

CHRONOLOGIES AND CALENDARS

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649490035

Chronologies and Calendars by James C. Macdonald

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JAMES C. MACDONALD

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UNIV. OF
CALIFORNIA

BY

JAMES C. MACDONALD, F.S.A. (SCOT.).

LONDON:

WILLIAM ANDREWS & CO., 5, FARRINGDON AVENUE.

1897.

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CHRONOLOGIES AND CALENDARS.

CHAPTER I.

Introduction.

IN writing a treatise upon chronology, it is my wish to take the reader along with me at every turn of the narrative and argument. And while endeavouring to convey to him as quickly as possible the results of my own study in this subject, I will strive, not less strongly, to do so in the most readable way. Let no one be repelled by the idea that a volume dealing with the chronology of history and the calendars in use at the present time is solely for the study-table of Mr. Dry-as-dust. The subject is one which can claim adherents in many diverse fields: the foreign correspondent of commerce must know something of this science; the international voyager cannot afford to neglect its memoranda; and even he who would peruse with intelligent interest Reuter's telegrams from distant lands will find a knowledge of chronology of considerable service.

2. Now, to such a query as 'What's the date of it?' an accurate answer, in the Western style, mentions the month, the day thereof, and the year of the Christian era. If the reply be a written one, the year is commonly shown in four

Indo-Arabic numerals. But how very often are these phrases used in conversation, or the digits preserved on paper without the speaker or recorder troubling himself to enquire whether there are other methods of noting the date? For instance, I can recall a sermon preached about twenty years ago by an eminent English Church divine (now deceased), in which he pictured the absurdity of any rationalist remaining a rationalist who used the year of grace to date his letters. The argument was all right on the surface. As soon, however, as one peruses the chronological authorities, one finds that the Christian era has a limited application; and that there are and were other races—by no means blind to civilisation—which possess more ancient systems of reckoning years, months, and days.

3. To be particular. The year—say 1896—conveys one meaning to us Western Gentiles, another—a very sacred purport—to Jewish minds, and a third and different idea (1) to the Moslem nations. We are apt to forget that it is only to the members of Christendom that these figures refer, in a chronological connection, to present time. To the Jews they memorise a year long ended and past; to the Moslems, (2) a year in a future which is still dim and distant. But that is not all. Go to Asia, and millions of educated persons are regulating their lives, their fasts, and feasts according to an era which is older than our era by fifty-seven years. (3) Which one is right, or is any one epoch the correct chronologic basis, are questions to which this volume will supply approximate answers.

4. Historians, it will be observed, seem to delight to

(1) See chap. iv., sec. 59, for particulars.

(2) See sections 59 and 145 *infra*.

(3) See chap. x.

superscribe B.C. and A.D. upon their pages, but they neglect the origin and the principles of chronology. I found that an historian would burden a paragraph with *one* Gregory, (4) some now forgotten spy, but about Gregory the famous Pope and his Calendar (bringing in the New Style), you will find scanty references in the usual histories. Truly we may say that the golden number is a cipher, and the dominical a dead, neglected letter—to the majority of writers upon historical subjects. And yet all these styles, numbers, and letters are indispensably required in order to obtain a proper and valid foundation for the sequence of dates, which proves so essential to every page of history.

5. A quotation will emphasise this :—‘Suppose (5) that some thousands of years hence, and in the absence of authentic records, the invasion of England by William the Conqueror were referred to the period in which Augustus swayed the sceptre at Rome: would it be possible for posterity to understand the real import and connection of that incident in the manner in which we now do? Assuredly not. But every anachronism is similar in its bearing to this example; and though perhaps by no means so great in degree, would be found as fatal in the nature of its tendency if prosecuted to its conclusions. It is with no little justice, then, that chronology has been styled the eye, and even the soul, of history; or that without it the subjects of this art could be considered no other than a dark chaos, a wreck of fragments void of order and every other indication of design. Unfortunately the discordances of chronologers in cases of the highest consequence are as enormous as the difference between the truth and the

(4) *Vide* Tytler, vol. iv. (5) *Encycl. Edin., vide* History, p. 250.

supposition above mentioned ; and hence the comparatively little value as to any philosophical purpose of the generality of histories respecting the earliest times.'

6. To dogmatise that any date is chronologically infallible because it has been repeated and handed down for hundreds, or even thousands, of years, is only begging the question. Errors have often been perpetuated solely on account of the magnitude of their fallacy. For instance, five centuries ago belief in the powers of the philosopher's stone was a universal tenet ; so, too, in aerial apparitions and in witches. Nay, more, the thinkers of that epoch—the men who were guiding the nations—declared that the heavens revolved round this earth according to the Ptolemaic Laws. To-day what do we find? To-day all these fallacies are rejected. But chronological progress has not kept step with advancement in ethical matters. Fabulous dates still find a place in records, and are handed down with zealous care.

7. 'History to be above evasion or dispute must stand on documents, not on opinions.' (6) And in another sentence the same great authority cogently observes that 'if men were truly sincere and delivered judgment by no canons but those of evident morality, then Julian would be described in the same terms by Christian and Pagan, Luther by Catholic and Protestant, Washington by Whig and Tory, Napoleon by patriotic Frenchman and by patriotic German.' Coming from such a source, these two observations are of great consequence ; and *mutatis mutandis* they apply to the principles of chronology. Chronology should stand upon valid documents ; and the

(6) Lord Acton, pp. 45 and 46.