

# LUTHER AND BIBLICAL CHRONOLOGY

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Since these pages granted hospitality to a study of James Ussher's work on biblical chronology,<sup>1</sup> it is fitting that the same should be done for Martin Luther, whose historical importance was much greater but whose interest in chronology, one may suspect, is very largely unknown, even to his admirers, at least in the English-speaking world.<sup>2</sup>

Luther's *Supputatio annorum mundi* is readily available, having been excellently edited in volume liii (1920), 1–184, of the Weimar edition,<sup>3</sup> including an introduction by the editor, F. Cohrs, which admirably states the necessary bibliographic information. There are two manuscripts in Luther's own handwriting (excellent photographs of which are reproduced within the volume), and the book itself appeared in two editions in Latin in 1541 and 1545. A German translation appeared in 1550 and was reprinted in 1551, 1553 and 1559. The frequent reprinting indicates a substantial reputation and demand for a work which Luther had originally intended only as working notes for himself. It was, not surprisingly, the writing of his commentary on Genesis, and especially chapter v of that book, that stimulated him to chronological computation: for the years of the lives of the patriarchs demand some sort of chronological table if they are to be made intelligible, and that is what he produced.

The essence of Luther's work is very simple. Vertically, down the middle of the page, he made what looks like a ladder with seventy rungs, each of which represents a year. The tens are marked with an X, the hundreds with a C. On either side of the ladder, notes are inserted, against the year space to which they refer. Great typographical virtuosity was required for the reproduction of this in the

<sup>1</sup> 'Why the World was Created in 4004 BC: Archbishop Ussher and Biblical Chronology', *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, lxxvii (1984–85), 575–608. This will be cited by the short title 'Ussher'. See also the writer's more general discussion in *Biblical Chronology: Legend or Science?* (Ethel M. Wood Lecture; London: University of London, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> The best discussion known to me is in K. Scholder, *Ursprünge und Probleme der Bibelkritik im 17. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 1966), 79–104. Cf. also K.H. Dannenfeldt, 'Some Observations of Luther on Ancient Pre-Greek History', *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, xlii (1951), 49–63. Brief treatment in J.M. Headley, *Luther's View of Church History* (New Haven: Yale, 1963), 52f.

<sup>3</sup> Henceforth cited simply as *WA* with page number. For references to other volumes of the edition, the volume number is given.

Weimar edition, since Luther wrote in the form of brief notes, added at various stages of his work, some of them in different colours of ink, some written sideways along the vertical axis of the page and some even upside down (he tended to treat the Popes in this manner). Sometimes there are longer discussions of the more difficult problems.

Given these basic prolegomena, we may proceed straight to a comparison between the general approach of Luther and that of Ussher. Luther's work was far shorter, a substantial advantage over the many voluminous chronological works of the time. Ussher took two thousand pages, and those brought him only to just after 70 AD. Luther, like many chronologists, continued the reckoning up to his own time, but he covered all this ground in roughly 100 pages (exact numbers differ between the manuscripts and editions).

There was, on the other hand, a central structural element which both Luther and Ussher had in common: central to both was a 4000-year scheme. As was explained in my earlier article ('Ussher', 578f.), Ussher's date of 4004 BC for creation made sense in just this way. There were 4000 years from creation to Christ and (as was known by Ussher's time) Christ must have been born by 4 BC at the latest. In addition, according to Ussher, Solomon's temple was completed in the year 3000 AM (AM = *Anno Mundi*) and was thus exactly one thousand before the coming of Christ. The figure 4000 was central to the entire idea.

The same was true of Luther. The key architectonic feature of his chronology too was a 4000-year scheme, but it was distributed in a different way. For him the nativity of Christ fell, traditionally, at the divide 1 BC/1 AD, so that the four years of Ussher's view were lacking. By Luther's computation, there were 3960 years from creation to the coming of Christ. How does this make up a 4000-year calculation? Because Luther reckoned not to the *birth* of Christ, but to a later, yet for him equally critical, point in New Testament history. According to him, the death and resurrection of Jesus fell in the year 34 AD (= 3994 AM), and this ushered in the final 'week' of the seventy weeks of Daniel. This final week, being seven years, brings us to the year 4000 from creation, or 40 AD. In the middle of this week, he thought, there took place the Apostolic Council of Acts xv, in which, as he put it, the law [of Moses] was abrogated by public decree and liberty from the law was promulgated. The year 40 AD was thus 4000 from creation; it was also the completion of the seventy weeks, or 490 years, of Daniel. This momentous quatermillenary, bringing the end of the law and freedom from it, was a marvellous chronological illustration and vindication of Luther's own theology. And this was not all. Since Luther continued his reckoning through the Byzantine and medieval periods and up to his own time, he was conscious of his own position in world chronology. Writing in 1540, he noted that this year was exactly 5500 from creation. The end of the world could not be far away. The perfection of the scheme was impressive.

The idea that there were, more or less, 4000 years from creation to Christ was nothing new. Anyone who worked with the figures of the Hebrew Bible would have come somewhere near this total. (The Greek Bible had different numbers and placed creation more than a thousand years earlier; but in the West, after St Jerome, whose Vulgate was based on the Hebrew, something close to 4000 was common.) A current figure for creation in the Middle Ages, following Bede, was 3952 BC. By the sixteenth century, though the same general tradition remained normal, the interest in *precise* factual correspondence had become greater, as is very evident in Luther, and later in Ussher. The grand figure of 4000, if it was to be valid, ought to work out precisely. It did so.

Luther was very deeply influenced by the saying of ‘the Tanna of the House of Elijah’, recorded in the Talmud (‘Ussher’, 581): ‘The world is to exist 6000 years: the first 2000 years are to be void; the next 2000 years are the period of the Law; and the following 2000 years are the period of the Messiah’. Such a saying suited Christianity admirably, and was repeated again and again in the time of the Renaissance and Reformation. In his first edition Luther placed it at the head of his entire chronological work. He seems to have thought that this ‘prophecy’ came from the biblical Elijah himself; Cohrs remarks (WA, 12f.) that Luther ‘would have been disappointed if he had realized that the saying came originally out of the Talmud’. For, although Luther had got hold of this material through Carion/Melanchthon (of whom we shall speak shortly), he was much more deeply impressed and dominated by it than they had been, so that the need to make it work out in exact chronological results was very important to him. This can be traced in detailed alterations made between the first and second editions of the *Supputatio*.<sup>4</sup>

A word here about Carion/Melanchthon, mentioned just above, is appropriate. The *Chronicon* of Johannes Carion (or Cario), first published in 1532, was thereafter revised by Melanchthon and Casper Peucer.<sup>5</sup> It was highly respected by Luther, who maintained that his own reckoning differed only minimally from Carion’s – an exaggeration, since the discrepancies were in fact greater. But, in respect of the ‘prophecy’ of ‘Elijah’, though Luther appears to have originally learned of this scheme of world chronology from Carion, he tried to make it work out much more exactly. A *precise* demonstration of the double-millennium scheme clearly seemed to him to guarantee the regularity of a divine plan.<sup>6</sup>

We may now proceed to illustrate some aspects of Luther’s

<sup>4</sup> On this see in detail Cohrs’ preface, WA, 12–15.

<sup>5</sup> Critical edition in *Corpus Reformatorum*, xii (1844), 705–1094. I have used also the Wittemberg edition of 1572. For a historical study of Carion’s work, see Hildegard Ziegler, *Chronicon Carionis* (Halle, 1898); also WA, 1, 139, 143.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the preface, WA, 12f.

method by taking four periods in sequence, after which some general remarks will be added.

#### FROM CREATION TO THE BABYLONIAN EXILE

This is the great area of all biblical chronology, since it is here that Old Testament figures provide the clearest sequence. Although the biblical text provides explicit numbers, different interpretations are possible at certain points, or so at least it seemed in earlier times. Two of these well illustrate different aspects of Luther's thinking:

The first is the matter of Abraham's birth (see 'Ussher', 585f.). The Hebrew, taken for itself, seems clear enough: when Terah was seventy years old, he begat Abraham, Nahor and Haran (Gen. xi.26). When Abraham was seventy-five years old, he migrated to Canaan, leaving his father Terah behind. Sixty years later his father died, never having left Mesopotamia. Why then was there any difficulty? Principally, because in the *New Testament* Stephen, in his speech in Acts vii, said that '*after* his father died, God removed him'. If this was strictly correct, it added sixty years to the chronology of the world. Terah was 205 years old when he died; therefore Abraham, who was seventy-five when he migrated to Canaan, could not have been born when Terah was seventy. Therefore, when Terah was seventy, though the text says that he begat Abraham, Nahor and Haran, he actually begat Nahor and Haran, but he did not beget Abraham. These figures are not a minor family matter, but are essential links in the total biblical chronology; sixty years of the duration of the entire world depend on it. Calvin, and Ussher following him, followed Acts. Though Gen. xi.26 said that Abraham, Nahor and Haran were born when Terah was seventy, Abraham was actually not born until sixty years later.

Luther went another way. As he saw, Acts can be made correct, on this point, only by making Genesis wrong. And this would be a serious step: 'It would be hard and of great audacity to say' ('*durum autem et audaciae magnae sit dicere*') that Moses recorded the birth of Abraham sixty years before he was born (WA, 178). Thus, he goes on, the reader is free to follow either opinion, but it will be difficult 'to correct Moses'. He himself must agree with Moses: that is, Abraham was born when Terah was seventy, and left Haran sixty years before his father's death. The result, he at once notes, is a difference of sixty years to the chronology of the world. As for Stephen's speech in Acts, Luther says, this is not an '*assertio propria*', a formally correct statement, but a story told on the basis of common speech, which is often confused and unclear. And he thus goes on to point out other such inaccuracies in the citation of the Old Testament by the New. The gospel writers are often content to give a brief indication of the sources (rather than themselves to state the facts precisely). Matthew's genealogy (from Abraham to Christ) often fails to agree with the historical documents (of the Old Testament). Acts vii shows evidence

of other mistakes. It is a clear error, Luther says ('iste enim error perspicuus est'), when it says that God appeared to Abraham 'in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran' (Acts vii.2-3), and that he thereafter departed from Chaldaea and lived in Haran: for it was in fact in Haran that God had thus appeared to him.<sup>7</sup> Acts, in other words, often spoke in careless and popular terms. And, it is implied, the *proper* and exact account of these matters is to be found in the Old Testament narratives, for it is they that are concerned to communicate the precise history.

Luther's solution to this question is undoubtedly right; it shows common sense and critical ability, while the alternative position as adopted by Calvin and Ussher makes literary nonsense of the Genesis passages. Conceivably, of course, Luther may have known that he needed these sixty years for his grand scheme, just as Ussher later on needed to be without them; but there is no evidence that either man was *at this point* influenced by that consideration. A different aspect, however, is seen in our second case.

Joram King of Judah reigned eight years, and was succeeded by his son Ahaziah, who 'reigned one year in Jerusalem' (2 Kings viii.17, 24, 26; 2 Chron. xxi.5, 20; xxii.2). Both books agree exactly in these figures. The difficulty lay in the *age* of Ahaziah at his accession. 2 Kings viii.26 states that he was twenty-two at the start of his reign. 2 Chron. xxii.2 equally clearly gives the age as forty-two. It hardly enters Luther's mind that one or other of these figures might be simply wrong. He thinks of far more complicated possibilities than that. The question is not created by the mere difference between the two figures; rather, it is another. By the Chronicles figure, Ahaziah must have been two years older than his own father Joram. Joram was thirty-two at the start of his reign and was therefore forty when he died. But by the Chronicles figure (though not by that of Kings) Ahaziah his son was forty-two when he became king. He had therefore been born two years before his father was born. Even in biblical times this was unusual. Luther took it very seriously. He did not waste time on the idea that the Chronicles figure was a mere copying mistake or the like. He considered the possibility that Ahaziah was an adopted son ('filius legalis'), i.e. that Joram had adopted as son a man older than himself. But other scriptural evidence did not support this.

Luther therefore followed an explanation which he says he had found in Lyra and which went back in general to Jerome. Joram had indeed reigned for twenty-eight years, but twenty of these were passed over in silence in the account, because of his evil-doing. But, so that the historical total should be kept right, these twenty years were marked in the *age* of his son Ahaziah (though not in the length stated for his reign). In fact, therefore, events had been thus:

<sup>7</sup> See *WA*, 179.

- 3042 AM Ahaziah born  
 3057 Joram begins to reign, Ahaziah being now fifteen  
 3064 Joram begins to reign impiously, having forgotten the good lessons learned from his father Jehoshaphat, and having Ahaziah as co-regent with him, starting at twenty-two  
 3084 Joram dies, and Ahaziah, now forty-two, rules on his own for one year.

Common sense, so wholesomely present in Luther's handling of Abraham's birth, is as conspicuously absent from this proposal. It (partially) reconciles the difference between Kings and Chronicles over Ahaziah's age, but at the expense of introducing a twenty-year addition to Joram's reign which is contrary to the express statement of them both. Moreover, and more serious, it introduces into the whole question of biblical chronology the disastrous idea that periods had gone unrecorded because of someone's evil-doing. Evil-doing being ubiquitous, this would mean that any chronological evidence could have gaps in it. Yet Luther was rather proud of this achievement, and noted it as a point of failure in other chronologists: 'hic omnes supputantes omittunt 20 annos' ('at this point all chronologists miss out twenty years') (WA, 179). Actually, the other chronologists were very wise to do so, and it was Luther who was taking a most unreasonable stand. On the ground of a minor discrepancy in a person's age, he was adding twenty years to a period against the agreed reckoning of both Kings and Chronicles, he was introducing a principle of omission because of evil-doing that must undermine all certainty in biblical chronology, and he was inventing a totally fictitious co-regency – the invention of such co-regencies, which was still to be the staple of harmonizing interpreters well into the twentieth century, thus goes back to Luther if not before. And a moment's admission of a copying error in either Chronicles or Kings would have shattered the whole frail edifice.

In fact, it can hardly be doubted that Luther *needed* these twenty years: not because of the very thin evidence on which he built his case, but because of the long-term strategical results that he wanted and that this solution seemed to offer. 'If this opinion stands, and I gladly follow it, the result is, that the last year of the last week [i.e. of Daniel's seventy-week prophecy] is the very 4000th year of the world' (WA, 180). After discussing some other possibilities, Luther goes on, 'I would all the more gladly follow this opinion, because, if you add on these twenty years and fit them within the years of the world's chronology, then the resurrection of Christ will fall beautifully into the end of the fourth millennium' (WA, 180n.). Luther *had to* find these twenty years. His judgement here was the reverse of critical.

Such creation of interregna and co-regencies, as a device for the overcoming of discrepancies and difficulties, is not uncommon in Luther's work. The overriding motive, visible several times, lay in the seventy-week or 490-year prophecy of Daniel. It was of supreme

importance to ensure that this fitted in: and this meant to fit in with the 4000/6000-year scheme of 'Elijah'. Luther more or less openly admits that he had adjusted the years of the Hebrew kings in order to make this work out. His original reckoning had made the prophecy start in the year 3513 AM, and it would then have been fulfilled in 4003, three years too late. Luther then went back over his calculations. For Manasseh, king of Judah, he had allowed fifty-eight years, fifty-five as stated in 2 Kings xxi.1 and 2 Chron. xxxiii.1 plus three for the period of imprisonment mentioned (without period stated) in 2 Chron. xxxiii.11ff. He now revised the reckoning, removing these three years.<sup>8</sup> The 4000-year mark was now exact.

So also with Uzziah (also called Azariah). His father Amaziah was killed and Uzziah, sixteen years old, was made king (2 Kings xiv.19ff.); manifestly, immediately after his father's death. But there are some discrepancies in the figures for the other kings of the time; so Luther tells us that Uzziah was a boy of six when his father was killed by a conspiracy, and there was an interregnum of ten years before his reign began. The net effect of this is to add ten years to the total of the Judean figures, but on the other hand to subtract three years from the reign of Jeroboam.<sup>9</sup> And Luther in a footnote frankly admitted: 'we need these three years for completing the years of the weeks [of Daniel], as we shall see at the end' (WA, 93n.). Yet another interregnum of twenty-one years is created on almost the next page, a twenty-one-year gap between Jeroboam and Zechariah in Israel (WA, 95). Such devices were not necessarily original with Luther: some he gained from Lyra and he from Rashi or other Jewish interpreters. But Luther continued this tradition, extended it, and magnified its importance by building it into the grand edifice of his theological thinking.

In general, the period of the Hebrew kingdoms was for chronologists both supremely important and extremely difficult. The Bible gave precise figures for the reign of each king but did not furnish a total figure for the entire period. The figures given for all the kings of Judah, from the fourth year of Solomon, when the temple was commenced, to its destruction, add up to 430 years. Modern scholars consider the true historical period to have been just over 370 years: in other words, out of the sum of 430 found by pure addition they have to account for over fifty as cases of overlapping, theoretical schematism, different chronologies, mistakes of the authors and textual errors in transmission. Ussher himself got rid of a few years in such ways, and ended up allowing 423 in all. Luther, by contrast, went the other way, and made the period of the kingdom even *longer* than the 430 of the sources. By his calculation the start of construction of the temple was in 2933 AM (= 1027 BC) and the desolation of Jerusalem was in 3394

<sup>8</sup> See WA, 14.

<sup>9</sup> Details too complicated to include in full.

AM (= 566 BC). The kingdom lasted, therefore, about 460 years from the start of the temple. This is why Luther's chronology, though so different from Ussher's in many parts, comes out not so very different as a whole, taken from creation down to Christ. Luther's sensible solution to the question of Abraham's birth shortened by sixty years the chronology from creation to the building of the temple, but his interregna and other hypotheses during the kingdom stretched it out again. Moreover, his dating for the destruction of Jerusalem brought that event twenty years too late and thus shortened the time from that event to the coming of Christ, a period to which we must now turn.

#### FROM THE EXILE TO THE NEW TESTAMENT

After the end of the kingdoms the Bible provides only fitful and fragmentary chronological hints, and all biblical chronologies have to depend on extra-biblical information. Fundamental to the understanding of Luther in this period is his dependence on the literary product of the humanist Annius of Viterbo (Giovanni Nanni was his real name). Aware of intense contemporary interest in the ancient world, and of the sense of loss caused by the disappearance of numerous important works of ancient authors, Annius removed the problem by writing these works himself. He had a fertile imagination, and also a strong local patriotism, which led him to represent Viterbo as the very cradle of civilization, having been founded by Isis and Osiris along with numerous heroes and heroines drawn from classical mythology.<sup>10</sup> More important for Luther, Annius wrote texts which purported to be by the Mesopotamian Berosus, the Egyptian chronicler Manetho, a supposed writer 'Metasthenes' (there had been an actual Megasthenes who wrote on Persian affairs), and Philo (a text which was called the *breviarium de temporibus*). The significant portions of these are conveniently printed in the introduction of the Weimar edition (WA, 17–21).

Here again we see the centrality of the Danielic prophecy. If Luther had placed the end of the Hebrew kingdoms too late, the same happened with the rise of Alexander and the end of the Persian empire, placed in 3655 AM or 305 BC, close on thirty years too late. He was aware that 'almost all' place Alexander about thirty years earlier, but he made it clear that it did not matter very much to him where Alexander, Antiochus and other persons are located by historians,<sup>11</sup> so long as he knew the one absolutely vital fact, namely, the date of the second year of Darius Longimanus, from which point the 490 years of Daniel are reckoned.

This was a cavalier remark, for Luther was in fact highly dependent on the information that 'historians' furnished. It was

<sup>10</sup> Cf. R. Weiss, *The Renaissance Discovery of Classical Antiquity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), 125f. and *passim*.

<sup>11</sup> WA, 26 at foot and 113.

'Metasthenes' who listed the five kings of Babylon from Nebuchadnezzar to Balthassar (in English normally Belshazzar). The periods are:

Nebuchadnezzar	26 years after the destruction of Jerusalem
Evilmerodach	30
Reg Assar	3
Lab Assar Adach	6
Balthassar	5
Total	<hr/> 70

This seventy-year total was too good to miss. Luther, however, slightly modified the guidance of 'Metasthenes' here, for he thought that Jeremiah xxvii.7 indicated three monarchs rather than five. Taking it as three, he simply transferred to Balthassar the years of his two shadowy predecessors, giving him fourteen in all. The result was triumphant: for the seventy years of the desolation of Jerusalem had indeed been fulfilled, and that in the year in which Cyrus (along with Darius the Mede) took the empire. The seventy years had been 3394–3464 AM = 566–496 BC. Luther warns his readers against those who suppose that the seventy should have counted from the exile of Jehoniah eleven years earlier, or who suppose that the desolation lasted only fifty-two years. The perfect fit with the period from the destruction to the coming of Cyrus makes it clear that the even more important prophecy of the seventy weeks of years will also work out perfectly: as indeed it does. Historically, of course, Luther's reckoning is far astray: 496 BC is over forty years too late for Cyrus's establishment of the Persian empire.

From the beginning of Cyrus's reign 'Metasthenes' carries us through the Persian emperors to the all-important Darius Longimanus and beyond. The second year of this Darius represents the 'going forth' (Dan. ix.25) of the 'word' decreed in Daniel's vision of the previous year (Dan. ix.1f.); this 'going forth' was identical with the events mentioned in the first verses of both Haggai and Zechariah. The year was 3510 AM = 450 BC. The fulfilment of the prophecy was exactly 490 years later, the end of the final 'week' which began with Christ's death and resurrection and had in its middle the Apostolic Council.

Wild as some of the figures used by Luther are, it may be felt that they were somewhat closer to the truth than pure fictions would have been. And this is so. Although Annus forged the *writings* of 'Metasthenes' and 'Philo', he obviously used within them such pieces of information as humanists of his time had available, whether from classical sources or from the Bible itself. Thus the association of 'Darius the Mede' with Cyrus was taken by 'Metasthenes' straight from the Bible itself or from traditional interpretations of it. Views of Annus in Luther's lifetime varied. If some Italians considered him a 'shameless liar', elsewhere he had a high repute. Melanchthon

accepted the parts of his work that were more important for biblical chronology.<sup>12</sup> A supremely ironic twist to the matter is the fact that Annius, in order to defend his (forged) histories, developed rules of historical criticism that were considerably in advance of his time.<sup>13</sup>

The Persian emperors were always a source of confusion: how many were there, and how often did different names attach to the same one among them? The scheme inherited from 'Metasthenes' and followed by Luther was as follows:<sup>14</sup>

Darius [the Mede] and Cyrus jointly	2 years
Cyrus alone	22
Artaxerxes Assuerus (also called Darius)	20
Darius Longimanus	37
Darius Nothos	19
Artaxerxes Mnemon	55
Ochus	26
Arsames or Arses	4
Darius	6
Total	191

This is a mixture of partial truth, confusion and total rubbish; some of it derives from classical sources, some from the poor understanding of the Persian empire current in Jewish chronological tradition.<sup>15</sup> Cambyses is mentioned under Cyrus but is not accorded a reign of his own; he is said to have impeded Cyrus's decree for the rebuilding of the temple. Artaxerxes Assuerus was Esther's husband: of the four names of Persian emperors known from the Bible, he bore three. Under Darius Longimanus we have not only the start of the seventy weeks, but also the coming of Ezra and later Nehemiah to Jerusalem. From the first year of Cyrus (along with Darius the Mede) to the second year of Darius Longimanus are forty-six years, and these are those of which Jesus spoke concerning the building of the temple (John ii.20), although the actual completion of it was in the sixth year of the same monarch (Ezra vi.3, 15).<sup>16</sup>

In the Greek period Luther largely follows 'Philo', and he concentrates mainly on inner-Jewish persons and events, giving successions of priests and of 'chiefs' ('duces') with their years. These form the framework of Luther's chronology until he reaches the point where he has books like Maccabees as a guide, or familiar incidents of Roman history. Among the *duces* of 'Philo' we find such persons as Abner Semei, Eli Mattathias, Aser Maat, Artaxat Nagid (WA, 114f.),

<sup>12</sup> See Dannenfelt, 'Some Observations', especially 54.

<sup>13</sup> See A. Grafton, 'Renaissance Readers and Ancient Texts: Comments on Some Commentaries', *Renaissance Quarterly*, xxxviii (1985), 615-49, and especially 623ff.

<sup>14</sup> WA, 109, and 106-14 in general, with text of 'Metasthenes' at bottom of 18.

<sup>15</sup> On this see 'Ussher', 580.

<sup>16</sup> Modern scholars take Jesus to refer to Herod's temple-building and not to that of Persian times.

names that include elements found in the Lucan genealogy of Jesus. This fact may well have seemed to Luther to support the authenticity of 'Philo's' information. Under Simon the Just is mentioned that to him is ascribed the 'Talmud of the Jews'. The temple of Onias in Egypt is mentioned, with the remark that Onias had wrongly understood the famous passage Isa. xix. 19 but thereby in fact prophesied the end of priesthood.

#### NEW TESTAMENT TIMES

Luther registered the birth of Christ as in the forty-second year of Augustus, and this might seem surprising, since Augustus' principate is now usually counted as beginning in 27 BC. The explanation is simple. He took the rule of Augustus to begin immediately after the death of Julius Caesar. He counted Julius as ruling for five years, commencing in 3913 AM, and Augustus thus begins in 3918 AM = 42 BC.

New Testament events are handled simply and traditionally: as so often in the older chronology, the New Testament was found to yield thin and unclear information. Christ is baptized at the age of thirty, in 30 AD, and his ministry continues over four years, so that his death and resurrection fall in 34 AD, the first year of the final week of Daniel's seventy. In 37, the middle of that week, which is 'more or less' ('fere') in the third year after the resurrection, there takes place the Apostolic Council of Acts xv, in which the Mosaic law was abrogated and freedom from the law was promulgated. Thus in a sense the culminating theological moment was not exactly in the year 4000 AM. But 4000 was the end of that 'week', and the concentration of the ultimate events in the middle of that week gave precise agreement with the prophecy itself (Dan. ix.27).

But here of course Luther was guessing. For the date of the Apostolic Council he had nothing more than wishful thinking. The New Testament gave not the slightest reason for the idea that this event fell as soon as three years (and a little more) after the resurrection. In Gal. i.18f. Paul mentions how he had visited Jerusalem three years after the end of his visit to Arabia, which itself was an indeterminate time after his conversion, but had seen none of the apostles other than Peter and James, and goes on to tell (ii.1) of another visit, rather more like the council of Acts xv, but which took place *fourteen* years later. Thus modern scholars tend to date the council around 49–50 AD. Possibly Luther thought that the 'three years after' of Gal. i.18 justified his position, but in the *Supputatio* he made no effort to explain this. Probably the fact that his supposition gave an excellent solution to the seventy-week problem of Daniel was sufficient to decide the matter.

A few items from late New Testament times may be added. The destruction ('vastitas') of Jerusalem is registered under Vespasian, in the year 74 AD, 'forty years after the passion of Christ and seventy-

four after his nativity'. About this time, and following Paul of Burgos in his additions to the writings of Lyra, Luther refers to the 'flying scroll' of Zech. v.1f., which he identifies as the 'Thalmud Ierosolymitanum', and some decades later he repeats the same, referring to the 'volumen volans, id est maledictio, Thalmud Babylonicum. quo maxime utuntur Iudaei' ('the flying scroll, that is, the curse, the Babylonian Talmud, which the Jews use very much'). At 108 AD (considerably too early) he registers 'Ben Cosban Kochab', but says nothing more about him.<sup>17</sup>

#### AFTER BIBLICAL TIMES

Through the Middle Ages and up to his own time Luther fills his *Supputatio* with all sorts of interesting information: Roman and Byzantine emperors, events in German history and other matters. Only a few of those, which are significant for the theological role of chronology in Luther's mind, will be mentioned here.

Along with general factual references, this material includes some juicy anti-Catholic remarks. Of Gregory the Great, under the decade AM 4550–4560 (AD 590–600), we are told that he was the last Bishop of the Roman Church, those who followed being Popes, i.e. 'Pontifices Romanae Curiae' or priestly functionaries of the Roman court. The same page a little lower tells us of the establishment of papal primacy under Boniface III, a name which, Luther suggests, is well deserved, meaning as it does *bona facies*, a good face, 'because with good appearance he does the worst to God and to men' ('quia bona specie pessima facit Deo et hominibus'). This primacy was acknowledged under the Byzantine emperor Focas or Phocas; on this see again below. Under the year of salvation 1000 we have a note that with the ending of this millennium Satan is 'loosed' ('solvitur') and becomes the Bishop of Rome, the Antichrist, even with the power of the sword. Gregory VII or Hildebrand is registered as 'Larva Diaboli', written upside-down. The inverted writing was deliberate and is applied to other Popes: the same treatment is given, for example, to Innocent III ('Hypocrita insignis') and others.

Luther occasionally mentions Jewish Messianic expectations, apparently in order to indicate, with some satisfaction, that Jewish hopes failed to be fulfilled at the expected time. An example is found at 4200 AM = 240 AD, which should have been the 4000th year of the world according to the computation of the 'House of Elijah'.<sup>18</sup> Though Daniel's prophecy of the seventy weeks had been entirely fulfilled, there was perhaps more to come, and against the year 1327 AD we find

<sup>17</sup> Cf. the note in WA, 128f.

<sup>18</sup> See note in WA, 132. The point is that by Jewish chronography creation was about 200 years later than by Luther's reckoning, so that the prediction of 'Elijah' would be fulfilled in 240 AD. There are similar Messianic references in WA, 155, 164f, against the years 1091, 1225, 1360 AD.

a note that says: 'here end the 1290 days of Dan. xii, taken from the middle of the last week [of the seventy], a day being counted for a year'. But there is no indication of any significant event which constitutes the fulfilment; nor is there any marking, forty-five years later, which would correspond to the 1335 days of Daniel's last figure, Dan. xii.12.

Eschatological notes occur here and there. Under 1378 AD the schism that created a triple papacy is mentioned as a 'clear sign that the Papacy is about to fall' ('signum certum ruituri Papatus'), something already predicted in Rev. xvi.19, 'the great city was split into three parts'. From here on the ruin and collapse of Antichrist is to follow. In 1497 the arrival of the new 'French' or 'Spanish' disease is another sign of the impending end. Chronological correspondences in broad figures reappear in 1517, when 'Papal indulgences were attacked by Luther, in the 102nd year after the death of John Hus, which is more or less ['fere'] the thousandth year since the confirmation of the Papacy by Phocas'. The 102 years from the death of Hus was accurate: Hus died in 1415. The correspondence with Phocas, on the other hand, was exceedingly inexact, so that 'more or less' was a great understatement. Phocas reigned from 602 to 610 and Luther registered his recognition of the primacy under 606, so that the 'thousand years' were in exact terms 911. Exact figures, and very rough figures, it seems, could both work.

The eschatological note is maintained right to the end of the *Supputatio*, for, in a last entry which has already been mentioned above, Luther, writing in 1540, remarks that this year is precisely 5500 from the creation of the world: the end of the world is therefore to be expected, for, as we saw from the prophecy of the House of Elijah, six millennia will complete the world's existence. And this fits with the central Christian narrative of the passion of Christ: it involved three days, but the three days were not completed. Half of each day corresponds to a millennium.

#### GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

Luther divided historical time according to the six millennia. Each had a 'gubernator' or governor. Adam was obviously the first, though this seems not to be stated, Noah the second (born 1056 AM), Abraham the third (born 1948 AM, in good time for the start of the new millennium), David the fourth (stated against the start of his rule in Hebron, 2890 AM). He with his posterity would govern until the coming of Christ, who would be the eternal governor. But the governor ('regnator' this time) of the fifth millennium is Augustus, noticed under 3918 AM = 42 BC as 'the ruler of the fifth millennium, along with his posterity, until the Papacy, the Devil of the final millenium along with Mohammed'. After this, not surprisingly, the sixth millennium had not a 'gubernator' but a 'diabolus', this term being written in large letters all across the page (WA, 153).

Particular interest attaches to the early chapters of Genesis, for they were obviously chronological and had rightly guided Luther's own curiosity in this direction. For him this material is straightforward factual history. The great ages of the patriarchs meant that the elder co-existed with many generations of descendants and a succession was created. Thus not only Seth, but also Enosh, Kenan, Mahaleel, Jared, Enoch, Methuselah and Lamech all lived with Adam himself and heard his teaching. Though Adam had committed a grievous fault, he survived to pass on the true story and doctrine that he knew; living with him, how could they fail to become good theologians, prophets and fathers (WA, 36)? If all the marvellous stories they told had been written out, they would have filled a work much larger than the Bible, larger indeed than a whole lot of Bibles. They did not discuss dollars, guilders or crowns, but talked about the serpent, sin, death, hell, the Seed of the Woman, righteousness, life, paradise and the angels. The long temporal duration of the patriarchal period thus forms a factual historical framework for the transmission of sound doctrine.

The other genealogical list, that of Gen. iv, gave information of the 'Cainica Ecclesia' or Cainite Church, an institution remarkably similar to the Roman Catholic church. The saying of Gen. iv.26, 'then it was begun to call on the name of the Lord', may imply that some few from the Cainite church were converted at this time. The incident of Gen. vi.1-2, in which the 'sons of God' took to wife the fair 'daughters of men', was no giant-generating incarnation or mythological fall of the angels but a straightforward historical incident, in which members of the true or Sethite church ('sons of God') were corrupted by association with the Cainite church.

#### FINAL EVALUATION

To the biblical scholar of today, the striking thing about the *Supputatio* is its strong emphasis on *history*. The Bible might not be a textbook of mathematics or of physics, but it certainly was one of history,<sup>19</sup> and in principle an infallible one at that. Biblical chronology was an exact science or close to being one. History was of supreme importance but depended on chronology. Chronology was 'the light of history'. The thing that made it difficult to work with other history books, and caused them to contradict one another, was that they lacked a totally certain reckoning of the years. Luther himself, however, had not suffered from this, for he relied completely on the Bible, which furnished this reckoning precisely (WA, 24, from the 'Vorrede' of the second edition). This argument, incidentally, was an old one, going back at least to Josephus: the Greeks have a multitude of mutually contradictory books, but the Jews have one sole collection which,

<sup>19</sup> Scholder, *Ursprünge*, 82.

through divine inspiration, gives an accurate account of the earliest and most remote events.<sup>20</sup>

The historical accuracy of the one scripture was therefore a major reason for belief in its divine inspiration. No other book gave a historical account from the absolute beginning of the world down to events knowable within ordinary human record.<sup>21</sup> The existence of a precise and verifiable chronology was the essential linkage which held all the elements together and bound them into a complete chain of evidence. 'God willed', Melanchthon wrote, and in the same spirit as Luther's words, 'that history should be written for us by the fathers and prophets in the best order, and with the number of the years carefully handed down . . . This is a singular glory of the church, that nowhere else in the entire human race has an older series of reigns and times been found. Nor does any other people have the number of years reckoned back so certainly'. The accuracy of the Bible in giving information about the numbers of years in distant times, to which no human memory or reason could have access, only went to prove that it was divinely inspired and equally infallible in matters of normal human history and in theological matters.

The historical character of the Bible was thus very important for Luther, and 'historical' did not mean, as it might mean for many people today, just that the Bible worked on the level of historical events, saw theological meaning in historical movements, or described historical personages. It meant above all that the Bible gave arithmetically precise and correct historical information, forming a total complex that went back to creation and fitted in without friction to the history of the post-biblical world. The world was encapsulated within a temporal box with one end at 3960 BC and the other end, at 1540 AD, not far away.

Now many may wish to say that this, though historical, is history theologically interpreted, and it is true that this is an aspect. But it is an aspect that cannot be pressed very far. So far as the thinking of the *Supputatio* itself goes, *history* remains the main focus of concern. The main purpose is to achieve the historical concretization of the biblical material. It is not so much that history is interpreted theologically, as that theological material is given concretization in temporal relations within history.

That this is so can be seen from one of the most powerful forces governing Luther's chronological thinking, the Danielic prophecy of the seventy weeks. To make this fit in was a major consideration in

<sup>20</sup> Josephus, *Against Apion*, i.15ff., 26, 37f.

<sup>21</sup> The Greeks, supposedly the epitome of natural human wisdom, had nothing to match this. Their great historians were vague about times and chronology. 'The first [Greek] historians had no notion of an era and little sense of time in its larger aspects', writes J. Forsdyke, *Greece before Homer: Ancient Chronology and Mythology* (New York: Norton, 1964), 36. And such feeble chronologies as they had scarcely went back beyond the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries BC at most.

Luther's mind, and he more or less candidly admits that he has pressed the evidence two or three times in order to make it fit in. But what he gains from his result is little more than a *temporal* relation, and a historical one in the sense that the whole thing is set in the past and is now over. In *theological* interpretation of content, whether in Daniel or in Acts, little or nothing is gained. What Luther gained was the demonstration that history, common temporal factuality, had borne the pattern of the 490 years with that same precision which attached to other dates and incidents, within the Bible and without. The same was true of the seventy-year prophecy of Jeremiah.

Historical knowledge is therefore essential as an element in the understanding of scripture: 'scripture, church, and world history form a unity', writes Scholder. If the Bible makes history open to the understanding, it is equally true that history makes the Bible intelligible and serves to demonstrate its truth. Without historical knowledge, how will one know that the predictions of the prophets have come to pass?<sup>22</sup> Of the many predictions made by prophets, the two which most occupy Luther are the two which have the most precise numerical indications attached to them.

Thus history is much more strongly emphasized than eschatology. Eschatological echoes are occasionally heard, and Luther is aware that the world is in its last millennium; but he has no interest in working out exactly when the end will come. By his 6000-year scheme, the world could go on until 2040 AD – perhaps not an unrealistic prediction! There was a sense that recent events were signs of the impending end – something that can be felt in Christianity at any time – but this was quite separate from chronological calculation, which was exact. The great prophecies of Jeremiah and of Daniel were emphatically predictions that had been fulfilled in past history and that was their entire importance. It was primarily *past* history that vindicated theological faith.

It is sometimes pointed out, as a criticism of modern biblical scholarship, that it is over-devoted to historical reconstructions, which by their nature are hypothetical and speculative. Scholars do not explain the text but the (conjectured) events that lay behind it. In so far as this is a criticism, it is one fully applicable to Luther also, at least in his chronology. He was fertile in the reconstruction – whether invented by himself or developed from earlier interpreters – of historical processes that would help to make the chronology fit together. And his handling of the early chapters of Genesis is a thorough historicization, which reads into them a pattern like that of the Reformation, a content of which the text itself is quite devoid.

A good illustration of this historicizing tendency can be seen in Luther's use of the four-monarchy scheme derived from Daniel. These

<sup>22</sup> Scholder, *Ursprünge*, 83–4.

four monarchies were part of a theological concept in Daniel's apocalyptic world. And Luther does arrange four monarchies or empires in the margin of his work: the Assyrian, Persian, Greek and Roman. Daniel had predicted the sequence. If believers perceive that these cataclysmic changes have taken place, exactly as predicted, they will know that the last judgement will come as predicted. This is true theological purpose. But the actual presentation of the empires and their rise and fall is purely historical. Much of it depends on material outside scripture, and moral and theological judgements on the sequence are almost entirely lacking. It is a set of bare 'facts' (as they were then supposed to be); the factual realities were entirely historical. If the biblical texts were to be related to this framework, they could only be understood against a background of independently established historical information. Even when the information came from the Bible itself, it functioned through being used as historical information of exactly the same kind.

Here we must conclude. Luther's approach to biblical chronology had several conflicting elements in it. He could be sensibly critical, as he was in the matter of Abraham's birth, and wildly inventive of ill-evidenced proposals, as he was at several points in the period of the kings. He insisted on arithmetical precision, but could occasionally tolerate wild inaccuracies. He was profoundly dominated by the Danielic prophecy and by the (non-biblical) utterance of 'Elijah'. His insistence on history, as the mode of theological validation of the Bible in this respect, was emphatic. Since it is likely, in a world in which the spirit of the older biblical chronology has been almost forgotten, that these aspects of Luther are poorly known, this study may help to enlarge readers' understanding of his thought. Within the vast scope of Luther's work, chronology was, indeed, only one very small element; but, for the understanding of his approach to the Bible, it is a very distinct and significant part.

