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TIME AND CHRONOLOGY IN TERTULLIAN'S *ADVERSUS IUDAEOS* (VIII. 8-15)

LEVENTE PAP*

Although early Christians attempted to reject the heritage of the Antiquity, they could not succeed in this, therefore this legacy survived together with the Hebrew values they were deeply attached to. This duality characterizes the works of Tertullian as well. In *Adversus Iudaeos*, he uses *The Book of Daniel*, one of Bible's eschatological prophecies to prove that the Christ founded Christianity himself and he was the expected Messiah, his advent having already been foretold. In order to support these assertions, Tertullian enumerates the rulers of the ancient world, calculating the years of the prophecy by seven-year long septennial years. His major goal was to prove the authenticity of the prophecy, and nonetheless a strict historical accuracy – this could be the reason why he uses malleably both the Jewish approach to time and the Greek linear concept of time in the treatment of time and dates.

Keywords: Tertullian, time, Daniel, Christianity, emperors.

Man is unable to perceive time directly. Therefore, we form our concepts of time with the help of spatial ones. We live in time, and we approach its changes by the concepts of motion in space, observing its pulsation from our own perspective. Everyone is situated at a certain point of a temporal vector, with his face towards the future and with his back towards the past. In approaching time in this way, we are the followers of the ancient Greeks.

The Hebrew conception of time is a completely different one. In its foreground there stand not the duration, direction, or its movement, but its content and meaning. Its nature is determined by the fact that, contrary to the Greek way of thinking, dealing primarily with things, the Hebrew way of thinking focuses on the characteristics and meaning of the events, and on their relationships with each other. Consequently, in the Hebrew language time is expressed not with the help concepts of space, but through the forms of everyday activities. It is natural that while we can form quantitative terms about space, the nature of the events is described in qualitative terms. Rékai (2000: 70-72)

The *Ecclesiastes* says: "A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up." (*Ecclesiastes* 3:2-3.)

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The dating according to the years of reign was the typical method of determining time in despotic monarchies, not only in the ancient Orient, but also in Hellenistic monarchies, in the Byzantine Empire and in medieval feudal kingdoms. It expressed the view that the person of the actual ruler primarily determined the character of a particular year. A different way of dating emerged in societies governed in a non-despotic manner, or where the memory of an earlier “primitive democracy” was stronger. *Eponymous* dates consist in the fact, that each year was named after the annually changing person, usually fulfilling a sacerdotal (but in any case a highly esteemed) office, the dates bearing his name. This eponymous system formed the basis of the *Greek* record of years as well. Each Greek city-state possessed an own system in this respect. In Athens, the year was defined by the name of “the archon”. This title was worn by the leader of a nine-member “archonic” body, who therefore was later conferred the title of “archôn epônymos”, the “eponymous archon”. *The Roman Republic* also followed the eponymous system, counting the years according to the consuls. Each year was marked by the names of the two consuls. Even the omnipotent emperors of the fourth century emitted their decrees dated according to the consuls. Only *Justinian* abolished the office of the consulate in 537 and restored the ancient Oriental and Hellenistic pattern of dates according to the years of reign. Hahn (2004)

The ideological basis of developing Christian world-eras were the *eschatological* approach – i.e., regarding Doomsday as the final goal of the history of mankind – and, respectively, one of its forms of manifestation, *chiliasm*. According to this very approach, the history of the world forms a closed unity, which, from the beginning – from the creation of the “first man” – advances throughout vast milenial ages (*chilioi* = “thousand”, hence “*chiliasm*”) according to a divine schedule towards the ultimate outcome, the *eschaton*, i.e. the final divine judgment. Hahn (2004)

First of all, we should posit a generally accepted principle. While Greek thinking was static, in other words, the Greeks were looking for real, authentic existence in an unchanging permanence, taking only the unchanging and resting phenomena as real, Hebrew thinking was concerned with motion, action and the event itself. For the Hebrew thinking of the Old Testament, real existence is to be found in the events, in change. For this thinking, real existence means dynamism. From this position, we can comprehend the concern of Hebrew thinking for history, alongside with its positive approach to time. Here time serves as the unitary and universal framework for actions and events.

The Greeks, like other European nations, cannot imagine time without associating it with space. In other words, when there is mentioned a duration, a date, a period or an interval, these mean a certain spatial order in every instance. We perceive time, *tempus* in this spatial order. The past is what is behind us, the present is the very point we stand at, while the future has to be ahead of us.

When a Greek is speaking about time, he divides it into past, present and future, thus also making it abstract and even relativising it. The Hebrew, on the contrary, does not emphasize the measurability and quantitative importance of

time, but rather its quality, the events taking place in it. For him, time does not exist merely in itself. He does not possess such an abstract image of time. He is not able to separate time as an abstract concept. Instead he always perceives it as closely related to events and happenings. Adorjáni (2000: 2) Early Christian thinking, wanted to deny pagan Roman world, however, it could not succeed in this, because without the culture of the Antiquity this religion would have been condemned to death. The values of Hebrew culture were also an integral part of the new religion. Thus, they could not omit the Greek-Roman culture, while they were attached to Hebrew culture as well. This duality characterized early Christian literature and, accordingly, the works of Tertullian as well.

The prophecies of the *The Book of Daniel* have always been an interesting gleam in the series of the Bible's eschatological prophecies. Hammer (1976) The events of the 1st century BC had increased the interest of the Jews in this topic. This was the time of the actual split of the unity of Hebrew religion, new directions have appeared, trying to provide newer and newer explanations of this prophecy, and have excelled in its precise calculation. Without attempting to discuss here the period of its edition in a more detailed manner, in which the discovery of the *Dead Sea Scrolls* provided nevertheless an undoubtedly important support, *The Book of Daniel* is now important for us rather from the aspects of its content. Vermes (1998)

The origins of this book are also linked to an important event, since it was written when the army led by Cyrus the Great conquered the capital of the Babylonian empire. In addition, this was the year when Cyrus allowed the Jews to return home and build their Temple. Collins (1994)

Let us see the text: *It was the first year of Darius son of Artaxerxes, a Mede by race who assumed the throne of Chaldaea. In the first year of his reign I, Daniel, was studying the scriptures, counting over the number of years – as revealed by Yahweh to the prophet Jeremiah – that were to pass before the desolation of Jerusalem would come to an end, namely seventy years... When your pleading began, a word was uttered, and I have come to tell you. You are a man specially chosen. Grasp the meaning of the word, understand the vision: 'Seventy weeks are decreed for your people and your holy city, for putting an end to transgression, for placing the seal on sin, for expiating crime, for introducing everlasting uprightness for setting the seal on vision and on prophecy, for anointing the holy of holies. Know this, then, and understand: From the time there went out this message: "Return and rebuild Jerusalem" to the coming of an Anointed Prince, seven weeks and sixty-two weeks, with squares and ramparts restored and rebuilt, but in a time of trouble. (Dan 9, 1-2; 23-25)*¹

Daniel's prophecy speaks about the building of the Temple, about its destruction and about the Messiah. Along the centuries, various explanations were born regarding this issue, but a unified position did not exist, therefore the highly respected Rav stated in 246: "All the settled points of the end of times have already passed, the thing now depends only on repentance and on good deeds". Ruff (2006)

¹ Translation from: Wansbrough (1985)

In the Middle Ages Maimonides wrote the following about this, “Daniel has elucidated to us’ ‘the knowledge of the End Times. However, since they are secret, the Wise, may their memory be blessed, have barred the calculation of the days of the Messiah’s coming so that the untutored populace will not be led astray when they see that the end times have already come but there’s no sign of the Messiah. For this reason the Wise, may their memory be blessed, have decreed: “Cursed be he who calculates the End Times.” But we cannot assert that Daniel was wrong in his reckoning.” Santala (1992: 24), Davidson (2005)

Ruff T. has an appropriate remark to this in the concluding part of his article cited above: “Anyway, the prohibition did not have enough results: both the Jews and the Christians are still often preoccupied with Daniel’s prophecy.” Ruff (2006).

All these are valid also for the early Christian era, since this question raised a general interest namely to what extent the prophecy can be related to the birth of Christ (John the Baptist, Paul the Apostle, etc). These approaches were not uniform, but their essence was the same: when should the Messiah arrive, and did Christ actually arrive within this interval?

Tertullian² in this debate tries similarly, to exploit the argumentative potential of Daniel’s prophecy in his work *Adversus Iudaeos*.³ *Accordingly the times must be inquired into of the predicted and future nativity of the Christ, and of His passion, and of the extermination of the city of Jerusalem, that is, its devastation. For Daniel says, that "both the holy city and the holy place are exterminated together with the coming Leader, and that the pinnacle is destroyed unto ruin." And so the times of the coming Christ, the Leader, must be inquired into, which we shall trace in Daniel; and, after computing them, shall prove Him to be come, even on the ground of the times prescribed, and of competent signs and operations of His. Which matters we prove, again, on the ground of the consequences which were ever announced as to follow His advent; in order that we may believe all to have been as well fulfilled as foreseen. (Adv. Iud. VIII. 8-10)*⁴ It is an important matter that he should demonstrate to his debate partner, of course, with the help of the Bible again, that Christ had to be born,

² Tertullian was born in Carthage c. 160 and died before 240 AD. He is a controversial personality from several points of view. There exist many controversies regarding his life (including the date of his birth and of his death), his qualification and profession (whether he was a lawyer or not), his theology, his argumentative methods, and his style as well. This controversy also persisted throughout his entire further reception. While he had brought an enormous effort in the defence of the Christian faith, he could not enter the ranks of the Church Fathers. While the *Decretum Gelasianum* condemned his writings, none of these Fathers of the Church could have ignored them. His works are still subject to divergent approaches throughout the world, both by ecclesiastic and secular scholars.

³ This work was written around 197; its authenticity is being debated even nowadays. Its major objective was to prove to the Hebrews that the Christ himself, who was also the expected Messiah, had founded Christianity and the prophets had already foretold the advent of Christianity. This work uses the text of the Old Testament in order to persuade his opponents (*retorsio criminis*), and is aiming to prove at the same time that Christendom had replaced the Hebrews in being the chosen people of God.

⁴ English translation by: Thelwall (1870)

moreover, he even had to have to suffer, and all these were consummated in their due time. Besides, he also wanted to prove that the prophecies also speak about the destruction of the Temple, and that the Jews will become outcaste, and their homeland will be burnt up, which actually came true in the early spring of 70 AD Pap (2008).

In order to support his arguments, Tertullian, enumerates the rulers of the ancient world and the calculation of the years of the prophecy. He starts the enumeration exactly from the (end of the) reign of Cyrus the Great (559-530), which can be considered logical, since, as already mentioned, Cyrus made important concessions toward the Jews, and therefore his reign is a real milestone. The prophet made his predictions in the time of Darius, who in 519 BC allowed the Jews – in line with the previous decree of Cyrus – to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. It made sense that he should start his calculations from the end of the reign of the great king, respectively from the beginning of Darius' reign. The series of the rulers living before Christ ends with Augustus, whose reign is supposed to be of 46 years, and even though – as Tertullian himself also asserts – survived with 15 years the birth of Christ, his whole reign should entirely be added to the reign before Christ, because this leads to the completion of the foretold 62 and half septennial years that should elapse until the coming of Christ: *Let us see, therefore, how the years are filled up until the advent of the Christ: For Darius reigned XVIII years. Artaxerxes reigned XI and I years. Then King Ochus (who is also called Cyrus) reigned XXIII years. Argus one year. Another Darius, who is also named Melas XXI years. Alexander the Macedonian XII years. Then, after Alexander, who had reigned over both Medes and Persians, whom he had reconquered, and had established his kingdom firmly in Alexandria, when withal he called that (city) by his own name; after him reigned, (there, in Alexandria), Soter XXXV years. To whom succeeds Philadelphus, reigning XXX and VIII years. To him succeeds Euergetes XXV years. Then Philopator XVII years. After him Epiphanes XXIII years. Then another Euergetes XXVIII years. Then another Soter XXXVIII years. Ptolemy XXXVII years. Cleopatra XX years V months. Yet again Cleopatra reigned jointly with Augustus XIII years. After Cleopatra, Augustus reigned another XIII years... For, after Augustus who survived after the birth of Christ, are made up XV years. To whom succeeded Tiberius Caesar, and held the empire XX years, VII months, XXVIII days. (In the fiftieth year of his empire Christ suffered. being about XXX years of age when he suffered.) Again Caius Caesar, also called Caligula III years, VIII months, XIII days. Nero Caesar XI years, IX months, XIII days. Galba VII months, VI days. Otho III days. Vitellius VIII months, XXVII days.* The problem of the 15 years should not be considered a complete anachronism, since, Tertullian's list of rulers, as it was mentioned earlier, assigns a determining role to the years of the rulers from the point of view of counting the septennial years and not from that of the exact dates of the significant events during these reigns. This seems to be supported also by the fact that Theodotion's – version of Daniel's prophecy operates with intervals and not with exact dates. If we take

this into account, then the argumentation seems to be logical; even if it may seem ahistorical at certain points – we should not forget that it was not the sequence of the events that was important, but the justification of the Christian narrative of redemption embedded into this series – but his argumentative deduction is logical. Pap (2008:89-92) Even to that extent that afterwards he can easily demonstrate that the fall of the Temple in Jerusalem and the dispersion of the Jews were foretold exactly with the same precision.

The following chart attempts to provide a summary of this:

RULER	YEARS	MONTHS	DAYS
Darius	19		
Artaxerses	41		
Cyrus the Great	24		
Argos	1		
Darius Melas	21		
Alexander the Great	12		
Soter	35		
Philadelphus	38		
Euergetes	25		
Philopator	17		
Epiphanes	24		
Euergetes	27		
Soter	38		
Ptolemy	37		
Cleopatra	22	5	
Anthony & Cleopatra	13		
Augustus	43		
	437	5	
Septennial years	$437*12=5244+5=(5249/12)/7=62.5$		
Tiberius	22	7	28
Caligula	3	8	13
Nero	11	9	13
Galba		7	6
Otho		3	5
Vitellius		8	28
	36	42	93
missing	$(36*365+42*30+93)/365/7=5.6$	5,6	
Claudius included	$(49*365+42*30+93)/365/7=7.5$	7,5	

The emperor list of the chart clearly shows that the name and reign of Claudius are missing. This could be assigned to the author's inattentiveness, however, as the calculations show, their sum total should also contain the reign of Claudius, because the required seven and half septennial years will be complete only this way. The dates of the reign of none of the emperors would be appropriate – we would need 13 years – since Augustus himself also reigned 15 years after the birth of Christ, according to the calculation of Tertullian, therefore he would not fit into the formula. Vespasian, whose reign, according to the former logic, – according to which only the reigns of those rulers are enumerated, when important events took place, relevant for the prophecy – is rightfully missing, reigned for 10 years.

Why is Vespasian omitted from the list? Or what is more, why is also Claudius? From a mathematical point of view Vespasian's reign would have been uncomfortable in the process of argumentation, but Tertullian could have left it out, without any particular explanation, because the war waged to defeat the Jews, together with the mobilization against Jerusalem, had already begun, also during the former emperor's reign, and the decisive victory had not even been fought by the emperor himself, but by Titus. The omission of Claudius can probably be traced back to a *lacuna*, a copy mistake, as Tränkle also notes, not naming this lacuna explicitly, although his interpretation does not rule out this possibility. Tränkle (1964)

Although the explanations do not seem documented enough, sometimes, we can conclude that Tertullian actually had a single important goal: to prove the authenticity of redemption and the rightly adverse fate of the Jews, and nonetheless a complete historical accuracy. Of course, in the centre of this enumeration Christ himself stands as a cardinal argumentative point of this issue. This is also a reference point in the prophecy of the prophet, dividing it into two parts, being inserted between the time of building and the Temple and that of its destruction the Jews will be punished because of their sins; they will lose the divine grace, represented by the destruction of the Temple. However, this is a historical fact which could not have been denied even by the Jews of Tertullian's age, as it was also a historical fact the reconstruction of the Temple after the Babylonian captivity, and therefore between these two events the coming of Christ should be regarded also as a similar historical fact, having been mentioned by the prophet Daniel. In the treatment of time and dates, Tertullian uses malleably both the Hebrew approach to time (see the case of Vespasian) and the Greek linear concept of time (most obviously in the enumeration of the rulers). The Christian literature of this age was mostly characterized by this duality, until it succeeded to acquire its own *voice*, which naturally would also be an alloy of these two.

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