

BIBLICAL CHRONOLOGY

Vol. II, No. 9

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September, 1990

THE MYSTERIOUS NUMBERS OF EDWIN R. THIELE

We come now to what some have called the "Gordian Knot" of Biblical chronology: the period of the kings of Israel and Judah. We do not have a summary figure that tells exactly how long this period of time was. The book of Kings provides the years each king reigned, and cross-references to the reigns of the Kings in the other kingdom, but sometimes these are in apparent conflict. Thus, Biblical chronologists have studied the problem assiduously, and satisfactory solutions to virtually all the vexing questions have been put forth in the past.

Martin Anstey writes that "there is not a single difficulty that has not been satisfactorily cleared up in standard works by able Chronologists from the

by Dr. John Lightfoot, in the 17th Century, to Willis J. Beecher's *Events the* in our own day." (Anstey, *Testament* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, (1913) 1973], p. 169.) Some

of the curious problems are summarized by the aforementioned John Lightfoot: "Divers such passages as these you will find in this story of the Kings. Ahaziah 2 years older than his father (2 Chr. 22:2), Baasha fighting 9 years after he is dead (2 Chr. 16:1), Jotham reigning 4 years after he is buried (2 Ki. 15:30), Joram crowned King in the 17th year of Jehoshaphat (2 Ki. 1:17 + 1 Ki. 22:51), and in the 22nd year of Jehoshaphat (2 Ki. 8:16), and after Jehoshaphat's death (2 Chr. 21:1)." (Cited by Anstey, p. 170.) There are excellent and credible explanations for each of these curiosities, and the interested reader is invited to consult Anstey's work for them.

In recent years, the labors of traditional Biblical chronologists have not been taken seriously. The reason for this is that the chronology of the Ancient Near East that has been devised by secular scholars does not square with the data found in the books of Kings. The chronology in the Hebrew books of Kings is about 50 years longer than the chronology of the nations round about Israel, as reconstructed by secular scholarship.

In 1951, a Seventh-Day Adventist scholar named Edwin R. Thiele published a study titled

Published by the prestigious University of Chicago Press, Thiele was widely heralded as having solved the problem of the chronology of Kings in a way that rescued the reliability of the Hebrew text while dovetailing with the "short chronology" of secular opinion. Thiele's work was revised slightly for publication by Eerdmans in 1965, and again in an edition from Zondervan in 1983.

Although Thiele seeks to defend the Bible as much as possible, it is clear that what he regards as more reliable is the chronological data that comes from the nations

years (2 Ki. 18:10, 13), while according to Assyrian dating there ought to be 21 years between these two events. Thiele gerrymanders the text of the Bible in an extremely speculative way in order to correct this problem. What he should have done is take another look at Assyrian records.

Thiele banks heavily on eclipse data, which as we have seen is quite untrustworthy (Biblical Slight changes in the rotation and revolution of the earth, called "accelerations," mean that the farther back in time we go, the farther out of synch our calculations of the time and place of eclipses will be. The eclipse recorded in the 10th year of Ashur-dan III might not have been on 15 June 763 after all.

Thiele also regards the canon of Ptolemy as "completely reliable." We shall have to return to Ptolemy later in this series, but for now we make the point that Ptolemy's list of reigns, written around A.D. 150, is not at all beyond question, as Robert R. Newton's

(Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1977) demonstrates. It seems likely that Ptolemy invented regnal dates and manipulated astronomical data in order to support his theories of celestial mechanics. Unfortunately, Ptolemy's questionable work has influenced chronologists ever since he wrote it, even though his chronology is seriously contradicted by the records of the Jews and the Persians.

Speaking of the Jewish historian Josephus, Anstey writes that "since his account of the closing years of the Persian Empire agrees with that of the National Persian Traditions incorporated in the poem of Idrisi, and with that of the National Jewish Traditions preserved in the *Sehe* [Josephus] stands as a witness against the longer Persian Chronology of Ptolemy, now universally accepted" (Anstey, pp. 22-23). If we reject Ptolemy and go with the shorter chronologies used by men closer to the scene of the disputed events, then the chronology of the ancient Near East must be shortened by a century. This means that the synchronism between Israel and the surrounding cultures are called into question, and this calls Thiele's work into question in this area.

My point here is that the relatively clear testimony of Scripture is set aside by Thiele in favor of questionable pagan writings. The Hebrews had by far the most highly developed sense of history of anyone in the ancient world, and it stands to reason that their chronology should be taken more seriously than that of anyone else. Unfortunately, the reverse is the case today.

We can and must say, of course, that Dr. Thiele's intentions were honorable, even if his methodology is open to serious criticism.

What need to be answered. The first is **whether** the king's reign is dated from the first month of the lunar year (Nisan, in the spring), or from the first month of the solar year (**Tishri**, in the fall). Chronologists have debated this question for centuries.

The second question is whether the king's accession year is counted as year one or year zero. For instance, if we use the accession-year method, then the first year of the new king is the same as the last year of the old king. In that case, when we add up the numbers, we have to subtract one year because of the overlap. If, however, we use the **nonaccession-year** method, then the first year of the new king is the next year after the last year of the old king. In that case, we can add up the numbers without subtracting any.

It is clear that sometimes the accession-year method is employed, and sometimes the nonaccession-year method is employed. This is what makes interpreting the chronology of Kings so tricky. Anstey comments that "the figures cannot be treated mechanically. They can only be interpreted and understood in the light of the accompanying narrative" (Anstey, p. 176).

Now, what is Thiele's system? Thiele maintains that sometimes the two kingdoms used the accession-year method, and sometimes the nonaccession-year method, and moreover that sometimes the king's reign began in the fall (**Tishri**) and sometimes in the spring (**Nisan**). He sets out his **system** in detail in his book, but for our purposes, Ozanne's summary will be most helpful:

"Briefly [Thiele's] system is as follows. At the time of the disruption, the Northern Kingdom of Israel followed the nonaccession-year system of reckoning, and in accordance with this system, backdated their **regnal** years to the **Nisan** preceding the precise date of accession; on the other hand, the Southern Kingdom of Judah followed the **accession-year system** and accordingly postdated their **regnal** years to the **Tishri** following the precise date of accession." (C. G. Ozanne, York: Exposition Press, 1970], p. 96.) What is immediately odd about this system is that both of these kingdoms had a common cultural root. Why would they be so completely different in their methods of reckoning reigns?

"Furthermore, the recorder in **each** kingdom reckoned the years of the other kingdom according to his own system: the northern recorder reckoned the years of the Judean kings by the nonaccession-year system, while the southern recorder reckoned the years of the Israelite kings by the accession-year system; but in each case retaining the New Year's Day (1st Nisan or 1st **Tishri**) used by the other kingdom" (Ozanne, p. 96). There are two problems with Thiele's view here. First, why would the northern scribe use the northern nonaccession-year system, but keep the southern new year's date? This really strains credulity.

a "northern scribe source" and **which** come from a "southern scribe source"? In some cases, where reference is made to such books as "The Chronicles of the Kings of Judah" as a source document, we can make a guess, but in other cases such information is lacking.

Now, this is only the beginning of complications, because Thiele's system only works for the first century so. "This system of reckoning continued down to the reign of Jehoram of Judah, but in his day, according to Thiele, the Judean kingdom adopted the nonaccession-year system used in Israel. This was due to the influence of Jehoram's wife, **Athaliah**, who was the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel" (Ozanne, p. 98). So, for 52 years, the two kingdoms both used the **nonaccession-year** system, though they retained two different New Year's dates (**Tishri** in the south, Nisan in the north).

But: "This, however, was to continue for only 52 years and through four reigns; for toward the end of Joash's reign the Southern Kingdom reverted to the accession-year system, while at the same time the Northern Kingdom adopted the accession-year system from Judah" (Ozanne, p. 98).

Thiele's work has been influential, primarily I suspect because of the unwillingness of evangelical scholars to challenge the "assured results" of secular opinion regarding the chronology of the Near East, with which Thiele's dovetails. Yet many scholars feel that it is too complicated. Why in the world would two cultures that have the same background differ so dramatically in their ways of reckoning time? And why would they switch back and forth?

But let's assume that the cultures did indeed differ in this regard, where does this leave us? Ozanne's comments are worth citing: "That the prophetic recorders should have reckoned the years of both lines of kings by the system customary in their own kingdom is nothing to be surprised at; what is surprising is that the final editor of the books of Kings, who was responsible presumably for these references in their present form, should have left the **synchronisms** unchanged – **unless, indeed, he was unaware that they were reckoned in divergent principles. To me it is not only surprising but incredible that such a complicated system of reckoning should underlie these seemingly innocent entries. What, we may ask, was the purpose of this editor – was it to enlighten his readers or to confuse them?**" (Ozanne, p. 99).

The point of this essay is not to despise or reject Thiele's labors. At many points of detail his suggestions are worthy of consideration. His system as a whole, however, is not very plausible because (a) it asks us to believe some almost incredible things about these cultures and about the final author of Kings; (b) it gerrymanders the text in order to square it with highly questionable secular chronological reconstructions; and (c) the gerrymandering of the chronological data entails some very, very unlikely interpretations of the text.