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The chronology of the Hebrew kings

By EDWIN R. THIELE

The behind-the-scenes story of how a major problem in Biblical studies was resolved by an Adventist scholar.

It cannot be done. If the numbers had been correct to begin with, it might have been possible to accomplish something in straightening out Hebrew chronology, but the numbers of the kings were not correctly recorded at the beginning, so there is nothing that we can do with them today."

The voice was that of my teacher, W. A. Irwin, chairman of the Department of Old Testament at the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago, as he rejected my request to make the chronology of the Hebrew kings the subject of my Master's thesis. In beginning his class discussion of the books of Kings, Professor Irwin had called attention to the constant contradictions and errors in the regnal data. At the close of the class I had spoken to him about the need for something to be done about the problems he had mentioned, which led to my request for this to be the subject for my Master's thesis.

So I chose another subject. When my Master's work was over and I was beginning work on my doctorate I went again to Professor Irwin to request that the chronology of the Hebrew rulers be the subject of my doctoral dissertation. Again he refused, saying that it was entirely impossible to bring any sort of order to the chaotic state of the chronology of the Hebrew rulers.

When I spoke to him, Professor George Cameron, my cuneiform teacher, was of the same mind as Professor Irwin. And when I approached Prof. A. T. Olmstead, the renowned Assyriologist and Hebrew scholar, he said that for more than 2,000 years the most able Biblical scholars had been wrestling with this problem and had accomplished nothing. If they could do nothing, neither could I. He added that he himself had been working on the chronology of the Hebrew rulers all his life, without success. There was no use for me to make an attempt.

But I could not bring myself to believe that the Biblical numbers about the Hebrew rulers were a mass of errors. I believed the difficulty was that those who had been working on the problem did not understand the original chronological methods employed by the early recorders. If these could be brought to light, order would replace the seeming chaos. The subject fascinated me, so I gave it a great deal of attention. In time the major difficulties were resolved. I found the Biblical statements beginning to harmonize.

The professors at the Oriental Institute were delighted. Professor Irwin requested me to make the chronology of the



Ahijah, a prophet from Shiloh, predicted that Jeroboam would become king over ten tribes of Israel, succeeding Solomon.

Hebrew kings the subject of my doctoral dissertation. Professor George Cameron, editor of the *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, the professional journal of the Oriental Institute, proposed to publish it if I would prepare it for publication. That was done. When the University of Chicago Press heard of it they told me that if I would write it out as a book they would publish it. It was issued in 1951 as *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*.

Professor Irwin wrote in the book's introduction: "The seeming inconsistencies and mathematical contradictions" really were "nothing of the sort, but integral elements in a sound and accurate chronological system." "Passages commonly regarded as patent disclosures of carelessness, if not of ignorance," had been shown "to be astonishingly reliable." "It is a matter of first-rate importance to learn now that the books of Kings are reliable in precisely that feature which formerly excited only derision." "Professor Thiele has made an important contribution to our common quest of truth."

These words from a scholar who once had made sport of the Biblical numbers marked a turning point. From that point the teaching and writing of Professor Irwin took a new turn. He came to look with confidence and respect on what he had once derided.

But what about the chronological data that had brought

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ridicule and distrust? Outwardly the numbers appear to be in constant disarray. For instance, we are told in 2 Kings 9:29 that Ahaziah of Judah began to reign in the eleventh year of Joram of Israel, but in 2 Kings 8:25 we are told that it was in the twelfth year. The difference is only a year, but it is a matter of some importance because it reveals a change in the system of chronological reckoning that just then had been made in Judah.

We are told in 2 Kings 3:1 that Jehoram the son of Ahab of Israel began to reign in the eighteenth year of King Jehoshaphat of Judah. But according to 2 Kings 1:17 it was in the second year of Jehoram, son of Jehoshaphat. Both statements are true, stemming from a coregency of Jehoram with his father Jehoshaphat. Jehoram was in the second year of his coregency when Jehoshaphat was in the eighteenth year of his reign.

If according to 2 Kings 1:17 Jehoram of Israel began in the second year of Jehoram of Judah, how could Jehoram of Judah have begun in the fifth year of Jehoram of Israel, as we read in 2 Kings 8:16? Such an understanding would make each of these kings begin to rule before the other. But the statement is accurate, for when Jehoram of Israel became king, Jehoram of Judah was in the second year of his coregency with Jehoshaphat. When at the death of Jehoshaphat Jehoram began to rule alone, Jehoram of Israel was in the fifth year of his reign.

In this way we see that numbers that at first glance seem to

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be in disagreement actually are correct when correctly understood, and they reveal details of importance concerning the reigns of the Hebrew rulers.

In addition to these comparatively simple items, there are major problems in following the original chronological methods employed by the early Hebrew recorders. Unless we know these, it is not possible to weave the synchronisms and lengths of reign into a harmonious whole.

One important element is the method of chronological reckoning for regnal years. Two methods were in common use. One called the remainder of the calendar year in which a king came to the throne his accession year. Not until the next New Year's Day did the official first year of his reign begin. This is called accession-year reckoning. Totals of regnal years according to this system are in accord with absolute time. This was the system being used in Judah when the united monarchy of David and Solomon was divided.

But according to another system that remainder of the calendar year in which a king began was numbered as his first year, his second year beginning with the next New Year's Day. This is called nonaccession-year reckoning. Therefore, a king who employed this system was in his second year at the same time a king who used the other system was in his first year. In a nation where nonaccession-year reckoning was used the sum total of regnal years increased by one year beyond absolute time for every reign, pulling ahead of the total as calculated in nations where the accession-year system was used. Israel was employing nonaccession-year reckoning at the time of the schism.

Therefore, when Rehoboam began to rule in Judah he employed accession-year reckoning, but Jeroboam, beginning at that time in Israel, employed nonaccession-year reckoning. Some years later, however, at a time of alliance between Judah and Israel, Judah switched from its accession-year method to Israel's nonaccession-year system. This occurred when Jehoram, the son of Jehoshaphat, married Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel of Israel.

This change of system in Judah produced the two seemingly contradictory synchronisms for the accession of Jehoram's son Ahaziah—the eleventh year of Joram of Israel (2 Kings 9:29) according to the former accession-year system, but reckoned in the twelfth year (chap. 8:25), in accord with the newly adopted nonaccession-year method.

After Judah had employed nonaccession-year reckoning for four reigns it returned to accession-year reckoning and followed it to the end. Then Israel also adopted accession-year reckoning and followed it to the end.

It is important also to recognize that at the time Judah followed the accession-year system it employed that system for a synchronistic year of a king of Israel, even though Israel at that time employed nonaccession-year reckoning. Conversely, when Israel followed nonaccession-year reckoning and gave the synchronistic year with a king of Judah where accession-year reckoning was employed, the year was given in accord not with Judah's system but with the system employed in Israel. Not until this procedure is understood can we harmonize the chronological data of synchronisms and lengths of reign.

The month of the year when a ruler began his regnal year is also important. In Judah the regnal year began with the month of Tishri, in the fall. "And in Israel it began with the month of Nisan, in the spring."

At times in the history of Israel and Judah there were overlapping reigns. Such was the case in coregencies, such as when Jotham was placed on the throne jointly with Azariah when Azariah was smitten with leprosy (chap. 15:5). At times there were rival reigns, as when Tibni ruled over part of Israel while Omri ruled the other part (1 Kings 16:21).

In helping us understand overlapping reigns the data recorded for Omri in 1 Kings 16:23 is important. There we read: "In the thirty and first year of Asa king of Judah began Omri to reign over Israel, twelve years." But in 1 Kings 16:28, 29 we are told that Omri died and was succeeded by Ahab in the thirty-eighth year of Asa. Such calculations would give Omri a reign of only seven years, not 12.

Bible students have long been troubled over these data for Omri. When the Bible was translated into Greek three centuries before Christ, it was thought that the information given in 1 Kings 16:28, 29 for the end of Omri's reign in the thirty-eighth year of Asa was wrong, and they changed it to the second year of Jehoshaphat.

What the Greek translators failed to see was that the 12 years of Omri (11 actual years) began in the twenty-seventh year of Asa when Omri was placed on the throne by the people at the insurrection of Zimri (verses 15, 16). Hence the length given for Omri's reign was the total number of years that he was on the throne, commencing with the beginning of his overlapping years with Tibni in the twenty-seventh year of Asa, and terminating with the end of his sole reign at his

death in the thirty-eighth year of Asa. The synchronistic year given for his accession, however—the thirty-first year of Asa—was not the year when his overlap with Tibni began, but when it ended, and when Omri's sole reign began.

This unusual type of reckoning was employed in certain overlapping reigns, where the length of reign is the full number of years that the king sat on the throne, commencing with the year when he first became king at the beginning of the overlap and ending with his death at the close of his sole reign. But at the point where the synchronism for his accession is the year when the overlap ended and the sole reign began, I use the term "dual dating."

Dual dating was employed in five of the eight cases of Hebrew overlapping reigns—for Omri, Jeroboam II and Pekah in Israel, and for Jehoshaphat and Azariah in Judah.

The failure to understand dual dating in these five instances of overlapping reigns has been the factor most responsible for bewilderment concerning the regnal data in Kings. Not only has it created difficulty for modern Bible students, but there was trouble from the time that the Bible first came into being. The Greek translators of the Septuagint did not understand dual dating for Omri. The Hebrew editors who brought together the Scriptures into the Masoretic text on which our current Old Testament is based also had difficulty with dual dating. They did not understand the true meaning of the numbers for Pekah in 2 Kings 15:27.

They placed the account of Pekahiah's reign in 2 Kings 15:23-26 and followed it by the account of Pekah in 2 Kings 15:27-31. But this is not in harmony with the rule of sequence for the accounts of the kings as followed in the books of Kings. That rule requires that accounts of the rulers be placed in the order of sequence in which they began their reigns. If one king began before another, his account preceded that of the other. Since Pekah began in Israel in 752, in the same year that Menahem also began, and since

Pekahiah did not begin until 742, the account of Pekah should have come before that of Pekahiah.

Since the reverse occurs in the Biblical text, we know that the Hebrew editor of Kings did not understand dual dating for Pekah. He placed the account of Pekahiah before that of Pekah because he began in the fiftieth year of Azariah (2 Kings 15:23) and because the synchronism given for Pekah's accession is the fifty-second year of Azariah (verse 27). They did not understand that the year when the two-year reign of Pekahiah was over was the year when Pekah began to reign alone, not the year when he first came to the throne. Beginning the 20 years of Pekah in 740 instead of 752 causes the years of Hoshea to overlap those of Hezekiah and results in the synchronism of 2 Kings 17 and 18.

It is good to know that the numbers of the Hebrew kings . . . give mathematical support to historical soundness . . . in the Word of God.

Modern students of the Bible also have struggled with dual dating, leading some of them to make unfortunate statements about inaccuracies in the Biblical numbers for the kings. Because of their failure to understand dual dating for Jeroboam II in Israel and Azariah in Judah, they failed to understand the historical situation at that period of Hebrew history. The *Jewish Encyclopedia*, addressing the subject of chronology, reads: "The twenty-seventh year of Jeroboam II, king of Israel (II Kings xv. 1), is mentioned as the first year of Uzziah, in flagrant contradiction to all the statements of the previous chapter. . . . Intentional mutilation of the text and suppression of all notice of the temporary suspension of the independence of the kingdom of Israel by the Syrians are the real cause of the larger number. . . . The subsequent passages have been ruthlessly altered, in order to obviate the slightest mention of [the] cessation of Israel's realm. A similar mutilation has been practiced at the end of ch. xv."

The renowned Biblical scholar William F. Albright at one time believed that the numbers in Kings for this period were wrong and that the original pattern of reigns could be secured only by discarding the Biblical data and supplying new figures. He proposed reducing the reign of Athaliah by one year, that of Joash by two years, of Amaziah by eleven years, and of Azariah by ten years. (See "The Chronology of the Divided Monarchy of Israel," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, 1945, vol. 100, p. 21.)

Frank Knight Sanders wrote concerning these numbers: "The exact chronology of this century is beyond any historian's power to determine."—*History of the Hebrews*, p. 141. None of these remarks would have been made if dual dating had been understood.

When the methods I have mentioned above as having been employed by the early Hebrew recorders are understood, it becomes possible to reconstruct a pattern of Hebrew history consistent with the scriptural records and in accord with the established chronology of Israel's neighbors.

It is good to know that numbers of the Hebrew kings, once regarded as wrong, are actually right, and give mathematical support to the historical soundness of the accounts of the Hebrew rulers recorded in the Word of God. □

Reigns of the Hebrew kings

Judah		Israel	
Rehoboam	930-913	Jeroboam I	930-909
Abijam	913-910	Nadab	909-908
Asa	910-869	Baasha	908-886
Jehoshaphat	872-848	Elah	886-885
Jehoram	853-841	Zimri	885
Ahaziah	841	Tibni, rival of Omri	885-880
Athaliah	841-835	Omri	885-874
Joash	835-796	Ahab	874-853
Amaziah	796-767	Ahaziah	853-852
Azariah	792-740	Joram	852-841
Jotham	750-732	Jehu	841-814
Ahaz	735-715	Jehoahaz	814-798
Hezekiah	715-686	Jehoash	798-782
Manasseh	696-642	Jeroboam II	793-753
Amon	642-640	Zachariah	753
Josiah	640-609	Shallum	752
Jehoahaz	609	Menahem	752-742
Jehoiakim	609-598	Pekah, rival reign	752-732
Jehoiachin	598-597	Pekahiah	742-740
Zedekiah	597-586	Hoshea	732-723