

NOTE ON THE "YEAR-DAY SYSTEM"

Many have adopted a principle of interpretation with regard to designations of time, when they are found in prophecy, to which they have given the name of "the year-day system." This principle is that in such prophetic designations of time, the literal meaning must not be held; but that in all expressions of periods of time, in future events a *day* stands as the representative of a *year*, and all other spaces of time in similar proportion.

There are not a few who hold this as an opinion so established in their minds that they regard it as an undoubted truth, without knowing definitely on what grounds it was adopted. They speak of a *prophetic day* or a *prophetic year* as if it were an axiom that these expressions denote [in] the one a literal *year*, and the other a term of 360 literal *years*.

On this principle they would interpret the designations of time in the book of Daniel and in the Revelation; they thus speak of the 1,260 *years* and the 2,300 *years*. Of course, if we find distinct Scripture warrant for this assumed canon, we must bow to it and interpret accordingly. But if this canon is supposed to be a deduction from Scripture, let us examine whether the inference be legitimate, and let the reception or the rejection depend on the grounds of proof.

It is not, I believe, stated by any that this canon is a subject of direct teaching in Scripture, at least none of the points advanced seem to be relied on as showing this. Some of the maintainers of the system expressly repudiate such a thought. For instance, Mr. Conder says: "The application of the year-day principle to the prophecy would, *a priori*, have been incapable of proof, and might seem scarcely compatible with probability" (*Literary History of the New Testament*, p. 585). And to this he subjoins the following note:

It is admitted that, for the first four centuries, the days mentioned in the prophecies of Daniel and in the Apocalypse were interpreted literally by the Fathers of the Church; but from the fifth to the twelfth century, a mystical meaning came to be attached to the period of 1,260 days, though not the true one. At the close of the fourteenth century, Walter Brute first suggested the *year-day* interpretation, which was fully espoused by the Magdeburg Centuriators, and applied to the Papacy (Elliott, vol. ii. pp. 965-972). That the true solution of the enigma should not have occurred to the earlier writers, is not surprising. It was not intended, and was scarcely possible, that it should be shown, *a priori*, that such was the principle of interpretation. As Mr. Elliott remarks, while the period was yet distant, a moral purpose was answered by a temporary veil of mystery being thrown over the prophetic period; for the Church was not to know the times and seasons, that she might be kept from the earliest age in the attitude of watchful expectation. It was accordingly, not till the time drew near, that the solution of the chronological enigma began to be perceived. Nor does it form any objection to its truth, that the *a priori* evidence scarcely amounts to a probability, when the *a posteriori* demonstration is all but irresistible. It seems to be the divine intention that the discovery of the prophetic mystery should wait upon the facts, not anticipate them."

Some who have received the year-day principle without inquiry will be surprised at these admissions of the weakness of the *a priori* evidence by which it is upheld. Others may think that

too much is surrendered. At all events, however, it must be owned that this canon of interpretation is not known as an intuitive truth; the early Church knew no such axiom. And therefore I hold that it should be shown to be either laid down in Scripture or else that it should be *proved thereby* before anyone can be expected to receive it, and before it is applied to the interpretation of prophetic statements.

In the quotation just given, I do not suppose that anything irreverent was *intended* in saying that "a moral purpose was answered by a temporary veil of mystery being thrown over the prophetic period." But surely such ideas and expressions should be avoided. It is by *truth* that God teaches His people, and thus we can never attribute to Him the accomplishment of a moral purpose by that which would be a virtual deception. He may produce a moral effect by leaving us uninformed as to many things. But this is wholly different from such an effect being wrought by positively false conclusions and opinions occupying the mind. Where Scripture is silent, we know nothing as to God's truth; and this silence may accomplish a moral purpose. But where the Scripture speaks to us, how can it be according to God's mind and appointment that a moral purpose should be answered by our thoroughly misunderstanding it, by its being for ages a delusive light? Scripture may mislead the *rejecters* of truth, but God can never have designed that it should direct His people wrongly. Had He done this, He would have made the reverse of truth profitable to their souls. If it is right that we should *now* understand the designations of time in prophecy, it was equally right from the earliest period of the gathering of the Church. Unless the Scripture taught, as a fact, that God had drawn such a veil, I would not believe it; and if I thus learned that a veil existed, I would not believe that it had been withdrawn, unless I had distinct proof to that effect. To do otherwise would be to assume the existence of some other depository of God's truth beside the treasury of holy Scripture. Observe, I do not say that Scripture truth on various points may not have been misunderstood, and that for long ages. This is wholly different from maintaining that God laid *over His Scripture*, from the first, a veil of mystery. *Our* hearts are dull of apprehension, so that they constantly need the teaching of the Spirit of God. The Scripture itself is the recorded testimony of that same Spirit.

God has taught us in His word what is our object of hope. He also teaches us the intermediate scenes as to some of their more important features. A *right* apprehension of any of the details set before us can never deaden in our minds the moral "attitude of watchful expectation." Nay, it is only so far as we are *truthfully* instructed that we can watch and expect aright.

What, then, are the Scripture proofs which are advanced in favor of the year-day system?

It is true that some expositors show that this principle is needful in *their* explanations of the prophecies themselves. This really is only a *petitio principii*: a certain exposition cannot stand unless this canon is *assumed*, therefore (it is concluded) the canon *must* be true. The right mode of treating the question would be this: If a certain exposition stands or falls together with a canon of interpretation on which it is based, then the exposition in question must be held or not according as that canon is proved or supported by God's word. I am quite aware that dogmatic arguments are sometimes employed: such a doctrinal system depends on such a mode of interpretation, therefore that mode of interpretation must be maintained. And then when a great deal has been said on the *doctrinal importance* of the points involved, it *seems* to some minds as if strong *a posteriori* grounds, at least, had been assigned for the mode of interpretation. This, however, is not a legitimate mode of drawing deductions from Scripture. We can never judge of the *truth* of any part of Revelation by our notions of its importance.

If, then, the prophecies containing designations of time do not state anything on the face of them which supports such a mode of interpretation, we must look elsewhere for the *a priori* grounds of this opinion. I have then to consider certain passages which are commonly referred to in support of this hypothesis.

1. Numbers 14:34: "After the number of the days in which ye searched the land, even forty days, each day for a year shall ye bear your iniquities, even forty years."

This passage speaks of a denounced fact, but in it there is nothing that implies a principle of interpretation. The spies had searched the land of promise forty *days*, and God sentences the murmuring and rebellious Israelites to wander in the wilderness the same number of *years*. In the prophetic part of the verse, *years* are literal *years* and not the symbol of anything else. Apply the year-day system to this passage and then "forty years" will expand into a vast period of *fourteen thousand four hundred years*. All that can be deduced from this passage as to the connection of the terms "day" and "year" is, that as the search of the land had occupied forty literal days so the wandering in the wilderness should continue for forty literal years. Literal years answer to literal days.

2. Ezekiel 4:4-6: "Lie thou also upon thy left side, and lay the iniquity of the house of Israel upon it. According to the number of the days that thou shalt lie upon it, thou shalt bear their iniquity. For I have laid upon thee the years of their iniquity, according to the number of the days, three hundred and ninety days; so shalt thou bear the iniquity of the house of Israel. And when thou hast accomplished them, lie again on thy right side; and thou shalt bear the iniquity of the house of Judah forty days. I have appointed thee each day for a year."

Now this is not a symbolic *prophecy* at all, but simply a symbolic *action* which was commanded by God. And unless there had been the express statement, we never could have known that what Ezekiel did for so many days really represented the actions of the same number of years. It is true that this is an instance in which a day *symbolically represents* a year; but the way in which this is done is wholly different from any such ground being taken as though in prophetic language the one were used for the other.

If in this passage *day* meant *year*, or if it were to be interpreted by *year*, what should we find? That Ezekiel was commanded to lie on his left side *three hundred and ninety years*, and on his right side *forty years*.

3. Another passage which has been used as a basis for this system is the latter part of the ninth of Daniel. Some, however, of the strenuous advocates of the year-day principle, fairly own that it has no bearing upon the question. Its supposed connection arises from the word שָׁבוּעַ, rendered "week," having been taken as though it must be simply in its literal meaning seven *days*. This might be called wholly a question of lexicography. The word itself is strictly *something divided into* or consisting of *seven parts--a heptad, a hebdomad*. It bears the same grammatical relation to the numeral *seven* as one of the Hebrew words used for ten does to the other of similar meaning. Gesenius simply defines its meaning to be "a septenary number." He then speaks of its use as applied sometimes to days, sometimes to years. The word itself, however, defines nothing as to the denomination to which it belongs, whether the one or the other. In Ezekiel 45:21 it is used almost entirely like a numeral, standing with a feminine plural termination in connection with a masculine noun, שָׁבְעוֹת יָמִים (according to the peculiar usage of numerals in

Hebrew and the cognate languages); and this passage is important as showing its use. It is not to be denied nor yet to be wondered at that it should be more often used of *week* than anything else, for this obvious reason: that of all things admitting a septenary division there is nothing so often spoken of as a week. In this sense, however, it more commonly takes the feminine plural termination.

In the present passage it takes its denomination from *years*, which had been previously mentioned in Daniel's prayer. Daniel had been praying to God and making confession on behalf of his people, because he saw that the seventy *years*, which had been denounced as the term of the captivity of Judah, were accomplished. And thus the denomination of *years* connects itself with the answer granted to him. He had made inquiry about the accomplishment of *seventy years*; he receives an answer relative to seventy *heptads of years*. The word has here the masculine plural termination, which *may* arise from *year* being *feminine*. But this could not be absolutely stated as the reason, for it is once used (Dan. 10:2) with the masculine plural joined to *days*.¹

I am well aware that strong assertions have been made to this effect: that if we follow the conventional reading (i.e. with points) it is simply "seventy weeks" (i.e. of seven *days*), but that if we reject the points it must mean "seventy seventies." This statement is very incorrect. I do read with the points, but the argument does not rest upon them. I do not admit that periods of seven days are necessarily indicated by the word itself. But if we paid no attention to the points, we are not left to any such meaningless rendering as "seventy seventies." The fact must have been overlooked that in verse 27, where the word occurs in the singular, it is twice written *full* (i.e. with the letter Vav inserted). And this, without any points to help us, decides the matter.

4. Luke 13:21,32: "The same day there came certain of the Pharisees, saying unto him, 'Get thee out and depart hence, for Herod will kill thee.' And he said unto them, 'Go ye, and tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out devils, and I do cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I shall be perfected.' ' "

In transcribing this passage, I feel such astonishment at its ever having been used as the basis of an argument on the subject that I think that some readers may be incredulous as to the fact. I must inform such that the passage was used a century and a half ago by *Fleming* (whose speculations as to the *weakening* of the Papacy were deemed by many, in 1848, so *wonderfully convincing*), and recently by Mr. Birks. But what use *can* they make of the passage? Mr. Birks says that the incident occurred several weeks before our Lord's sufferings. He therefore interprets it thus: "Our Lord's ministry commencing with a passover, closed at the passover, after an exact interval of three years. The words of this passage would therefore exactly describe the continuance of that ministry: the three days importing the three years." On this I remark, *first*, that *if* our Lord's ministry did continue exactly three years, it is what no one has distinctly proved; and if true, it is not what is commonly held.² And, *secondly*, that if in this instance our

1 In this case, the addition of the word יָמִים *days*, is important, as it shows that the term *might* else be understood differently. It is therefore a natural addition, especially as it comes just after the prophecy of the seventy heptads of *years*.

2 Three years and six months is the term ordinarily assigned to our Lord's ministry, while others would limit it to a year and a few months, and others (such as Dr. Chr. Benson) think that the Gospels supply evidence that it continued for about two years and a half. In the face of this uncertainty of opinion I was surprised to see the direct assertion that it lasted exactly three years. I do not remember any writer who had held this. I do not think that it could be proved from Scripture that it began at the passover; at least it had commenced before the passover in John 2, and that is the first spoken of in connection with our Lord's ministry.

Lord meant *years* by days, there must at this very time have been at least *two years* ("tomorrow and the third day") of His ministry yet to come. Most readers will, I should think, consider that the three days here are as literal as the three days during which our Lord lay in the grave, and that the term "third day" is here as simply third *day* as in the passage which speaks of the marriage at Cana in Galilee. I am not now concerned to expound the passage in Luke, but it seems to me to relate to our Lord's arrival at Jerusalem three days, I should think, after this conversation.

5. Mr. Elliott has recently brought forward Hebrews 7:27 as another passage to support the *year-day* system: "Who needed not *daily*, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifice, first for his own sins and then for the people's." Mr. Elliott supposes (following Macknight) that the high priest offered sacrifice but once in a year and therefore *daily* must mean *yearly*. On this *mistake* (for a simple mistake it is) the supposed argument drawn from this passage entirely rests. On this point I need only refer to Mr. Newton's *Aids to Prophetic Inquiry* (First Series, 2nd ed.), pp. 176, 177.

In all these passages the days when mentioned are simply *days* and the years simply *years*. There is not a single phrase in which it is said that the word *days* must mean years, except the very places the meaning of which is the point under discussion. One supposition cannot be brought forward as proof of another.

A distinction has indeed been drawn between *symbolic* and *literal* prophecies. It is said that in the former we are not to understand *days* literally, but as the symbols of something else. If this distinction be good, no *literal* prophecies ought to be brought forward among the supposed proofs: the sentence of forty years of wandering was a literal, not a symbolic, denunciation; Ezekiel, indeed, lay in his side symbolically, but there was no prophecy in the case at all. The *use* which has been made of this distinction has been to seek thus to avoid the force of literal periods of time mentioned in prophecy which have been literally fulfilled.

And now, to consider the principal statements of time to which this supposed canon is applied, they are:

1. The time, times, and a half (Dan. 7:25 and 12:7).
2. The two thousand three hundred days (Dan. 8:14).
3. The twelve hundred and ninety days (Dan. 12:11).
4. The thirteen hundred and five and thirty days (Dan. 12:12)
5. The five months (Rev. 9:5, 10)
6. The hour, and day, and month, and year (Rev. 9:15)
7. The three days and a half (Rev. 11:9, 11).

The *first* of these periods is mentioned in the same manner in the book of Revelation (12:14). In that book we also find a similar period spoken of as forty and two months (11:2, 13:5), and twelve hundred and sixty days (11:3, 12:6). In neither of the passages in Daniel does this designation of time occur in the midst of a symbolic prophecy at all; for in chapter 7 the period is spoken of in the plain literal interpretation of the symbolic horn, which is said to mean a literal king who shall subdue three literal kings (not described as horns in *this part* of the chapter), into whose hand the saints shall be given for a time, times, and half a time--three years and a half. If we make these words *symbolic*, may we not arbitrarily explain away any other expression of Scripture? In chapter 12 there is no symbol at all. The communicator of truth to Daniel "held

up his right hand and his left hand unto heaven, and swore by Him that lives forever, that it shall be for a time, times, and a half." It seems to me as if the solemnity of this oath "by Him that lives forever" would exclude the thought of mere metaphor and symbol. At least I know of no words in Scripture on which emphatic exactitude is more impressed.

But when we turn to the book of Revelation and see how variously this period is expressed--1,260 days; forty and two months; a time, times, and half--it seems as if care had been taken to prevent all possibility of misconception. Whether occurring in symbolic description or in literal explanation, the same isochronous expressions are repeated.³ As to "*time, times, and a half*," we have the period stated in three languages--Chaldee, Hebrew, and Greek.

The *second* passage (Dan. 8:14) is literally "unto two thousand three hundred evenings mornings," referring to the offering of the daily sacrifice each morning and evening. This also occurs in an explanation, so that the symbolic theory (even if it had any true foundation instead of being, as it is, a gratuitous assumption) would avail nothing. The expression seems such as intentionally to exclude all thought of other than real days.

The *third* and *fourth* passages (in Dan. 12) have nothing whatever to connect them with symbols or with anything other than literal statement. In fact, there is nothing to bring these under the year-day theory except it be an assumed interpretation.

The *fifth* of the passages has nothing whatever in it to call for this theory as needful. There is nothing to hint [at] any meaning except five literal months.

The *sixth* passage has been supposed by some to intimate a very precisely defined period of 391 years 15 days. This would require proof. I cannot see that it speaks of a period of time at all. The passage only says that the four angels were loosed that "had been prepared for the hour, and day, and month, and year"--a solemn designation (as it seems to me) of the *point of time* spoken of; just so our Lord says, "of that day and hour knows no man."

The *seventh* passage, "three days and a half," (Rev. 11) has nothing in it to require any other than the literal interpretation. Some advocates of the year-day system have been fond of laying stress on this passage because, they say, that it was early perceived by the Church that the period meant *three years and a half*. Had this been the *fact*, it would have proved nothing to any who does not feel bound to follow a supposed *consensus patrum* in the understanding of Scripture. The fact has, however, been *overstated*. Prosper, in the fifth century, says that the

3 I may mention that when first my attention was directed to the prophetic parts of Scripture, it was by this threefold mode of speaking of the same term in the book of Revelation that I was led to inquire into the grounds of the year-day theory--a thing of which everyone who knows anything about Scripture has heard traditionally, whether interested in prophecy or not. As a Hebraist I was already aware that the passage in Daniel 9 had no bearing in favor of the theory; and the varied mode of statement in the Revelation showed me that unless it possessed *distinct proof* it was not to be received. The maintainers of the year-day theory accuse those who reject it with repeating the same arguments over and over again. Perhaps they do this, but what of that? If we seek *truth*, not originality, we shall often act thus. How can we set forth the foundation doctrines of Christianity--the redemption of Christ, and the testimony borne by the Holy Ghost to the efficacy of His blood for the salvation of every believing sinner--without repeating what has been spoken reiteratedly from the Day of Pentecost and onward? And do not the upholders of this theory repeat the same arguments? Although I care but little whether I say the same things as others have said before me (so long as the things are *true*), I may inform the reader that my views on the year-day system were published in 1836; so that at least I did not copy from subsequent writers. Let, however, *truth* be maintained, as set forth in Scripture, irrespective of such points as *who* those may be who have previously held the same.

three days and a half of the slain witnesses *answer* to the three years and a half of antichrist. Others repeated the expression a little more strongly. But such passing remarks do not invalidate the correctness of the statement of Mr. Conder, that at the close of the fourteenth century the year-day interpretation was first suggested.⁴

But still, even if we have no exact *proof* of the theory, may we not apply it to the interpretation of Scripture? Is every word in the Bible to be taken literally?

There is nothing relative to Scripture which can be pressed as a matter of teaching unless it can be proved from Scripture, or from the force of the words, or from the facts of the case; and thus no one can be condemned for rejecting a theory not so proved. No doubt that in the Bible, as well as in other books, figurative terms and expressions are used. Thus, when our Lord called Herod "a fox," He used a figure which none could mistake. When He said "Destroy this temple," he used a figure of deep meaning, which was misunderstood. But where there is no figure at all, we have no authority to go out of our way to invent one, especially when it is both inapt and inapplicable. This mode of procedure will never aid us in understanding Scripture; for thus we should only be bending it to our own minds instead of taking the place of learners and inquiring, "What has the Spirit of God written for our instruction?"

Thus the *meaning* of the words *day* and *year* may be considered a simple matter of lexicographical investigation, just as is the import of the word rendered *week* in Daniel 9. And then the responsibility of proving that they may signify something else rests upon those who so understand them. But with regard to *Scripture terms*, we need not always treat them as mere matters of lexicography; and in the case before us we possess ample and absolute evidence *against* that theory, the supposed proofs of which have been discussed.

1. In Daniel 4:16, 23, and 32, king Nebuchadnezzar was told that he should be driven from men, etc., "till *seven times* should pass over him." This, on the year-day theory, would be a period of *two thousand five hundred and twenty years*--longer than from the time of Nebuchadnezzar to the present day. And the term "seven times" occurs both in the symbolic part of the chapter and in the literal, so that the force of words cannot be avoided by any such distinction. Nebuchadnezzar, however, says (verse 28), "All this *came upon* the king Nebuchadnezzar." The prophecy related to literal years, and in literal years was it accomplished. If then in chapter 4 seven times are seven actual years, of course the period in chapter 7 is half that number. Thus king Nebuchadnezzar is an unexceptional witness that prophetic Scripture does not admit the year-day theory.

2. The next witness is Daniel the prophet himself. In chapter 9:2 he tells us that he understood by books the prophecy of Jeremiah, that the Lord would accomplish *seventy years* in the desolations of Jerusalem. Daniel did not understand the period spoken of by Jeremiah according to the arbitrary canon which some would now apply to his own prophecies. He understood seventy years to mean seventy years, and not *twenty-five thousand two hundred years*. Thus this

4 As far as I know, the first who spoke of a period of *twelve hundred and sixty years* was the celebrated Abbot Joachim of Calabria at the close of the twelfth century. But he did not excogitate this as a prophetic period by using any year-day theory, but he formed it from the designation of "a time, times, and the dividing of time." Thus he assumed a *time* to be the largest measure of time in use among men, a *thousand years*; *times* to be two of the next smaller measures of time, *two hundred years*; *the dividing of time* he assumed to be *part* of the last-named measure. He probably adopted *sixty* precisely (instead of *fifty* which he should have done, as it is properly "half a time") from the analogy of the 1,260 days. I ought to inform the reader that Abbot Joachim considered himself to be inspired. The year-day theory of two centuries later seems to be only a carrying out of the supposed revelation to Abbot Joachim.

very chapter of Daniel, from which some (even though it is a prophecy free from all symbol) would draw a proof of their theory, supplies *decisive* evidence against it.

3. The prediction of our Lord as to his own resurrection on the third day is also of importance. It is useless to evade the application of this and similar passages by saying that they do not occur in symbolic prophecies. The answer is simply, "Neither do some of the passages to which you apply the year-day theory. They too are in simple statements." Thus, if in the case of our Lord's burial the third *day* meant *day* and not *year*, then we may plainly see that the canon which assigns the meaning of year to the word day when it is used in prophecy utterly fails in its application.

Instances might be multiplied, such for example as the four hundred years in Genesis 15 foretold to Abraham as the limits of the bondage of his descendants in Egypt. But it is needless to accumulate proofs when the point is established, according to the Scripture rule, at the mouth of two or three witnesses.

This, then, is a case in which the Scripture *has* spoken. We are not, therefore, at liberty to form any conclusions of our own (as if it had been silent) whether day *might not* mean or symbolize year. We are bound in subjection to the word of God to say that it *does not* and *cannot* so mean, and that thus every interpretation which depends on that theory is *necessarily* incorrect.

If we were to admit a *non-scriptural* canon of interpretation, we should do much injury to truth; and we should adopt that to which we could not authoritatively direct the attention of anyone. But the injury to truth is far greater when we admit a canon which is positively *anti-scriptural*. In the former case we should be adding to the word of God, but in the latter we should be even contradicting it.

It is by *truth* that God works on the hearts of His people. To *this* we must then adhere, however it may run counter to conventional ideas. The prophecies of Scripture can never be used for their legitimate purposes if they are explained by the aid of a primary canon which is in itself not only unsupported by Scripture but is actually in contradiction to it.