

EARLY PERIODIZATION OF REDEMPTIVE HISTORY

ARNOLD D. EHLERT, TH.D.*

APOLOGETICS

The distinguished Oxford philosopher of history, Dr. R. G. Collingwood, wrote in his *The Idea of History* (p. 49-50), "Any history written on Christian principles will be of necessity universal, providential, apocalyptic, and periodized. (i) It will be a universal history, or history of the world, going back to the origin of man... (ii) It will ascribe events not to the wisdom of their human agents but to the workings of *Providence* preordaining their course... (iii) It will set itself to detect an intelligible pattern in this general course of events, and in particular it will attach a central importance in this pattern to the historical life of Christ, which is clearly one of the chief preordained features of the pattern. It will make its narrative crystalize itself around that event, and treat earlier events as leading up to it or preparing for it, and subsequent events as developing its consequences. It will therefore divide history at the birth of Christ into two parts, each having a peculiar and unique character of its own: the first, a forward-looking character, consisting in blind preparation for an event not yet revealed; the second a backward-looking character depending on the fact that the revelation has now been made. A history thus divided into two periods, a period of darkness and a period of light, I shall call apocalyptic history... (iv) Having divided the past into two, it will then naturally tend to subdivide it again: and thus to distinguish other events, not so important as the birth of Christ but important in their way, which make everything after them different in quality from what went before. Thus history is divided into epochs or periods, each with peculiar characteristics of its own, and each marked off from the one before it by an event which in the technical language of this kind of historiography is called epoch-making."

Karl Loewith in his *Meaning of History* develops a definition of the term "Philosophy of history" to mean "a systematic interpretation of universal history in accordance with a principle by which historical events and successions are unified and directed toward an ultimate meaning. Taken in this sense," he says, "philosophy of history is... entirely dependent on theology of history, in particular on the theological concept of history as a history of fulfillment and salvation." He says further that "the ancients did not presume to make sense of the

*Graduate Studies Librarian, Biola College and its Graduate School, Talbot Theological Seminary, La Mirada, California.

world or to discover its ultimate meaning." He contends that "philosophy of history originates with the Hebrew and Christian faith in a fulfilment and that it ends in the secularization [we presume he means here periodization, or division into ages] of its eschatological pattern. . . . To the Jews and Christians. . . history was primarily a history of salvation, and, as such, the proper concern of prophets, preachers, and teachers. . . . The meaning of things. . . depends on purpose. . . . To venture a statement about the meaning of historical events is possible only when their *telos* becomes apparent. When a historical movement has unfolded its consequences, we reflect on its first appearance, in order to determine the meaning of the whole. . . . If we reflect on the whole course of history, imagining its beginning, and anticipating its end, we think of its meaning in terms of an ultimate purpose. . . . The ultimate meaning of a transcendent purpose is focused in an expected future" (*Meaning in History*, Chicago, 1958, p. 1-5 passim).

Emil Brunner in his *The Problem of Time* reminds us that "history is full of new things, because God works in it and reveals Himself in it. The historical time-process leads somewhere. The line of time is no longer a circle, but a straight line, with a beginning, a middle and an end. This is so because—if we may use a simile—God Himself has entered this circular time at a certain point, and with the whole weight of eternity has stretched out this time-circle and given the time-line a beginning and an end, and so a direction. By this incarnation or 'intemperation' of the word of God, time has been charged with an immense intensity. It has become, as we have said, the time of waiting, of decision and probation" (p. 125).

Oscar Cullman, of course, must be consulted with regard to history as periods of time in the redemptive process. In his *Christ and Time* he wrote, ". . . Salvation, in keeping with the Bible's linear understanding of time, is conceived strictly in terms of a time process. The expectation of the coming kingdom of God is not to be so dissolved that it means 'always standing in the situation of decision,' [as Bultmann would say, *Jesus and the Word*, 1934, pp. 51-56]. Were that done, the event of the coming of God's reign would not be 'an event in the course of time.' . . . The New Testament knows only the linear time concept of Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow; all philosophical reinterpretation and dissolution into timeless metaphysics is foreign to it. It is precisely upon the basis of this rectilinear conception of time that time in Primitive Christianity can yield the framework for the divine process of revelation and redemption, for those *kairoi* which God in his omnipotence fixes, for those ages into which he divides the whole process" (p. 51, 53).

Franz Delitzsch in his *Old Testament History of Redemption* (Edinburgh, 1881) says, "The fundamental Biblical part of the entire theological system is throughout historic. The Old Testament itself is divided into the history of the Old Testament literature; into the history of the contents of revelation as laid down in the Old Testament Scriptures,

with its presuppositions; and into the history of the preparation for redemption up to the point where, after the foundation of redemption had been essentially laid, the old dispensation separates from the new" (p. 1).

"If, now," Delitzsch goes on, "we observe how the Old Testament history articulates itself, so far as we extend it to the Sabbath between the burial and resurrection of the Old Covenant, we discover six steps, with which they tend toward the goal attained in the seventh." He goes on, then to outline the seven periods, and to observe that "the apparently poetical expressions used in the designation of the period indicates the parallelism in which the hexaemeron stands to the six steps of Old Testament history, for this parallelism is probably something more than accidental" (p. 8-9). So much for apologetics.

ANCIENT PERIODIZATION

There are a number of ancient schemes of dividing time into periods, most of which do not bear directly upon history seen as redemptive. The Chaldeans, according to Plutarch, believed in a struggle between good and evil for the space of 6000 years; "and then Hades is to cease, and men are to be happy, neither wanting food nor making shade." Zoroaster taught the same. Plutarch assigns no reason for these opinions; but Daubuz supposed them to be of patriarchal origin. The Etruscans are reported to have held, along with the Persians, that "God has appointed twelve thousand years to his works, the first 6,000 were employed in creation, the other six are appointed for the duration of the world" (consult the article "Etruscan Religion" in the *Hastings Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. 5, p. 538 and Prideaux's *Connection*, 1815, vol. 1, p. 382 ff.) Hengstenberg thought Zoroaster stole and adulterated the truths of revelation.

JEWISH TRADITION

Many of the schemes of periodization are based on the six creative days, and the Sabbath day of rest, of Genesis, which have been considered prophetically symbolic of a number of periods of development to be followed by a period of utopia or a golden age, as the Sabbath follows six days of work. The various schemes do not divide equally, but their beginning and end coincide with the creation of Adam and the millennial reign of Christ. Some of them go on to posit an additional period, which in most cases has no end, which would be the eternal state.

The Scripture support adduced for this tradition includes the first verse of Genesis, which in the Hebrew contains seven words, and the two passages where a day with the Lord is counted as a thousand years, and a thousands year as a day: Psalm 90:4 and 2 Peter 3:8. Regarding Genesis 1:1, David Gregory, a learned mathematician and astronomer of Oxford, who died in 1710, wrote, "In the first verse of the first chapter

of Genesis, the Hebrew Aleph, which in the Jewish arithmetic stands for 1000, is six times found. From hence the ancient Cabalists concluded that the world would last 6000 years. Because God was six days about the creation, and a thousand years with Him are but as one day. . . therefore after six days, that is 6000 years duration of the world, there shall be a seventh day, or millenary sabbath of rest" (William Hales, *Analysis of Chronology*, I:79, quoted in D. T. Taylor's *Voice of the Church*, 1866, p. 26).

There is a passage in the Talmud which spells out this tradition (Sanhedrin 97a, 97b). "R. Kattina said: Six thousand years shall the world exist, and one [thousand, the seventh], shall be desolate, as it is written, *And the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day*. Abaye said: It will be desolate two [thousand], as it is said, *After two days will he revive us in the third day, he will raise us up, and we shall live in his sight.*"

The tradition has come to be known as the tradition of the house of Elias, based on this passage: "The Tanna debe Eliyyahu teaches: The world is to exist six thousand years. In the first two thousand there is desolation [i.e., no Torah]; two thousand years the Torah flourished; and the next two thousand years is the Messianic era, but through our many iniquities all these years have been lost." The footnote to the passage indicates that it was understood that Messiah was to come at the beginning of the last two thousand years, but that the delay was due to the sins of the Jewish people (Soncino Talmud, *Nezikin*, vol. III, p. 657). This lends itself to a very interesting Christian commentary.

The most elaborate treatment of the whole subject of the year-day theory, and the heptadic cycle to come to our attention is in an extensive volume by H. Grattan Guinness entitled *The Approaching End of the Age*. Section II of the book is entitled, "The Law of Completion in Weeks," and covers 129 pages. He deals extensively with what he calls septiform periodicity in nature and in the Scriptures.

APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE AND QUMRAN SCROLLS

Dr. Jacob Licht of Jerusalem, who teaches at Tel Aviv University, read a paper at the IIIrd International Congress of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem in 1965, which has been published in *The Journal of Jewish Studies* (XVI, 177-182, 1966) in which he explores some time concepts in the Qumran literature. While he does not find the traditional terms *ha 'olam haze* and *ha 'olam haba*, he says, "In spite of this, one may, perhaps, claim that the basic notion of the Two Worlds can be detected underlying Qumran eschatology. On the other hand we do find, and indeed frequently, the terms 'eth, qes, and mo 'ed, which are connected with the sect's eschatological speculation. These are used in a manner which refers—as shown by the plain sense of the language—to several times, not to *two* times. We read, e.g., about revelation according to the times (IQS i, 8-9; viii, 15), or about 'all the seasons of God fulfilling

their measure (1QpHab vii, 13). It is also evident that the sect distinguished at least four periods, *viz.* the past which preceded its own establishment, its historical present, the coming period of active struggle against the forces of evil, and (this being referred to but rarely) the ultimate future of full eschatological peace. We cannot say, on the evidence so far available, how these periods correspond to the terms 'eth and ges, nor are we able to define the meaning of these terms with the desirable measure of accuracy. In this matter, however, a glance at Jewish Apocalyptic is instructive enough." And so we turn to the Jewish apocalyptic, as reflected in the pseudepigraphic literature.

PSEUDEPIGRAPHIC LITERATURE

In the Book of Enoch we have what is called the 'Apocalypse of the Sheep' (ch. 85-90). A series of dream-visions of Enoch present in symbolic form, using various animals as symbols, a sequence of times from Adam to the final judgment and the setting up of Messiah's kingdom. The vision is somewhat complicated, and cannot be detailed here, but briefly it involves the following periods (using for the most part the headings of Charles):

1. Cain and Abel, Seth
2. Fall of the angels and demoralization of mankind
3. Advent of the seven archangels
4. Punishment of the fallen angels by the archangels
5. Deluge and the deliverance of Noah
6. Death of Noah to the Exodus
7. Israel in the desert, giving of the law, entrance into Palestine
8. Time of the judges to the building of the temple
9. The two kingdoms of Israel and Judah to the destruction of the temple
10. Destruction of the temple to the return from captivity
11. Time of Cyrus to that of Alexander the Great
12. Alexander the Great to the Graeco-Syrian domination
13. From the Graeco-Syrian domination to the Maccabean revolt
14. The last assault of the Gentiles on the Jews
15. Judgment of the fallen angels, the shepherds, and the apostates
16. New Jerusalem, conversion of the surviving Gentiles, resurrection of the righteous, the Messiah

In this outline the Christian age would probably come between numbers 14 and 15.

We find also in The Book of Enoch an outline of the ten 'weeks' which compass the extent of the world's history (ch. 93-91, with the arrangement in Charles). Enoch professes to have learned this from a heavenly vision, through the word of the angels, and from the heavenly tablets. He says he was born in the seventh of the first week (93:3),

which would indicate that it commenced with Adam. Here is the list with chief characteristics of each, as outlined in the passage (the extent of the periods is my own wording, but the characteristics are quotes from the text):

1. From Adam to Enoch: "while judgment and righteousness still endured"
2. From Enoch to Noah: in which there was "great wickedness . . . decept . . . and . . . the first end"
3. From Noah to Abraham: in which "a man shall be elected as the plant of righteous judgment, and his posterity shall become the plant of righteousness for evermore"
4. From Abraham to the giving of the Law: "at its close visions of the holy and righteous shall be seen, and a law for all generations and an enclosure shall be made for them"
5. From the giving of the Law to the construction of the temple: "the house of glory and dominion shall be built for ever"
6. From the building of the temple to its destruction: "all who live in it shall be blinded, and the hearts of all of them shall godlessly forsake wisdom. And in it a man shall ascend; and at its close the house of dominion shall be burnt with fire, and the whole race of the chosen root shall be dispersed"
7. From the destruction of the temple to the appearance of "the elect righteous of the eternal plant of righteousness": in which "shall an apostate generation arise, and many shall be its deeds, and all its deeds shall be apostate"
8. From the appearance of the 'elect righteous' to the building of a house for the "Great King in glory": in it "all mankind shall look to the path of uprightness"
9. From the building of the house to the destruction of the earth: in it "the righteous judgment shall be revealed to the whole world, and all the works of the godless shall vanish from all the earth, and the whole world shall be written down for destruction"
10. The eternal state: "In the seventh part, there shall be the great eternal judgment, in which He will execute vengeance amongst the angels. And the first heaven shall depart and pass away, and a new heaven shall appear, and all the powers of the heavens shall give sevenfold light"

Enoch goes on: "After that there shall be many weeks without number for ever, and all shall be goodness and righteousness, and sin shall no more be mentioned forever."

A good deal could be said about this scheme, but we pause only to observe that it covers the writer's past, his contemporary scene, and his future, from the beginning to the end of time, and introduces eternity future. What we would consider the eschatological section of this succession would begin with the seventh period commencing with the

destruction of the temple, if Charles is correct in dating the work as pre-Maccabean.

Licht was interested in this scheme as a process, in its numerical harmony. He finds a symmetry in it: "the most important event—the building of the temple—is placed in the middle; the last three weeks of metahistory are balanced by the first three weeks before Abraham, which are represented as a kind of pre-history." After alluding to other patterns similar to this, Licht observes, "... All these predictions are, to a greater or lesser degree, speculations about the significant periods of history, and attempts to impose some pattern on history as a whole" (p. 180).

The writer of IV Ezra addresses some questions to the Almighty, which are answered by an angel. He had been concerned about the end of the then present evil age and the promises to come to pass. To this the angel is reported to have replied, "Thy haste may not exceed that of the Most High; for thou art hastening for thine own self, but the Exalted One on behalf of many. Were not these questions of thine asked by the souls of the righteous in their chambers? How long are we (to remain) here? When cometh the fruit upon the threshing-floor of our reward? And to them the archangel Jeremiel made reply, and said: Even when the number of those like yourself is fulfilled! For he was weighed the age in the balance, and with measure has measured the times, and by number has numbered the seasons: neither will he move nor stir things, till the measures appointed be fulfilled" (4:34-37, Charles II, 567).

This did not satisfy the writer, and he asked in the 5th chapter, "But lo, O Lord, thou art ready to meet (with blessing) those who survive in the end; but what shall our predecessors do, or we ourselves, or our posterity?" to which the answer was, "... just as the young child does not bring forth, nor she that is aged any more, so have I also disposed the world which I have created by defined periods of time" (IV Ezra 5:41, 49). There is more to this dialogue, but we do not get a discernable outline of time like we do in the other instances.

In the Syriac Baruch (II Baruch in Charles) we find a vision of altering black and white waters, which is interpreted as symbolizing the history of the world from Adam to the advent of the Messiah. The angel Ramiel came to spell out the interpretation of "the methods of the times that have passed, and of those that are destined to pass in His world from the beginning of creation unto its consummation (55:2). The outline is in twelve parts:

1. A great cloud and black waters coming out of it: the creation and Adam's sin to the flood
2. Bright waters: the fount of Abraham
3. Black waters: sins of the nations, wickedness of the land of Egypt which made the sons of the righteous to serve
4. Bright waters: the advent of Moses and his colleagues

5. Black waters: Israel polluted by sin, oppressed by the Amorites and ruled by judges
6. Bright waters: the time in which David and Solomon were born
7. Black waters: the sins of Israel's kings, the captivity of Israel by Assyria
8. Bright waters: rectitude of Hezekiah and the grace of God to uphold him
9. Black waters: wickedness in the days of Manasseh
10. Bright waters: purity of the generations of Josiah
11. Black waters: calamity befalling Zion, trodden down of the Gentiles, Jerusalem laid waste
12. Bright waters: "This is the word." "Thy people shall fall into distress... nevertheless they will be saved. And at that time after a little interval Zion will again be builded."

We have this mysterious statement in no. 12, "This is the word," and the phrase "at that time" when Israel shall be saved, which are most interesting. One is left to interpretation as to how no. 12 is related to no. 11. The Christian student of eschatology would likely place the church age between these two. The little interval would follow Israel's national salvation and lead into the Messianic reign, if that is equivalent to the rebuilding of Zion.

The church fathers as early as Barnabas picked up the heptadic pattern and gave the church age its proper place in it. Daniel T. Taylor traces this in more detail than any other writer to come to our attention (*The Voice of the Church on the Coming and Kingdom of the Redeemer*. Rev. and ed., with a pref., by H. L. Hastings. 8th ed. Scriptural Tract Repository, 1866). My own book, *A Bibliographic History of Dispensationalism* (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1965) brings the story up to the present. One is tempted to quote, in closing, Psalm 39:4: "Lord, make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is, that I may know how frail I am."