

THOSE 40 PIVOTAL YEARS

Or, fun with numerology

By

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What connotation does the number 40 bring to mind?

Perhaps you think of the era of the judges in Israel--a time when various administrations or judgeships are conveniently demarcated by blocks of time either numbering 40 years or intervals of that figure (e.g., Judge. 3:11, 30, 5:31, 6:1, 8:28, 12:9, 13:1). After the period of the judges came to a close, the three monarchs of Israel's United Monarchy each governed the twelve tribes for 40 year intervals (Saul--Acts 13:21; David--II Sam. 5:4; Solomon--I Kings 11:42, I Chron. 29:27, II Chron. 9:30).

It is quite probable that 400 years passed between the death of Abraham (Gen. 25:8) and the division of the promise land by Joshua (Josh. 1:1-2). Maybe you remember the three 40 year intervals into which the life of Moses was precisely divided (Acts 7:22-23, 30, Num. 14:34); the 40 day fasts of Moses (Ex. 34:28, Deut. 9:9), Elijah (I Kings 19:8), or Jesus Christ (Mt. 4:1-2); or Christ's 40 days with the disciples following his resurrection (Acts 1:3).

Whether the time intervals cited above deal with periods of political rule or administrative epochs, stages of an individuals life, or a time set aside for fasting. . . the number 40 implies a certain sense of judgment.

It is an interesting "coincidence" of modern history--the history of those people descended from the Israelites of the ancient world--that 40 continues to play an important role in the most critical and defining interval of time during the modern era: the years 1775-1815 A. D. It was precisely during these years that the Anglo-American character of the 19th and 20th centuries became confirmed.

Those four decades witnessed the greatest fulfillment to date of the promises of Genesis 48--the separation of Ephraim and Manassah as a generally united people largely under the same single political umbrella of control--and Genesis 49--the unparalleled ascension of the descendants of Joseph through expansion of population, acquisition of some of the most valuable natural resources in the world, and an expanding measure of prestige which inspires today's historians to define the 19th century as British and the 20th century as American. The same 40 years also witnessed the conclusive transference of the birthright blessings, *a la* I Chronicles 5:2, from the first of Jacob's firstborns, Reuben the son of Leah, to Jacob's second firstborn Joseph, the son of his most favored wife, Rachel.

In this ~~new~~ publication, I will offer occasional articles designed to elaborate on the theme outlined above. Those who read these articles should keep three major concepts in mind as they consider each piece. The first concerns the inevitable long-term impact of our personal actions respecting the laws, principles, statutes, and judgments of almighty God. His sovereign pronouncements are inviolable. No matter how hard we may try to find a way around them--no matter how long it may seem that we have "beaten the system," that we have found a way to sin and "get away with it"--sooner or later, we will reap the fruit which we have sewn (Gal. 6:7), for better or for ill.

For our purposes here, the contrasting stories of Reuben and Joseph are thrown into high relief. One of the grand themes of European history from late-medieval times into the early 20th century is the Anglo-French rivalry, not only over Continental territories but in more recent times a colonial rivalry complete with a struggle for control over overseas resources and markets. If the identity of modern-day Reuben is that of the French people of today, and the descendants of Joseph are found in British Isles, the Commonwealth nations, and the United States of America, the broad sweep of Western civilization suddenly takes on added meaning.

We see writ large in the pages of our history books a testimony to the inviolability of the seventh commandment. Through his adulterous relationship with his own father's concubine Bilhah (Gen. 35:22, 49:41), Reuben forfeited the double portion (Deut. 21:15-17) of those material resources and world power promised by the right of primogeniture (Gen. 48:22, Ez. 47:13). His more honorable brother Joseph--a godly young man with character strong enough to resist the seductive temptations of Potiphar's wife (Gen. 39:9-12)-

-thus fell heir to the most spectacular birthright promises ever bequeathed to any national people.

The second concept in our story regards another fascinating "coincidence" or similarity about how the history of *both* the ancient Israelites and the modern-day Anglo-American people has unfolded. Both the record of biblical history and Hebrew tradition attest to major events in human and especially Israelite history falling on the holy days outlined in Leviticus 23.

One tradition places the creation of Adam on a double Sabbath day falling on the Feast of Trumpets. The longest recorded statement concerning the Abrahamic Promise (Gen. 17:1-22) was given 430 years to the very day from that 1st Day of Unleavened Bread on which the Israelites departed from Egypt (Ex. 12:40-41, Gal. 3:17). Indeed, the deliverance of Israel from pharaoh's Egypt is intimately bound up in the Spring Passover season.

We read of the rebuilding of the decimated tribe of Benjamin in conjunction with a fall festival of the early-14th century (Judge. 21:16-24). Solomon chose the Fall Feast as the most appropriate setting on which to dedicate his magnificent temple (I Kings 8, II Chron. 5). He very likely initiated this 14 day celebration (II Kings 8:65-66) on the Feast of Trumpets, interrupting the merriment for a few days in the middle of the festivities to prepare for and observe the Day of Atonement (see *Jamison, Fawcett, and Brown One Volume Commentary* on II Chron. 7:9).

Some three centuries later, Hezekiah saw his foreign relations problems with Assyria resolved in a holy day context. A quite plausible Hebrew tradition indicates that the destruction of Sennachirib's army on the outskirts of Jerusalem occurred on no less than the Passover (II Kings 19:35-36, II Chron. 32:21, Isa. 37:36-37). Following Judah's 6th century B. C. Babylonian Captivity, the Fall Festival became the setting during which Zerubbabel and the returned Jews erected the altar in Jerusalem (Ezra 3). There is even a hint in Isaiah's prophecies that the literal physical restoration of a captive end time Israelite people will begin on the Day of Atonement (27:12-13).

It is interesting that many watershed events affecting the Anglo-Saxon peoples have conformed to this same pattern. From the "shot heard round the world" on the Lexington green (April 18, 1775--the 5th Day of Unleavened Bread) to the final and decisive fall of Napoleon at Waterloo (June 18, 1815--Pentecost), this fascinating coincidence persists. Thus this 40 year time frame during which the withholding of Joseph's birthright expired is bracketed by key events falling on the holy days. The holy day connections to these events might seem the product of mere chance except for the fact that various precipitate political actions, foreign policy decisions, assemblies, key battles, and peace settlements--each highly relevant to the outcome of the American Revolution (1775-1783), the War of 1812 (1812-1815), the French Revolutionary Wars (1793-1799) and the Napoleonic Wars (1804-1815)--*also* coincide with holy day dates.

Finally, the third concept I ask you to remember concerns God's intervening hand in human history. Years ago, at a ministerial refresher program, many of us listened to a Pastor General who declared that Satan's "fingerprints" are all over this world's society. Indeed, that statement is true. On the opposite side of the coin, a more important axiom prevails: God's hand print is on the story of human history, particularly that of physical, national Israel. Like the well-known graffiti of World War II--"Kilroy was here!"--those whose eyesight is illuminated by the Spirit of God can perceive where He has nudged, pushed, shoved, or crafted human events to insure a particular prophesied outcome.

In the articles which follow, we will examine in greater detail some of the fascinating examples which demonstrate God's intervention in modern Israelite history. We hope that you will enjoy this retrospective look at how prophecy has been fulfilled and God's sovereign will confirmed.