

William Perkins & His Harmony of the Testaments

By Benjamin Shaw

INTRODUCTION

This work, originally in Latin, was titled *Specimen Digesti, sive Harmoniae Bibliorum Veteris et Novi Testamenti*. According to the dedication, it was published December 31, 1597. And there we find the first curiosity. The dedication was to the faculty of Christ's College, Cambridge. Perkins says that it was the custom of the "Gentiles" to send New Year's gifts to one another. According to Perkins, citing some of the church fathers, the church thought it good to condemn this custom, and therefore Perkins himself is not sending this work as a New Year's gift. "Therefore (excellent sirs) I do not send unto you a New Year's gift after the old custom, yet I send."¹ It nonetheless arrived to the other faculty as a New Year's gift. Perkins asked only that his readers read it carefully, with critical judgment.

Perkins died just a few years later in 1602. The work was translated into English and published in 1609 under the title *A Digest or Harmony of the Books of the Old and New Testament*. Given that title, and given our current fascination with the use of the Old Testament by the New, the reader might be led to believe that this is one such work. It is not. In the introductory portion of the work, Perkins sets out several hermeneutical observations that guide his interpretations. However, the substance of the work is a chronology of the Old and New Testaments. In this chronology, Perkins establishes the years Anno Mundi, that is, from the beginning of creation. His chronology thus does not tie directly to the BC and AD chronology of either Perkins's time or our own.

However, a careful consideration of Perkins's timeline can give the reader of the Bible a better sense of the temporal development of biblical events than he can get from a simple reading of the Scriptures. This is due to the fact that Perkins intermixes the works of the

prophets and other books with their placement in the historical sequence. The work is also much more condensed than Ussher's much later *Annals of the World*.

PERKINS'S PROEM

In the first place, Perkins makes some astute observations about the order of Hebrew narrative. The most obvious is what he calls the natural order, or what we might call chronological order. The second is what he calls the order of dignity, in which something or someone which is more important is related before things or persons of lesser importance. Though it is notable in Genesis that less significant figures are dealt with before more important figures, and also more briefly. For example, the history of Esau is dealt with by means of genealogy in Genesis 36 before the story moves on to the history of Jacob through Joseph in chapters 37–50. Perkins's third order he calls the order of wisdom, when things are related in an order that works best for the progress of the story. That may explain, for instance, the double introduction of David in 1 Samuel 16 and 17.

After dealing with the larger issue of narrative order, Perkins considers the order or significance of times. These times include the hour, the day, the week, the month, and the year. As for the hour, it may be a simple hour, such as the statement in John 11:9, "Are there not twelve hours in the day?" Or, it may be a compound hour. For Perkins, the compound hour is a quarter of a day. The period from the first to the third hour is, according to Perkins, called the third hour, the next section of the day is called the sixth hour, and so

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1. J. Stephen Yuille, ed. *The Works of William Perkins*, vol 1 (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), p. 3.

forth. In this way, the hours of the day are like the watches of the night.

As for the day, it is either a twenty-four hour period or it is the period between sunrise and sunset. A holy day is one set apart for a holy purpose. A week is the space of seven day, though in places it represents a period of seven years.

Perkins's discussion of the year is curious, perhaps even odd. He says that the Hebrew year was the time of the sun's course and thus was 365 days, five hours, and 59 minutes. But then, wading through the history of the flood, he says, "it will appear that the year did comprehend thirteen months, and that every month did contain 30 days" (Yuille, Perkins, 1.11). That would make for a 390-day year, which he doesn't explain. He follows that statement with the observation that "the Epaçt did not consist of eleven days, but only five" (Ibid.). The Epaçt was a term used to describe the relationship between the solar calendar year and the lunar calendar year. The eleven-day Epaçt seems to be the consensus view today. Perkins does not explain how he arrived at the idea of a five-day Epaçt.

Perkins then moves on to a discussion of the narrative use of time in the Bible. He divides this discussion into four parts. The first involves the duplication of time. That is, sometimes, times overlap. In making sense of the chronology of the Judæan and Israelite kings, their reigns sometimes overlap, so that there is a duplication of time. Second, sometimes time is dealt with in round numbers. The time Israel spent in the wilderness was forty years, but the time of their punishment was only 38 years. The 38 years, however, approximates to forty. Presumably, there would be other time references that were rounded up or down to even numbers.

Before Perkins moved into his detailed chronology, he gave an overview of the divisions of biblical time. The first division was from creation to the giving of the law. He subdivides this period into three. The first period is from the creation to the flood, which consisted of 1,656 years. It is obvious that he was taking the ages in Genesis 5 and 11 in the Hebrew text at face value for their use in chronological computation.² The second period was from the flood to the promise to Abraham, which he calculated at 367 years (again using the numbers given in the Hebrew text). The third part is from

the promise to the law, which he calculates at 430 years. It should be noted at this point that he is following the Septuagint text of Exodus 12:40. The Hebrew text limits the 430 years to the time Israel was in Egypt. According to the Septuagint, the 430 years was the time from the entry into Canaan to the exodus.

Perkins divided the time of the law into five parts. The first is the 480 years from the law to the temple (1 Kings 6:1). The second part is from the building of the temple to its destruction, which he calculates at 427 years. The third part is the seventy-year captivity in Babylon. The fourth part he defines as the approximately eighty years from the return from Babylon to the beginning of Daniel's weeks. The fifth part then is constituted by the weeks of Daniel, and is hence 490 years.

The final period is the period of the new world under Christ. It extends from Christ's ascension to the final judgment

ODDITIES IN PERKINS'S CHRONOLOGY

We do not have an account from Perkins as to how he arrived at these conclusions. He is obviously using the biblical material, but he does not indicate what other resources he may have been using. Based on the Table of Nations in Genesis 10, Perkins designates Japheth as the first king of Europe, Shem as the first king of Asia, and Ham as the first king of Africa. All this took place in the year 1,757 AM (Anno Mundi). The promise to Abram (Genesis 12) is made in 2,023 AM. The binding of Isaac (Genesis 22) took place thirty-seven years later in 2,060 AM, which, by Perkins's calculation, was also the date of the death of Terah.³ In 2,113 AM Abraham died. There must be a typo in the publication, since it says "Abraham dies in the 375th year of his age" when the text of Genesis 25:7 says 175 years (Yuille, Perkins, 1.24). In addition, Perkins listed 1,948 AM as the year of Abram's birth, but the period from 1,948 to 2,113 is only 165 years. Again, these may be from mistakes in the original, but the reader of the modern edition cannot tell. According to Perkins's calculations, Judah was born in 2,190 and he gave Er in marriage to Tamar in 2,219. But Judah was only twenty-nine years old and Er and Onan were nine and eight respectively. Apparently they were quite vigorous pre-teens. Again, the reader wishes he had access to Perkins's sources and calculations. My sense, however, is that Perkins was misled by the wording of Genesis 38:1, which says, "It happened at that time." Perkins appears to have taken that to mean that all the events of chapter 38 took place between the time the brothers sold Joseph into slavery

2. The ages given for the patriarchs in Genesis 5 and 11 vary in the sources. The total of years derived from the Septuagint is longer than the total derived from the Hebrew text. The total derived from the Samaritan Pentateuch is the shortest of the three.

3. Perkins provided an argument for this dating of Terah's death in his Proem.

and the time of their first trip to Egypt. This would account for Perkins’s estimations regarding the ages of Er and Onan. However, that is a mistaken reading of the clause. The clause is idiomatic and is used to indicate that all of the events of chapters 37–42 occur in the same general period. In other words, Judah’s marriage to Tamar probably occurred before the events of Genesis 37. While Judah was, to some extent, living apart from his extended family, it is likely that he would also have been involved with the larger operations regarding their shepherding. It is not necessary to compress the events of chapter 38 into the brief window between Joseph’s sale and the brothers trip to Egypt.

One more oddity appears among the sons of Jacob. Citing Genesis 41, Perkins stated that Egron was born in 2,232. From the context, Egron appears to be a child of Joseph, but no such character can be found in Genesis 41, or anywhere else in the Bible.

Most of Perkins’s chronology from the time that Israel went into Egypt down to the Babylonian exile appears to correspond, at least roughly, to what other chronologers propose. This is largely due to the fact that the Scriptures provide more chronological data for this period. His chronological references to the Kings of Israel and Judah mostly correspond to the lengths of reign given in the Scriptures. One oddity is that the biblical text assigns a reign of seventeen years to Rehoboam (1 Kings 14:21). Perkins assigns the beginning of his reign to the year 2,970 AM and the end of his reign to 2,985 AM, relieving Rehoboam of two years of his reign.

Once the chronology arrives at the Babylonian exile, however, there are several significant differences from later proposals. First, Perkins places Esther as Queen of Persia during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. This was unlikely to have been the case. Persia was not a significant power at that time, certainly not the empire described in the book. It is more likely the case that the events of the book of Esther occurred sometime between the completion of the temple in Jerusalem and the arrival of Ezra in Jerusalem.

The return from Babylon granted by Cyrus took place in 3,431 AM according to Perkins. He then dates the beginning of the work of Haggai and Zechariah to the year 3,443. According to Ezra 1:1, the decree of Cyrus took place in the first year of his reign. The ministries of Haggai and Zechariah began in the second year of Darius. The twelve years between those two dates that Perkins accords seems to be too short a period. Of course, Perkins’s dates are probably based on the limited sources available to him.

Since Perkins’s dates are presented in AM years, it is difficult to correlate them to our current system of chronology. The following table is intended to help clarify Perkins’s data relative to our own chronology. Ussher, in his *Annals of the World*, provides both AM and BC dates. Though his AM dates do not correspond exactly to those of Perkins, it does serve to shed some light on Perkins. The final column is from a modern chronology of the Old Testament which has had the advantage of using sources that were not available to either Perkins or Ussher. ■

Event/Person	Perkins AM	Ussher AM	Ussher BC	Modern
Exodus	2452	2513	1491	1446
David’s Reign Begins	2890	2949	1055	1050
Kingdom Divides	2970	3029	975	931
Exile of Judah Begins	3360	3416	588	586
Cyrus’s Decree	3431	3468	536	537
Second Temple Completed	3450	3489	515	515
Ezra Arrives in Jerusalem	3514	3537	467	458
Nehemiah Arrives in Jerusalem	3536	3550	454	445