

## THE CHRONOLOGY OF 2 KINGS 15-18

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For centuries the apparent contradictions in the chronology of the kings of Israel and Judah remained a mystery to Bible readers and scholars alike. Edwin R. Thiele, however, has now essentially solved the problems of chronology in the books of 1 and 2 Kings.<sup>1</sup> He showed that the chronological information of the books of Kings does not contain errors and that generations of scholars had been ignorant of the methods used in ancient times to record the lengths of the reigns of kings. By recognizing the unique methods used in Biblical times to record the history of the kings, Thiele showed that the book of Kings was an historically accurate record of the ancient monarchs' reigns.

The chronology of the reign of Hezekiah remains particularly troublesome, however. When did Hezekiah reign? How accurate is the present MT of 2 Kings 17-18? Did the original author make a mistake in chronology? Or did a subsequent scribe mistakenly alter the text?

### I. THE SOLUTION OF THIELE

Thiele's comprehensive harmonization of the chronology of the kings of Israel and Judah<sup>2</sup> rests on three important facts.

1. *One must recognize differences in the way the reigns of kings were reckoned.* If a king began his reign in the middle of a calendar year, was he counted as reigning for the entire year (nonaccession-year dating) or was he counted as starting his reign at the beginning of the next year (accession-year dating)? Both methods were used in Judah, but only the nonaccession-year method was used in Israel. Not recognizing these different methods can cause a one- or two-year difference in reckoning the dates of a king's reign.

2. *One must recognize co-regencies.* Occasionally a son would be made king along with his father to insure a smooth transition of power at the death of a king. This often results in dual dating, where the length of a king's reign is given as his total years of reign, including the time he was a co-regent, but his year of accession to the throne is counted as the year he became sole ruler.

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<sup>1</sup>E. R. Thiele, *Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965).

<sup>2</sup>Thiele, *Numbers*. The first edition appeared in 1954.

3. *One can establish dates with the help of non-Biblical sources (e.g. Assyrian or Egyptian chronology).*<sup>3</sup>

Using these three methods Thiele was able to harmonize all of the Biblical chronology of the divided monarchy with the exception of 2 Kgs 17:1; 18:1, 9–10. He was unable to make the chronological assertions of chaps. 17 and 18 harmonize with those of chaps. 15 and 16. All these passages involve the reign of Hoshea in Israel and thus directly affect the dating of the reign of Hezekiah.

Basically, Thiele recognized a conflict between the synchronizations for the reign of Hoshea given in chaps. 15 and 16 and those given in chaps. 17 and 18. According to Thiele the synchronizations in chaps. 15 and 16 point to Pekah beginning his reign in 752 B.C., while chaps. 17 and 18 point to Pekah beginning his reign twelve years later in 740. It is the latter date that puts Hoshea, the last ruler of Israel, on the throne during the early years of the reign of Hezekiah in Judah.

Thiele believe the synchronizations given in chaps. 17 and 18 to be in error. He based his reasoning on two factors: (1) Assyrian chronology,<sup>4</sup> and (2) the Passover observed at the beginning of the reign of Hezekiah. Concerning the Passover, Thiele states:

Invitations to attend this passover were sent not only to Judah, but "to all Israel and Judah," including Ephraim, Manasseh, Zebulun, and Asher (2 Chron. 30:1,6,10,11), areas that once had been the domain of the northern kingdom but that now were free to the envoys of Judah. Hezekiah's decree shows clearly that the former domain of Israel was now open to Judah, for Hezekiah sent his decree to the people "throughout all Israel, from Beersheba even to Dan, that they should come to keep the passover unto the Lord God of Israel at Jerusalem: for they had not done it of a long time in such sort as it was written. So the posts went out with the letters from the king and his princes throughout all Israel and Judah, and according to the commandment of the king, saying, Ye children of Israel, turn again unto the Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, and he will return to the remnant of you that are escaped out of the hand of the kings of Assyria" (2 Chron. 30:5,6).

The entire record points clearly to the fact that when Hezekiah came to the throne, the nation of Israel had ceased to exist, having fallen prey to Assyria.<sup>5</sup>

Certainly 2 Chr 30:6 seems to support Thiele's contention that Israel had fallen by the time Hezekiah reached the throne, for the decree of Hezekiah mentions those who escaped "the hand of the kings of Assyria."

Thus Thiele disregards the synchronizations given in 2 Kings 17–18. He credits them to an error in the understanding of the author of the book of Kings: "He was a man deeply concerned about the truth, but who did not understand all the truth."<sup>6</sup> For the writer of Kings, therefore,

<sup>3</sup>For a simpler summary of this approach see E. R. Thiele, *A Chronology of the Hebrew Kings* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977).

<sup>4</sup>Thiele, *Chronology* 50–51.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 53–54.

<sup>6</sup>Thiele, *Numbers* 542.

the exact situation that prevailed in 752 B.C. was not understood and the employment of dual dating for the synchronism of 2 Kings 15:27 for the accession of Pekah was not perceived. So his twenty years were treated as commencing in 740, not in 752. . . . With Hoshea seeming to begin in the twelfth year of Ahaz rather than the twentieth year of Jotham, and with Hezekiah seeming to have begun in the third year of Hoshea, the synchronisms of 2 Kings 17 and 18 were brought into being.<sup>7</sup>

Thiele's dating of the reigns of the last kings of Israel and the corresponding kings of Judah are as follows:

	<i>Israel</i>		<i>Judah</i>
Pekah	752-732	Jotham	750-732
Hoshea	732-723	Ahaz	735-715
		Hezekiah	715-686

Thiele's attribution of an error to the divinely inspired author of Kings produces a problem for the believer in the inerrancy of Scripture. For this reason others have tried to follow Thiele's basic chronology for the book of Kings but have offered different solutions for the chronology of Hezekiah's reign.

## II. THE SOLUTION OF KITCHEN AND MITCHELL

In the *New Bible Dictionary* K. A. Kitchen and T. C. Mitchell<sup>8</sup> propose to harmonize the synchronizations presented in 2 Kings 17 and 18 by postulating a thirteen-year co-regency of Hezekiah with his father Ahaz. This approach is favored by R. K. Harrison as well.<sup>9</sup> Thus the reigns of the above-mentioned kings would be dated as follows:

	<i>Israel</i>		<i>Judah</i>
Pekah	740-732	Jotham	750-732
Hoshea	732-723	Ahaz	744-715
		Hezekiah	729-686

Seemingly this solves the problem of the synchronizations given in 2 Kings 17 and 18, but in reality it produces more problems than it solves. It extends the total reign of Ahaz to thirty years, though his reign is mentioned as only sixteen years in the text (2 Kgs 16:2). Thus 2 Kings is silent about his fourteen years of co-regency. The same could be said of Hezekiah's forty-three years, of which only twenty-nine are mentioned in 2 Kgs 18:2.

Furthermore, Ahaz was twenty years old when he began to reign (16:2). His father Jotham was twenty-five years old when he began to reign (15:33). If Ahaz was twenty years old in 744, then he was born in 764. But his father was born only nine years earlier (in 775). If Ahaz was twenty years old when he assumed the throne as sole regent in 732, however, then according to Kitchen and Mitchell he was only eight years old when he was made co-regent. One

<sup>7</sup>Thiele, *Chronology* 59.

<sup>8</sup>*New Bible Dictionary* 217 ff. according to R. K. Harrison, *Old Testament Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 734.

<sup>9</sup>Harrison, *Introduction* 734-736.

might imagine the case of a kingdom being ruled by counselors on behalf of a regent who had to reign at a young age because of the death of his father, such as the case of Manasseh (21:1), but why would a son be made co-regent at such a young age?

The postulate of Kitchen and Mitchell creates a corresponding problem concerning Hezekiah. Either he was born when Ahaz was ten years old or he was made co-regent at the age of eleven.

Thiele's reconstruction faces fewer difficulties. Under his scheme Ahaz was born when Jotham was twenty and Hezekiah when Ahaz was fifteen, both within the realm of possibility.

Furthermore, Hezekiah's great Passover becomes a problem for Kitchen and Mitchell. If it took place in the early part of his co-regency, how was it that his messengers could freely go about inviting the Israelite tribes to Jerusalem? It might be asserted that this Passover happened when Samaria was being besieged by the Assyrians. But why would the Assyrians allow messengers from Judah to roam freely in Israel, considering that Assyria also was hostile to Judah? How could Hezekiah refer to the remnant of the people of Israel who escaped out of the hand of the Assyrians if Samaria had not yet fallen (see 2 Chr 30:6)?

Still another problem with the reconstruction of Kitchen and Mitchell is recognized by Gleason Archer.<sup>10</sup> He notes that 2 Kgs 18:13 would conflict with the other chronological information in chaps. 17 and 18 because the date of Sennacherib's invasion of Judah is well established by Assyrian sources. 2 Kgs 18:13 relates that in the fourteenth year of Hezekiah the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem took place. But if Kitchen and Mitchell are correct, this invasion is placed about ten years too early by the author of Kings. Archer seeks to emend the reading to "twenty-fourth year" of Hezekiah's reign. This introduces another problem, however. The author of Kings clearly sets Hezekiah's reign as twenty-nine years. He also notes that "in those days" (referring to the days of the invasion of Sennacherib) Hezekiah became sick and nearly died before God granted his request to live (2 Kings 20). God grants Hezekiah fifteen more years (2 Kgs 20:6). It is obvious that the author wishes to show that Hezekiah's reign was fourteen years before Sennacherib's invasion and fifteen years afterward for a total of twenty-nine years. Archer's emendation destroys this.

### III. ANOTHER SOLUTION

But another solution to the chronology of 2 Kings 17 and 18 exists. Before it is offered, however, a few things need to be noted about the chronological information given in Kings.

The information concerning the year of a king's accession to the throne, his age, and the number of years he ruled is normally given at the report of the beginning of his reign. Only rarely is any information given at the end of a reign, and then only the years of rule are given (1 Kgs 2:11; 11:42; 2 Kgs 10:36; 18:10). Never is the end of a king's reign synchronized with the reign of another

<sup>10</sup>G. L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody, 1974) 291-292.

king (with the exception of 18:10, one of the passages under discussion here).<sup>11</sup> A king's reign is almost never synchronized more than once with another king of the other kingdom (either Israel or Judah, as the case may be). The lone exceptions are Joram (who is synchronized with both Jehoram and Jehoshaphat: 1:17; 3:1) and Hoshea (15:30; 17:1).

From these observations it is obvious that the synchronizations in 2 Kings 17 and 18 are peculiar. 2 Kgs 17:1 is the second synchronization of Hoshea's reign (15:30 with Jotham, 17:1 with Ahaz). 2 Kgs 18:9 synchronizes the middle of the reign of Hoshea with the middle of the reign of Hezekiah, a type of synchronization unknown in the rest of Kings. 2 Kgs 18:10 synchronizes the end of Hoshea's reign with the middle of Hezekiah's reign, again unique to Kings.

What do all these rare (for Kings) forms of chronological information indicate? Perhaps the hand of a second author. Someone after the original time of writing may have added the synchronizations of 17:1; 18:1, 9–10. Thiele is basically correct in stating that, for this "author," "the exact situation that prevailed in 752 B.C. was not understood and the employment of dual dating for the synchronism of 2 Kings 15:27 for the accession of Pekah was not perceived. So his twenty years were treated as commencing in 740, not 752."<sup>12</sup> That is, a later scribe, not the inspired author of Kings, may have added these synchronizations. Perhaps he was trying to make sense of the historical information contained in 2 Kings and did not understand the concept of "dual dating" associated with co-regencies. Thus, as Thiele states: "With Hoshea seeming to begin in the twelfth year of Ahaz rather than the twentieth year of Jotham, and with Hezekiah seeming to have begun in the third year of Hoshea, the synchronisms of 2 Kings 17 and 18 were brought into being."<sup>13</sup>

Therefore a later scribe's additions of his chronology to the record of Hoshea and his reign in 2 Kgs 17:1; 18:1, 9–10 are not part of the inspired text. The length of reign for Hoshea given in 18:10 may be original, since the lengths of the reigns of other kings are occasionally recorded at the end of their reigns. To understand what the original text of each of these verses may have said, it is necessary to examine each separately.

"In the twelfth year of Ahaz king of Judah, Hoshea the son of Elah began to reign in Samaria over Israel, and he reigned nine years" (17:1).

This synchronization was added to make chap. 17 consistent with chap. 18. It is unnecessary, for the synchronization of 15:30 of Hoshea's reign with that of Jotham is sufficient to place Hoshea in his proper sequence. The reign of Hoshea is not immediately treated following 15:30, however. After relating the history of the reigns of Jotham and Ahaz, the narrative returns to the reign of Hoshea in chap. 17. But there is no need to synchronize the reign of Hoshea

<sup>11</sup>1 Kgs 15:28; 16:10 may be seen as synchronizing the ends of the reigns of Nadab and Elah with the kings of Judah. Actually, however, they serve to synchronize the dates of the successful rebellions in the northern kingdom. For this reason they stress the reign of the next king, stating that the successor "reigned in his [the predecessor's] stead."

<sup>12</sup>Thiele, *Chronology* 59.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*

with a king of Judah a second time. There is no need to give the total length of Hoshea's reign, for this is done when the end of his reign is recorded (17:6). 2 Kgs 17:1 may have originally read: "Now Hoshea son of Elah began to reign in Samaria over Israel. . . ."

"In the third year of Hoshea son of Elah, king of Israel, Hezekiah the son of Ahaz, king of Judah, began to reign. He was twenty-five years old when he began to reign. . . ." (18:1-2).

Here the beginning of Hezekiah's reign is synchronized with Hoshea's reign. However, this again is a case of an added synchronization by a later author. The author had already explained the fall of Samaria and the reasons for it in chap. 17. Now he has to explain why Judah did not fall, because it also sinned against God (17:19). The answer is found in chap. 18, the subject of which is the faithfulness of Hezekiah. For the sake of Hezekiah, Judah was spared. 2 Kgs 18:1-8 makes this clear and tells us why Hezekiah was able to successfully rebel against Assyria. The scribe who added the synchronization of 18:1 failed to see that Kings relates not just history but God's dealing in history, and so he added the synchronization where none was needed. The original text may have read: "Hezekiah the son of Ahaz was twenty-five years old when he began to reign. . . ." (cf. 21:1; 22:1; 23:36; 24:8, 18).

"In the fourth year of King Hezekiah, which was the seventh year of Hoshea son of Elah, king of Israel, Shalmaneser king of Assyria came up against Samaria and besieged it and at the end of three years he took it. In the sixth year of Hezekiah, which was the ninth year of Hoshea king of Israel, Samaria was taken" (18:9-10).

2 Kgs 18:9-12 repeats the account of the fall of Samaria. The purpose here is to contrast the fall of disobedient Samaria and the survival of obedient Judah under Hezekiah. The purpose is to explain why God allowed Hezekiah to rebel against Assyria but gave Israel into the hand of Assyria. No synchronizations are needed. In fact, no chronological information is needed at all. That is not the point here. The information on the length of Hoshea's reign may have been repeated here, even though it was not necessary. But considering that 18:10-12 is closely parallel to 17:5-6 it most likely was part of the inspired text. The original text of 18:9-11 may have read: "Shalmaneser king of Assyria came up against Samaria and besieged it and at the end of three years he took it. In the ninth year of Hoshea king of Israel, Samaria was taken. The king of Assyria carried the Israelites away to Assyria. . . ."

The Biblical author's point is not that the fall of Assyria took place during Hezekiah's reign. The point is that, unlike Israel, Judah with God's help was able to repel the attacks of Assyria.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In a sense Thiele was correct. The synchronizations of 2 Kings 17 and 18 are in error. But he was wrong to attribute it to the inspired author. The hand of a later scribe most likely is responsible for these errors. Certainly scribes did alter other portions of Scripture, though not in so dramatic a fashion. Gen 14:14 is an example. The city of Dan was called Laish until long after Moses' day (Josh 19:47; Judg 18:29). Moses probably wrote "Laish," but a later scribe

wrote "Dan," the name he was used to using for that city. Aling has proposed the same type of change in the case of the city of Avaris (Ramses in the extant text of Genesis and Exodus).<sup>14</sup>

There is, admittedly, one problem with this thesis. No manuscript known supports the alterations proposed above. But the thesis has important advantages over the other proposed solutions. It does not deny the inerrancy or inspiration of Scripture. It solves the apparent difficulty with the introduction of only one problem—that of scribal additions to the text. All other proposed solutions increase the problems of the text more than they solve the problems. Perhaps in future years a better solution will present itself through archeological discovery of Biblical or extra-Biblical texts. I doubt this possibility, however, and prefer to preserve both the historical integrity of the author of Kings and harmonize its various historical references in the least objectionable way.

<sup>14</sup>C. F. Aling, "The Biblical City of Ramses," *JETS* 25 (1982) 129–137.