
Bible Chronology

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While we can find substantial defences of the biblical record, a perusal of much archaeological literature draws one's attention to conflicts between the biblical and archaeological claims. In addition, we find that evangelical scholars conflict over dates such as that of the conquest of Canaan. Perhaps significantly, the presumed archaeological conflict occurs in the period of greatest chronological uncertainty. In this article we are to examine first the principles and then their application to the biblical record. Detailed analyses will be avoided, but suitable cross-references will be supplied to enable the reader to pursue these for himself. This writer is starting from the presumption — common to most of this journal's readers — that the Bible is definitive in this as in other matters. Only our interpretation is to be questioned; the Scriptures are inerrant.

I : Some Principles

The importance of chronology

According to Thiele,¹ "Chronology is the backbone of history ... Without an exact chronology, there can be no exact history."

If archaeological discoveries are to be used profitably in illuminating the background to the Scriptures, then it is necessary to relate exactly the events in each.

Relative and Absolute Chronology

We are used to thinking in terms of 1985 (or whenever) and often forget that biblical events are dated differently. For example, "In the year that king Uzziah died ..." (Isaiah 6:1); but, when did he die? Or, "In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah ..." (Daniel 1:1); but, which year was that?

It is possible to build up a fairly accurate relative chronology (but see the problems outlined below) by relating events to some incident. For example, Nebuchadnezzar's attack on Jerusalem is related to the reign of Jehoiakim (2 Chronicles 36:5-8). Through Jehoiakim we can relate back to the other kings of Judah and Israel who preceded him. With the help of Daniel and Jeremiah (Daniel 9:1-2) we can move on to the time of the re-establishment of the nation. The chronicler enables us to relate the date of the exodus to the time of Solomon (1 Kings 6:1). And so we could go on (see below).

The biblical events can be related to the history of the nations surrounding Israel. As mentioned, Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon played a key role in the history of Judah. We have references to Assyria (e.g. Sennacherib in 2 Kings 18:1-3) and Egypt (e.g. Necho in Jeremiah 46:2) to mention just two others.

However, the other nations used relative dates as well, so preventing us from using these as a means to quoting absolute dates. A lot of the records relating to the period of the late Israelite monarchy have unambiguous references to the kings of these nations.² These cross-references between the two systems enable us to lock them into each other.

But, how do we get an absolute chronology?³ The key is an eponymous system from Ashur. This is a chronological system which gives a name to each year and notes an important event in that year (see Table 1).

Table 1: Extracts from the Assyrian eponym list

853	Daian-Ashur	field-marshal	against Hatti
841	Adad-rimani	governor	against Damascus
763	Bur Ishi-Sagale	governor of Guzana	revolt in the city of Ashur; in the month of Simanu an eclipse of the sun took place
734	Bel-dan	governor of Calah	against Philistia
723	Shalmaneser	king of Assyria	against Samaria
709	Mannu-ki-Ashur-li	governor of Tille	Sargon took the hand of Bel

A key event noted in this long list (covering 150 years) was a solar eclipse. This is a sufficiently rare event, and one easily calculated astronomically, so that it can be identified as occurring on the 15th June 763 BC. Hence all the other years in this system can be dated. For example, Shalmaneser III of Assyria refers to Ahab as one who fought against him at the Battle of Qarquar during the eponymy of Daian-Ashur. Twelve years later he tells of receiving tribute from Jehu. The eponymy list tells us that the battle of Qarquar was in the year 853, so Jehu's tribute was paid in the year 841.⁴

The Assyrian and Babylonian chronologies are inter-related through Sargon. The Assyrian king, in year 709 BC, "took the hand of Bel", that is, he became king of Babylon. So, the Babylonian chronology can be linked to the Assyrian. And both are synchronous with biblical history. So, we can now convert the relative chronology of the Bible to an absolute chronology.

The Interpretation of Biblical Data

How do we approach the biblical data? Often there has been an arbitrary manipulation of data in order to harmonise it. Frequently biblical and archaeological scholars dismiss the biblical record as anachronistic (or worse!). For example, Aharoni says that "(the) political conditions ... (are) quite different from the biblical characterisation of the period ... (Judges 17:6)."⁵ Schmidt⁶ established five principles on which the data should be used in order to establish a chronology:

- a. We should be faithful to the Massoretic text which has been proved to be dependable;
- b. our interpretation should be faithful to **all** the biblical data, since it is inconceivable that the Holy Spirit would give so much data if it was not historical;

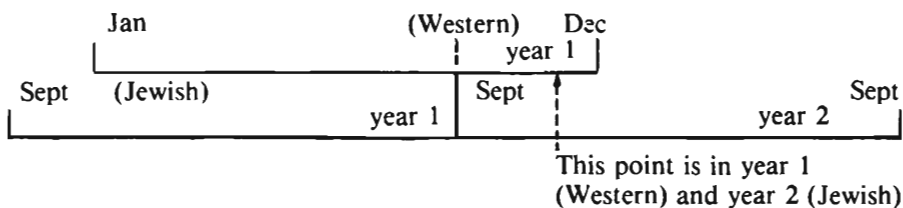
- c. as shown by Thiele's work,⁷ we need to understand the chronologer's mind;
 - d. there should be harmony with established extra-biblical data;
 - e. the overall chronology must be logically and mathematically sound.
- It is on these principles that we will proceed.

There are limitations imposed on us by the biblical record and these must be recognised:

- a. The Bible reports are selective — for example, only two or three years of the forty years of wilderness wanderings are recorded. Similar proportions apply to the monarchical period.
- b. Full details, often chronologically essential details, are not given. For example, the Pharaohs are not named for the time of the sojourn and exodus. This leaves a degree of ambiguity which is well illustrated by the conflicting views amongst evangelicals of the date of the exodus.⁸
- c. Ancient historians did not use twentieth century AD methodologies in commenting on the tenth to twentieth centuries BC. One reason for this was that there was not a universal date line. Even today there are different systems. For example, when this writer was in Morocco he was interested to see the dual dating on their coinage (e.g. 1974 and 1394 on one). Biblical writers (and their non-Jewish counterparts) dated events by a variety of contemporary incidents: "It came to pass in the third year of Hoshea, son of Elah, king of Israel, that ..."; "In the year that king Ussiah died, I saw ..."; "... two years before the earthquake"; etc. In the last example we see a typical problem: we do not know to which earthquake he was referring, though it was obviously of major significance.

Thiele was able to make a significant contribution in this field by deciphering the chronological systems of Israel and Judah. He identified three factors that need to be considered:

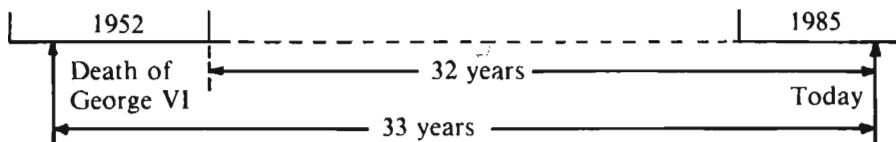
- 1. Coregencies — e.g. Tibni with Omri (1 Kings 16) and Jehoram with Jehoshaphat (2 Kings 8:16-17). This practice was more extensive in Judah (Israel being subject to usurptions). A similar pattern applies to the time of the Judges.⁹
- 2. Different calendar years — this can be illustrated by comparing modern calendars, "Christian" and Jewish. The western year starts on January 1st; the Jewish calendar on September 29th (see figure).



In the Old Testament, Israel's year begins in Nisan (spring) and Judah's in Tishri (autumn).

- 3. Different regnal years — for example, Queen Elizabeth II (as at 1st May

1985) could be described as having reigned for either 32 or 33 years (see figure), depending on whether her reign is dated as from her accession or from the beginning of 1953, her first full year. Israel followed the former system and Judah the latter one (though Judah did change for a while).



- d. Another problem is that characters and countries well known to us from the Scriptures are often known by different names in other nations. Daniel (Hebrew) was known as Belteshazzar (Babylonian). Who are Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah? They are the Hebrew names of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Similarly, Seir and Edom are names of the same country. (Compare Germany = Deutschland = Allemagne). So, we will not be surprised at the non-appearance of “Joseph” in the Egyptian records. On this point I would criticise the translators of the NIV; Esther 1:1 says “Ahasuerus”. To render this as Xerxes is unwarranted — it is interpretation and it is not certain that it is a valid one either.¹⁰
- e. One popular chronological technique is the use of genealogies. But, here again the ancient historian had a different approach to the modern genealogist. A careful comparison of Scripture with Scripture shows that frequently the family trees were condensed. The reason for this is unclear, though it was a widespread practice in the ancient world, but often symmetry seems to have been a factor. For example, Jehu was the son of Nimshi, but he is often identified by his relationship with his grandfather, Jehoshaphat.

The genealogical tables of Matthew 1 are well known for their abbreviation (Joram was the great, great grandfather of Uzziah) which appears to be linked to the symmetry of the passage (three periods of fourteen generations). In fact, the first verse of this chapter demonstrates the principle in an extreme form: “The generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham”. Similarly, a comparison of the genealogies of 1 Chronicles chapters two and six shows that there were, in fact, eight generations between Salmon (and Rahab) and Boaz (and Ruth).⁹

This difficulty is fairly easy to detect when we have different family lines to compare. Problems arise when we move into the pre-Abrahamic period leading to the dates of the flood and creation. Are the genealogies of Genesis five and eleven complete?¹¹ A number of reasonable arguments are presented in support of the contention that they *may* be incomplete. For example, although Scripture refers to total numbers of years from the call of Abraham, from the exodus, etc., it does not do so from the creation or the flood. (But compare Jude 14!) Also, the genealogies are presented in a symmetrical pattern (ten generations ending in three sons) suggesting that symmetry was more important than completeness (cf. Matthew 1). Genesis

11:26 is not presented in a form consistent with precise chronology (Abram was the youngest son of Terah, born when he was 130). It is also argued that they may be incomplete by analogy with other family trees (see above). But this is a two-edged argument: they could be compared to the complete trees instead!

In response to these arguments on the primeval period, we must emphasise a few points. Firstly, the best that can be claimed, as above, is that "... they **may** be incomplete". There is no substantial evidence to prove it. Even following the argument of analogy with other genealogies, we have to say that only a few generations are omitted. The reason for developing these arguments (refer to Green¹¹) is archaeological/scientific pressure. For example, by analogy with the antiquity of Egypt. This evidence is not without its challengers, but again supports our contention that there is a limit to the extension of the genealogies. One of the strongest arguments in favour of the exactness of the tables is the formula that is used: (e.g.) "Seth lived 105 years and begat Enos; and Seth lived after he begat Enos 807 years, and he begat sons and daughters: and all the days of Seth were 912 years, and he died." This writer finds it difficult to see any substance in arguments countering this formula. A strict interpretation of the data has the translation of Enoch and the death of Methuselah in the year of the coming of the flood. Allis¹¹ finds this a "startling conjecture". Why? If it was not a strict chronology we would be more likely to find their life spans overlapping the flood (in theory)! Also, the reference in Jude 14 must be considered. Again, I say they **may** be incomplete, but a substantive case has still to be made.

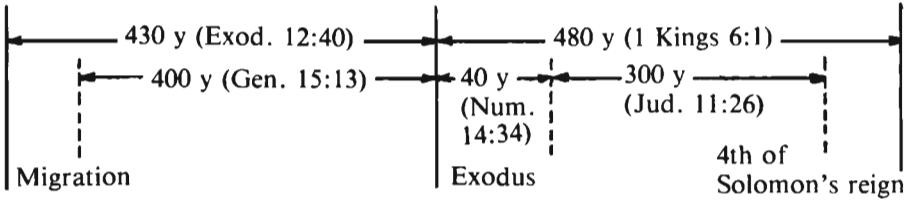
- f. Finally, in relating the biblical chronology to archaeology, we need to refer to archaeological "ages". The long period of man's sojourn on earth is described by the type of tools he used at different times: stone (palaeolithic and neolithic), copper (chalcolithic), bronze (early, middle and late) and iron ages. More recent periods are characterised by the dominant powers. In much of these former ages no written records are found in Palestine and so it is difficult to tie them into the biblical records directly; hence the uncertainty as to which age belongs to each part of the Bible. For example, the exodus has commonly been related to the Late Bronze Age,¹² but Bimson has tied it to the close of the Middle Bronze Age.¹³ A few less orthodox writers even suggested that it belongs to the Early Bronze Age.¹⁴

Towards an Absolute Chronology

The Bible gives us some data which we must take into account and use as fixed points:

- a. a seventy year exile in Babylon (Daniel 9:2; Jeremiah 25:12);
- b. a forty year wandering in the wilderness (Numbers 14:34; Acts 13:18);
- c. there were four hundred and eighty years from the exodus to the fourth year of Solomon's reign (1 Kings 6:1);
- d. there were four hundred and fifty years of rule by the judges (Acts 13:20);
- e. three hundred years passed from the initial occupation of east Jordan to the

- Ammonite attack (Judges 11:26);
- f. Abraham's descendants were afflicted four hundred years (Genesis 15:13; Acts 7:6-7);
- g. four hundred and thirty years passed from the descent of Jacob and his family to the exodus (Exodus 12:40).



Interestingly, even though it is the pivotal point of modern chronology, the date of the birth of Christ is uncertain, because there is controversy about the date of the death of Herod the Great.¹⁵ This affects the precise dating of New Testament events. We know that our Lord was about thirty years old when He began His ministry (Luke 3:23). Many of the events of the early church can be pinpointed thanks to Luke's precise and accurate identification of historical events.

We can pick up some fixed points from archaeology too, though we recognise that these are not infallible data. We have already shown that Assyria provides some positive chronological links with Israel/Judah. We can add other Assyrian dates to this (Table II).

Table II: Some Assyrian Chronological Links

Battle of Qarqar (Ahab)	..	853
Jehu's tribute (Black Obelisk)	..	841
Stela from Rimah (Joash)	..	796 (approx)
Menahem's tribute	..	738 (approx)
Hoshea replacing Pekahiah	..	734 (approx)
Ahaz in Judah (Nimrud Slab)	..	734 (approx)
Capture of Samaria	..	722/721
Subjugation of Judah	..	715
Siege & capture of Lachish	..	701
Manasseh's tribute	..	676 (approx)
Fall of Nineveh	..	612

Babylonia can provide us with some further links (Table III).

Table III: Some Babylonian Chronological Links

Jehoiakim's submission and Daniel's capture	..	605
Battle of Carchemish and the 4th of Jehoiakim	..	605
Fall of Jerusalem and capture of Jehoiachin	..	597

Jehoiachin's rations (between)	..	595—570
Destruction of Jerusalem	..	587
Deportation	..	581

Egyptian history is less precise and not so useful for chronological purposes. Some useful correlations can be found in the periods covered by Assyria and Babylon, because the Bible names the Pharaohs (e.g. Necho) in this period. For a conventional interpretation of Egyptian history in line with this paper, see the work by Aling.¹⁶

II : Application

These principles will be applied with the aid of a series of figures. Details can be filled in with the aid of the cross-references given. In the period from the beginning of the dynasty of David, it is possible to quote the dates to within a year. As we move further back, the dates are related to the exodus. Since these latter periods are referred to in round numbers (often with the qualifier "about"), the precise values quoted below for this period should be treated with some caution. Because of the uncertainties mentioned previously for the patriarchal period, no attempt is made here to convert the biblical information on the pre-Abrahamic period into an absolute chronology.

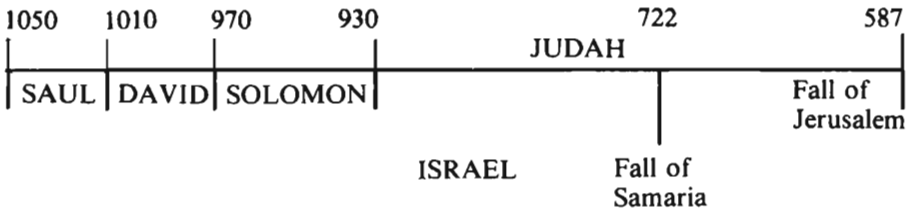
The death of Belshazzar can be dated, from contemporary history, to 539 BC. Since the exile was for seventy years (see above) and the return under Zerubbabel was about 537/6 BC (Ezra 1), the conquest of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar must have been about 606/5 BC, the third year of Jehoiakim. Daniel and his friends were taken into captivity in about 605 BC too and Jerusalem was destroyed in 587 BC.

After the initial return under Zerubbabel, the temple was rebuilt and dedicated in the sixth year of Darius (516 BC; Ezra 6:15). The second return, under Ezra, occurred in the seventh year of Artaxerxes (458 BC; Ezra 7:7) and Nehemiah rebuilt the walls, starting in the twentieth year of this king (445 BC; Nehemiah 2:1).

606	597		539	537		516		458	445
Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem			Fall of Babylon			Temple Restoration		Return under Ezra	
	Daniel to Babylon			Return under Zerubbabel				Nehemiah returned	

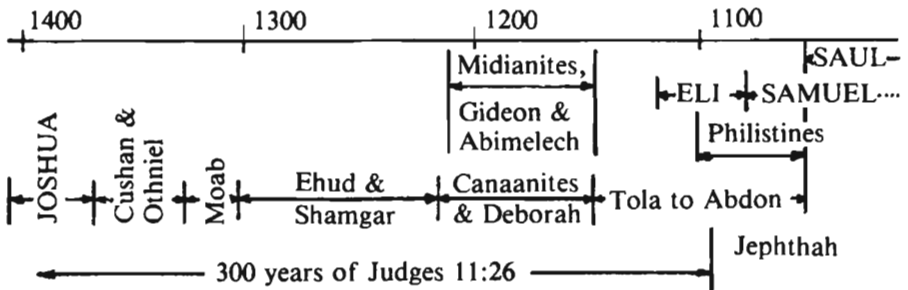
The period of the monarchies can be fixed by a number of points: the downfall of Babylon (587 BC) and the overthrow of Samaria (722 BC). In addition, Sennacherib mentions his attack on Hezekiah (701 BC), which is Hezekiah's fourteenth year (2 Kings 18:13). We have already mentioned the death of Ahab (853 BC) and accession of Jehu (841 BC). From these dates we can move back to the division of the kingdom in 931/930 BC. Solomon reigned forty years (2

Chronicles 9:30) and David for forty years (1 Kings 2:11), though they appear to have had a brief coregency (1 Chronicles 28:5). Saul also reigned for forty years (Acts 13:21).^{9,17}



The details of the reigns in the divided monarchy have been worked out by Thiele,¹ in accordance with his principles outlined above, though in the period of Jotham/Ahaz/Hezekiah he is clearly in error. This portion has been correctly decoded by Stigers.¹⁸

Prior to Saul, the country was ruled by judges. How long did they rule? The “obvious” answer is 450 years (Acts 13:18-20), taking us back to 1500 BC for the death of Joshua. However, this is not consistent with other biblical data: as mentioned earlier, there were 480 years from the exodus to the fourth year of Solomon’s reign (1 Kings 6:1). This puts the exodus at about 1450 BC, which is too late for the 1500 BC start of the judges. This problem is compounded by some scholars who believe that the exodus must be dated to 1250 BC! What is the answer?



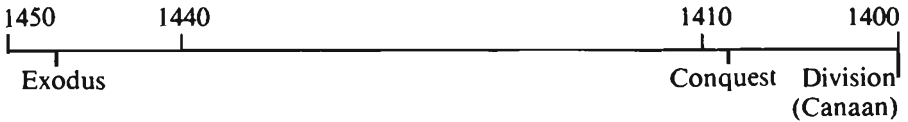
As the diagram shows, there is some overlap in the period of the judges. The arguments for this reconstruction are given elsewhere,⁹ but does conform to Scripture. The period of the judges is, on this model, of the order of 350 years. Merrill submits that the figure of 450 years, quoted by Paul, is a round figure which takes “the numerical data of the book of Judges (and 1 Samuel) at face value and with no allowances for synchronism, lapses or other possibilities which must be entertained in a truly ‘scientific’ approach to the problem.”¹⁹

The figures for the judges from Othniel to Eli, on this principle, are 447 years, that is, “about 450 years”.

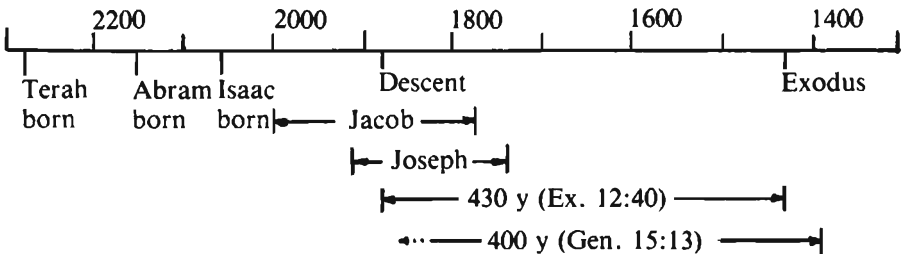
This reconstruction is consistent, not only with the biblical data on the exodus and conquest, but with the statement of Jephthah (Judges 11:26) that the Is-

raelites had occupied the territory for three hundred years.

The arguments concerning the data of the exodus have been well rehearsed elsewhere. The debate is between 1250 BC (“late date”) and 1450 BC (“early date”). The former date has among its leading proponents such evangelical scholars as Kitchen¹⁷ and is determined by certain archaeological considerations. It is difficult to correlate this to the biblical data, though this has been attempted by some writers. However, it is not satisfactory in, for example, its discussion of the period of the judges. The natural biblical interpretation leads to the early date. This date has been skilfully defended by a number of scholars^{8,13,16} and the present writer considers this case to be the most satisfactory.



From Exodus 12:40, we learn that 430 years elapsed from the descent of Jacob into Egypt to the exodus. That puts the descent at 1875 BC. We can add to this further details about Joseph and so estimate the time of the oppression. Joseph met Pharaoh when he was thirty years old (Genesis 41:46). Before his father arrived in Egypt, the period of plenty had passed (seven years) and they were well into the time of famine. If we estimate that he had been vizier for ten years before the descent, he was born around 1915 BC and so died in 1835 BC (aged 110 years; Genesis 50:26). The oppression began, perhaps a generation later, under a Pharaoh who did not know Joseph (Exodus 1:8; Acts 7:18). This gives a period of nearly four hundred years of oppression in Egypt. Not surprisingly, this accords with Scripture (Genesis 15:13; Acts 7:6-7) which indicates that they were afflicted for 400 years (this could, of course, cover the period up to the conquest of Canaan). Since Jacob lived in the land of Goshen for seventeen years (Genesis 47:28) and died at the age of 147 years (Genesis 47:28), he must have been born around 2005 BC.²⁰ Comparing the biblical data on his forebears, we can complete the period of the patriarchs as shown in the diagram.



We have already noted the difficulty in dating the period before the birth of Terah without further confirmatory data.

Some Non-Orthodox Views

The chronological structure described is in line with the orthodox views (though there is division, as noted, over the date of the exodus). Various other approaches have been reported. Obviously non-evangelical scholars treat the biblical data with some scepticism, but there are some other proposals which seek to take the biblical data seriously. These are less orthodox in their interpretation of archaeology. One is by a Seventh Day Adventist, D. Courville.²¹ This model is based on an Early Bronze Age date for the exodus. He seeks to restructure all ancient chronology around this correlation. It does depend on this basic synchronism. Egyptian history is reconstructed so that the Old and Middle Kingdoms are simultaneous; there is no direct evidence for this. The later dynasties of the New Kingdom are also made contemporaneous, often on slender and ambiguous evidence.

A closely related, but different, restructuring is that by a Jew, the late Immanuel Velikovsky.²² His complete work is not yet available, but the essential features are known. The strength of his approach is his attempt to correlate the events of the exodus, as reported in Scripture, with the Egyptian history. The major weakness is his failure to consider stratigraphy and so most of his later work has had to be rejected even by his supporters. A lot of research is still going on to determine the viability of his basic model, some of the best by a British group, the Society for Interdisciplinary Studies. While Velikovsky linked his historical work to his cosmological hypothesis,²³ the two can stand or fall independently of each other. So, a rejection of the latter work need not disallow his primary historical thesis, though, as indicated, this still needs a conclusive analysis.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have discussed the underlying principles to biblical chronology and have proposed a structure covering the period 2295 BC to 445 BC. The Bible has become anchored into a chronological framework which helps us to study it in its true historical context.

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“When we confess that Holy Scripture is inerrant, infallible or truthful, we simply mean that whatever the Bible claims to be true is in fact true. It does not determine in advance what a particular passage is saying, nor does it answer the question of whether a given passage is prose or poetry, figurative or literalistic. The interpreter who accepts the inerrancy of Holy Scripture must continue to use the best tools available to him to determine what a given passage means. But whatever it claims to be true is in fact true, and that simply because it comes from the God of all truth.

To affirm that the Bible is inerrant is to recognise that it comes from God Himself, and that God does not lie, deceive or lead astray. To confess that God’s Book is without error is to express our confidence that the God we have come to know, love and trust in Jesus Christ is indeed faithful and trustworthy in all that He says and does, including the inspiration of Holy Scriptures.”

*Adapted from “The Inerrancy and Infallibility of the Holy Scripture”
in Lutheran Witness, March 1983, by Ralph Bohlmann*