

Why Study the History of the Church?

Introduction

The study of the History of the Church will be helpful in giving us an understanding of where we, and many things we teach, fit into the overall scene of what God has done, and is now doing.

It will help us -

1. To see how men of God in the past viewed things.
2. To see the development of thought in doctrine as progressively God revealed truth throughout time.
3. To see false positions that have been taken and the resultant effects in the world and the church.

Subject Defined

A brief history of the New Testament Church and doctrines. Though Israel of the Old Testament was called the Church in the Wilderness, we are looking at that which springs out of the atoning work of the cross.

Biblical History from Pentecost to approximately 97AD

1. Egypt

Egypt was the world power at the time of the Patriarchs. She became the dominant nation of the world under the pharaohs of the 18th dynasty, who retained the power some 250 years, 1570-1310BC.

Before this period Abraham had migrated from Ur of the Chaldees, to Haran, then across to Canaan.

Jacob and his sons had gone down to Egypt and settled there. It was there they became slaves and grew as a slave nation, until deliverance under Moses. They moved to, conquered and settled in the land of promise. All this was within the context of the Egyptian dominance over these areas.

Abraham arrived 2000 BC or 1800 BC. The exodus took place in the 15th or 13th centuries BC. According to the scriptures, the Exodus took place 480 years¹ before the 4th year of Solomon, which is fairly sure at 958 BC. That would make it the 15th century, approximately 1438 BC.

The power of Egypt waned, and in the period of Israel's establishment in Canaan, right through Saul, David and Solomon's time and still further, there was no dominant world power troubling them. Their wars were with their small neighbours. In fact, David's and Solomon's kingdoms were enlarged, almost to a minor world power size.

2. Assyria

The next world power over that area was Assyria. **Under Tigleth-Pileser III (745 – 727)** Assyria became a world power with a vast empire, conquering the Aramean (Chaldean) people of Babylonia to the south, the kingdom of Urartu to the north, as well as east beyond the Euphrates and west to Cilicia and south-west into Egypt.

Assyria became the instrument of God's judgement upon the ten northern tribes of Israel because of their idol worship, apostasy, atrocities and degraded life-style.² Samaria fell in 721

¹ 1 Kings 6:1

² Read Isaiah, Hosea, Micah and Amos

BC, the people transported away and Israel ceased to exist. Judah, the southern kingdom, became a satellite state of Assyria.

3. Babylon

The next world power was Babylon. The **Assyrian Empire** fell apart after the death of **Ashurbanapal**, 633 BC. The Babylonians and Medes destroyed Ninevah 612 BC and Haran 610 BC. The western part of Assyria's defunct empire (including Judah) lay now between Egypt and Babylon. Judah came under Egyptian domination 609 – 605BC. The Egyptians took the fight to the Euphrates, were utterly defeated, and sent reeling back to Egypt by **Nebuchadnezzar** who began ruling upon father **Nabopolassar's** death (official date of reign 604 BC).

Judah became an unwilling, vassal state and rebelled. December 598 the Babylonians marched – March 597 Jerusalem surrendered. The King, Queen mother, high officials, leading citizens and much booty was taken to Babylon. Daniel and his friends might have been among those deportees, but more likely were taken hostage when the Babylonians passed by fighting Egypt in 605 BC.

Judah rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, who in July 587, captured Jerusalem and a month later razed it to the ground. He killed many and deported the rest. The temple, the city, were gone. The state of Judah had ended.

The Bible tells us this was God's judgement upon Judah, who rather than repenting when they saw His judgement upon Israel, became even more apostate themselves.

Prophetic History

Before looking at the rise of the fourth

world power, this period requires further study. The Book of Daniel now fits this context and prophesies concerning the future of God's people to the end of the age blend with prophesies concerning the world kingdoms.

At this point in history God begins to reveal, in prophetic detail, His sovereignty, His mercy, and the wonder of His purposes for salvation.

Israel was gone and the people thoroughly dispersed. Judah was now gone and with it David's kingly line. So too was the temple and Jerusalem the city. There was nothing left to suggest that God could fulfil His promises to the people He had called, or the promises to Moses and David. God had judged the apostasy of His people.

All that remained was a remnant of the Jews captive in far away pagan Babylon, and among them was Daniel. In this setting God spoke. And He spoke both to the pagan king **Nebuchadnezzar** (and in judgment to **Belshazzar**) and to **Daniel**. He gave them visions which are recorded in the book of Daniel.

These prophetic visions no longer spoke concerning the Old Testament people of Israel. They now spoke of the whole of human history to come – of the history of world powers and the history of God's people in the context of world history. They projected from then to the end times. The Book of Daniel is the first of two of two prophetic (apocalyptic) books about God's purposes to and at the end of history. The second book is the book of Revelation given by Jesus to John the apostle. These two books reveal the same things. Daniel was told to seal up his visions until the time of the end. John's revelation we are told to read. It is time to open Daniel's book and read it now in the light of what the book of Revelation tells, so that we have a full understanding of the time of the end which is approaching.

Interpretation of the visions of the book of Daniel need to extend right down through history to the present time and link with interpretation of the book of Revelation.

During his captivity, Daniel read a copy of the prophecies of Jeremiah. Jeremiah was the lonely voice warning the king of Judah not to ally himself with others against the Babylonians and calling forth repentance and a turning back to allow the Lord to be Lord of Judah's destiny. He was opposed and eventually taken against his will to Egypt by rebel escapees. But Jeremiah also prophesied the length of the Babylonian captivity and that God would restore again the Jews back to Judah. It was when Daniel read this that he sought God for the restoration of His Name and received the prophecy of Daniel 9. God did speak to Daniel of this restoration, and of immediate history, but only as He showed Daniel down through the ages His purposes.

Ezekiel, like Jeremiah, was also a prophet of that time, but he was among the exiles. He too spoke words of warning, but words too of a new exodus to come.

4. The Medo-Persians

The Babylonian Empire began to decline after the death of Nebuchadnezzar in 562 BC, **Nabonidus** held power 556-539 BC. His son **Belshazzar** was in charge of Babylon, 552-545 BC.

Meanwhile **Cyrus the Persian** took over the Median Empire in 550BC. In 539 he took Babylon. In 538BC he issued an edict ordering the restoration of the Jewish community and religion in Palestine.³ **Shesh-bazzar** led an initial

³ Aramaic version Ezra 6:3-5, Hebrew report Ezra 1:2-4

expedition back to Palestine. The whole venture was slow and bitterly disappointing.

Zerubbabel, son of Jehoiachin's eldest son (**Jehoiachin** was the king of David's line held captive in Babylon) took over a new expedition to restore the Jewish community in Palestine; somewhere around 520 BC. **Joshua ben Jehozadah** of Zadokite lineage, born in exile, was responsible for spiritual affairs among the returnees. The temple was finished March 515 BC. Morale was low. It was a poor and pressured community of about 20,000 people. (Jerusalem still a ruin 75 years after this).

Cyrus was killed in battle 530 BC. **Cambyses** ruled 530-522 BC and added Egypt to the empire. The empire was racked with upheavals.

Darius I (the Persian) took power 522 BC and by 520 BC put down all rebellion. He confirmed the decree of Cyrus, found in the archives at Ecbatana, but David's throne was not re-established. Zerubbabel disappears from history. Judah was just a theocratic community under high priest Joshua and his successors until the time of Nehemiah.⁴

For the next 70 years, 515 – 450 BC, little is known. Most Jews in the empire did not want to return to Palestine. The Persian Empire grew, reaching its greatest expansion in the 5th century BC. Judah's population doubled to approximately 50,000. Darius was an able leader and was succeeded by his son Xerxes 486 – 465 BC, who lost a Persian army and fleet in the Aegean and was forced from Europe.

Artaxerxes I Longimanus (reigned 465/4 – 424 BC) seized the throne when Xerxes was assassinated. The Jewish community was small, and was harassed and bullied by provincial officials of Samaria.⁵ There was also enmity with

⁴ Neh 12:26

⁵ Ezra 4:6; 4:7-23

neighbours, e.g. Edomites. But during his reign the situation changed dramatically (probably 458/457 BC). Permission, by decree of Artaxerxes, was given both to reorganise the practice of Jewish religion through all Palestine and also rebuild the walls and city of Jerusalem. **Ezra** and **Nehemiah** were the leaders of this important development.

An important question has been “by which decree was permission given to rebuild the fortifications of Jerusalem?” This is important in dating the 70 weeks of years prophecy of Daniel 9. (This will be discussed in a separate study on this topic). Suffice it to say this decree of **Artaxerxes** fulfils the criteria best.

Dates are difficult for Ezra. Nehemiah’s dates are certain. Their careers overlapped. Nehemiah gave the community political status and administrative form, while Ezra reorganised and reformed its spiritual life.

Nehemiah’s career was from the 20th year of Artaxerxes (445 BC)⁶ to sometime after his 32nd year (approximately 433 BC).⁷ My assessment is that Ezra came⁸ in the seventh year of Artaxerxes (458 BC) and completed his work after Nehemiah’s arrival.

Nehemiah was a cup bearer in Artaxerxes court. In December 445BC⁹ a delegation from Jerusalem by **Hanani**, his brother, spoke of deplorable conditions in Jerusalem. He courageously asked, four months later,¹⁰ that the previous decree,¹¹ be reversed. Artaxerxes not only received him, but gave rescript authorising the building of the city’s walls and giving materials for it and appointed Nehemiah

governor¹² of Judah as a separate province, independent of Samaria.

When did Nehemiah go? Josephus says 440 BC.¹³ In 52 days a wall of sorts was up.¹⁴ Josephus says the full wall took two years and four months – to December 437 BC. It was greatly hampered by neighbours, and from within. Nehemiah had to stand firm against religious laxity while getting its external security restored. It needed Ezra’s involvement to get the “inner life” of the community reformed.

Ezra the scribe’s commission,¹⁵ was religious; to teach the law and set up an administrative system to see it obeyed. However, it was for all the Jews in Palestine, far wider than Nehemiah’s civil commission, and was supported by royal decree – it had great authority.¹⁶ Again, against much internal pressure, he eventually reconstituted the community on the basis of the law.¹⁷

‘If Moses was Israel’s founder, it was Ezra who reconstituted Israel and gave her faith a form in which it could survive through the centuries.’ Bright p374.

Concerning the 70 weeks of years prophecy of Dan 9:27ff, what can be said is:

1. there was a specific decree to rebuild Jerusalem,
2. it was given around the middle of the 5th century BC,
3. Nehemiah’s and Ezra’s work was inseparable, and, at least, partly coincident, and

⁶ Neh 2: 1

⁷ Neh 13: 6

⁸ Ezra 7: 7

⁹ Neh 1: 1-3

¹⁰ Neh 2: 1-18

¹¹ Ezra 4: 7-22

¹² Neh 5: 14; 10: 1

¹³ Read Neh 2:11- 18: 3

¹⁴ Neh 6: 15

¹⁵ Ezra 7: 12-26

¹⁶ Ezra 7: 26

¹⁷ Ezra 9: 30; 10: 29

4. Whatever decree is prophesied by Daniel a century before, has its date somewhere there in the decrees given those men. (Read notes specifically prepared on this prophecy).

5. The Greeks

The Persian Empire continued after the death of **Artaxerxes I** in 424BC. Judaism gradually assumed the form to take when Jesus Christ was born.

Darius III assumed power in 336 BC, the same time as **Alexander of Macedonia**. In five short years from 334 BC the empire was gone. Alexander the Great (336 – 323) had conquered all.

Beginning in 334 BC he defeated the Persians, subdued Syria and Egypt, took Babylon and the capitals of Persia, Susa and Persepolis. He extended his borders to the Indus River of India. Before he could invade Arabia, he died in Babylon, aged 32.

His reign was brief, but he had organised an empire built on Greek language and culture that was to survive right through to New Testament times. The New Testament was written in market place (Koine) Greek. Greek philosophy is still foundational to Western culture today.

Alexander had no successor. His empire was divided between four of his generals upon his death.

1. **Ptolemy** – Egypt and southern Syria
2. **Antigonos** – northern Syria and west Babylonia
3. **Lysimachus** – Thrace and western Asia Minor
4. **Cassander** – Macedonia and Greece

Antigonos' territory was taken by Selucus I in 310 BC. The kingdom of Lysimachus was also absorbed by the Selucids leaving two major powers in the area from the beginning of the 3rd century, the **Selucids** and the **Ptolemies**.

Constant hostility between the Selucidæ of Syria and the Ptolemies of Egypt kept Palestine under the domination of one or the other as their armies marched against each other. The Ptolemies ruled Palestine through the 3rd century. In 198 BC Antiochus III of Syria (of the Selucidæ) defeated an Egyptian army in north Palestine and gained control of all Palestine.

They began to Hellenize the Jews. **Antiochus IV Epiphanes** (175-163 BC) succeeded to the throne in 175 BC. He interfered with priestly appointments in Jerusalem and introduced Greek customs into Jerusalem. Defeated by the Egyptians in a battle, he turned his anger against the Jews – destroyed the walls of Jerusalem, plundered the temple and turned it into a shrine of Olympian **Zeus**.

On December 15 168 BC, an image of the god was set up on its altar and ten days later a sow was sacrificed in its honour. Heathen altars were set up everywhere. Judaism was proscribed everywhere. The death penalty was inflicted on any who read the Torah. Sabbath observance and circumcision were forbidden.

This sparked the **Maccabean** revolt, 166BC, which defeated the Syrians, cleansed the temple, and resulted in a brief revival of an independent Jewish state, linked with Syria, and under the eyes of the Romans. **Pompey** made Syria a Roman province in 63 BC. Some suggest Dan 8: 23-25 refers to Antiochus IV.

During the **Persian** and **Greek** periods the monarchy and the prophetic office were gone. The priesthood persisted as the central political power in the land.

6. The Romans

Greek culture survived throughout the area of these previous world kingdoms, but now rulership was taken by the

Romans. This empire was to expand west as well as east, as far as northern Britannia.

Rome was founded in 753 BC. She became mistress of the Italian peninsula by 265 BC. Carthage was razed in 146 BC and Macedonia became a province (Corinth was sacked) in 146 BC. **Pompey** made Syria a province in 63 BC and annexed Judea.

Gaul was conquered by **Julius Cæsar** in 58/57 BC. **Augustus** was emperor 27 BC to AD 14. In this context Jesus Christ was born, crucified and raised, and the New Covenant church began and spread. Rebellion broke out against the Romans in Judaea. Jerusalem fell to the Romans under **Titus** in August AD 70, the temple was burned, the city destroyed, the people massacred, with some sold into slavery.

Christianity spread into the whole expanse of the **Roman Empire**, the most extensive of all the world empires. Roman government, laws, administration, built a lasting empire. Such government and administration is reflected in the democracies of our day.

In AD 323 **Constantine** became to sole ruler of the Roman world. He made Christianity the official religion of the Empire. He freed it from persecution and favoured it. A union of church and state had begun.

The Sixth continued

In terms of prophetic history the sixth kingdom continues to modern times, *'five are fallen, one is.'* (Rev 17:10)

Organised Christian religion and political rulership were linked across the whole area of the sixth world kingdom. In the East, this continued till the Moslems overran the Eastern Empire in the 11th and 13th centuries. In the West, the link

was broken only in recent centuries by the rise of Republics and Totalitarianism. (The Reformation did not change the link between church and state.) Yet in Great Britain the link still remains. However even under Totalitarian Communist Rule in Eastern Europe for example, the church is still influential. (So is religion linked with government outside the old world empire boundaries, in Asia and especially in Islamic countries.

So the influence of Greek culture and political idealism and Roman law and governmental administration, applied to the world through the dominant influence that European Christian empires have had down to this century, still apply. It can be said that the sixth world empire has lived to this century and influenced the whole world (Even Asia). Only in the latter half of this century are we seeing the growth of patterns of government, and rearrangements of political power different from that linked with the sixth.

Now at the end of the 20th century we are seeing world wide inter-dependence in economics, communications, technology, and culture, that is demanding world wide decision making and governmental organisation.

A Seventh is at Hand

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