as God's kingdom was about to move from its earliest stage, wherein God's Israel were all being called into the kingdom, to its fuller stage, when it would start to move to take control of the earth. Yet God stopped His *anno Dei* clock. This time, He did not stop it because of Israel's unbelief or following of idols. (Though we do not deny that there were Israelites who did not believe in the Acts period, there were multitudes that did, and the rejecters seem to have been more among the leaders than among the common people. Even among the leaders, many believed, a full half of them in Rome.) Instead, He stopped it to manifest a new plan and program for the world, one that He had always kept secret in His past revelations, but now revealed to the world. This plan, as set forth in the book of Ephesians, had to do with a dispensation of total grace, wherein God would act exclusively graciously toward the world, in this way manifesting His grace unmixed with any judgment. During this time, God threw open the doors of salvation to all men from all nations, and graciously offered them almost unbelievable privileges: to sit in the most exalted seats with Christ in His kingdom to come and to have bold access with confidence to God.

Therefore, we can better understand how this time we live in relates to God's kingdom plans by understanding that it is a giant *anno mundi* period. For over 1950 years, God's *anno Dei* clock has stopped, and not a bit of the kingdom work that He was doing in the book of Acts has proceeded forward since that time. Instead, He has been working to show forth the riches of His grace. This helps us understand the Acts period better, as well as the day in which we live, and therefore aids us in understanding the plans and works of God.

Conclusion

We have seen that understanding the time reckoning methods of the Bible can be very important in clearing up things that seem at first glance to be contradictions. The Bible does not always reckon time like we do, yet this does not mean that it is wrong in Its reckoning. It only means that we must when studying It to see to it that we are not expecting the Bible to say one thing when It is actually saying another. If we understand inclusive and exclusive reckoning, gaps between kings and overlaps in reigns caused by co-regency, the idiomatic phrase "the third day" and the technical phrase "three days and three nights," Hebrew time versus Gentile time, and *anno Dei* and *anno mundi* time periods, then we have made great advances in understanding some of the more difficult and technical time reckoning methods employed in the Bible. Then, we will be able to say that the Bible makes no mistakes in time reckoning. It just does not always reckon it like we do.

Let us thank God for a further understanding of these things, and proceed confident that there truly are no "contradictions in Scripture" regarding time reckoning methods.

Nathan C. Johnson