

FOREWORD

THE SUBJECT of the “Gentile times” is a crucial one today for millions of persons. Christ employed that phrase on a single occasion, as part of his response to his disciples’ question about his future coming and the end of the age. In the centuries that followed, numerous interpretations and time-applications of his expression have developed.

While this book provides a remarkably broad view of the subject, it primarily focuses on one prominent interpretation, one that in a very real sense defines for millions of Jehovah’s Witnesses the time in which they live, supplies what they consider a powerful criterion to judge what constitutes “the good news of the Kingdom” which Christ said would be preached, and acts for them as a touchstone for assessing the validity of any religious organization’s claim to represent Christ and the interests of his Kingdom. An unusual fact is that the foundation of this interpretation is a “borrowed” one, since, as the author documents, it originated nearly a half century before their own religious organization began to appear on the world scene.

Rarely has a single date played such a pervasive and defining role in a religion’s theology as has the date focused on by this interpretation: the date of 1914. But there is a date behind that date and without its support 1914 is divested of its assigned significance. That prior date is 607 B.C.E. and it is the Witness religion’s linking of that date with a particular event—the overthrow of Jerusalem by Babylon—that lies at the crux of the problem.

Those of us who have shared in editing this present work and who were ourselves, more than thirty years ago, part of the writing and editorial staff at the international headquarters of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Brooklyn, New York, can remember the rather stunning effect the arrival of a treatise on the “Gentile times” from Carl Olof Jonsson in Sweden had on us in August of 1977. Not only the volume of the documentation, but even more so the weight of the evidence left us feeling somewhat disconcerted. We were, in effect, at a loss as to what to do with the material. That treatise later formed the basis for

Carl Olof Jonsson's book *The Gentile Times Reconsidered*, now in its fourth printing.

When we today read this book we become the beneficiaries of more than three decades of thorough and careful research. Not just the immense amount of time, but also the means of access to the sources of information that made possible so intensive a study, are something very few of us would have at our disposal. The author has not only made use of such facilities as the British Museum but also has had personal communication with, and assistance from, members of its staff, as also Assyriologists of various countries.

The research takes us back some two and a half millennia in the past. Many of us may think of those times as "primitive" and it thus may come as a surprise to realize how advanced certain ancient peoples were, their writings covering not merely historical events and monarchical dynasties, but also dealing with dated business documents such as ledgers, contracts, inventories, bills of sale, promissory notes, deeds, and similar matters. Their understanding of astronomy, of the progressive and cyclical movements of the lunar, planetary and stellar bodies, in an age unequipped with telescopes, is extraordinary. In the light of the Genesis statement that those celestial luminaries serve to "mark the fixed times, the days and the years," this takes on true significance, particularly in a study in which chronology plays a central role.¹ Nothing, except the modern atomic clocks, surpasses those heavenly bodies in precision in the measurement of time.

Of the quality of the research into the Neo-Babylonian period, Professor of Assyriology Luigi Cagni writes:

Time and again during my reading [of Jonsson's book] I was overcome by feelings of admiration for, and deep satisfaction with, the way in which the author deals with arguments related to the field of Assyriology. This is especially true of his discussion of the astronomy of Babylonia (and Egypt) and of the chronological information found in cuneiform texts from the first millennium B.C.E., sources that hold a central position in Jonsson's argumentation.

. . . His seriousness and carefulness are evidenced in that he has frequently contacted Assyriologists with a special competence in the fields of astronomy and Babylonian chronology, such as Professors H. Hunger, A. J. Sachs, D. J. Wiseman, Mr. C. B. F. Walker at the British Museum and others.

1 Genesis 1:14, *NAB*.

With respect to the subject field I am particularly familiar with, the economic-administrative texts from the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid periods, I can say that Jonsson has evaluated them quite correctly. I put him to the test during the reading of the book. When I finished the reading, I had to admit that he passed the test splendidly.²

Readers of the first or second edition of this book will find much that is new here. Entire sections, including some new chapters have been added. Contributing to the readability of the book is the inclusion of about thirty illustrations, including letters and other documents. Many of the illustrations are rare and will undoubtedly be new to most readers.

The original research behind the book inescapably brought the author on a collision course with the Watch Tower organization and—not unexpectedly—led to his excommunication as an “apostate” or heretic in July 1982. This dramatic story, not told in the first two editions, is now presented in the section of the Introduction titled “The expulsion.”

The discussion of the chronology of the Neo-Babylonian period has been greatly expanded. The seven lines of evidence against the 607 B.C.E. date presented in the first two editions have since been more than doubled. The evidence from astronomical texts forms a separate chapter. The burden of evidence presented in Chapters 3 and 4 is indeed enormous and reveals an insurmountable disharmony with, and refutation of, the chronology of the Watch Tower Society for this ancient period.

Despite the wealth of information from ancient secular sources, this book remains primarily Biblical. In the chapter “Biblical and Secular Chronology” it clears up a common and serious misconception as to how we arrive at a “Biblical chronology,” as also the erroneous idea that a rejection of the Watch Tower’s 607 B.C.E. date implies a placing of secular chronology as superior to such “Biblical chronology.”

We are confident that the reading of this unique book will aid many to gain, not only a more accurate knowledge of the past, but also a more enlightened outlook regarding their own time, and increased appreciation of the trustworthiness and historicity of the Scriptures.

The Editors

2 From the preface to the Italian edition of *The Gentile Times Reconsidered* by Luigi Cagni, Professor of Assyriology at the University of Naples, Italy. Professor Cagni was, among other things, a leading expert on the Ebla tablets, the about 16,000 cuneiform texts that have been excavated since 1975 in the royal palace of the ancient city of Ebla (present Arabic name: *Tell Mardikh*) in Syria. Luigi Cagni died in January, 1998.

