

# BIBLICAL CHRONOLOGY

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## THE ASSYRIAN EPONYM CANON (Chronologies and Kings VII)

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We come this month to one of the most pernicious problems in the reconstruction of Ancient Near Eastern chronology, the problem of the Assyrian King Lists. We cannot proceed further with our survey of the chronology of the kings of Israel until we remove this roadblock from our path.

We can do no better than to lean on the work of the extremely learned Dr. O. T. Allis, who includes a full discussion of the subject in his unjustly neglected book *The Old Testament: Its Claims and Its Critics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Pub. Co, 1972). The book is long out of print and nowhere available, and so, since few readers will be able to consult it for themselves, I shall provide an in-depth review of his discussion. Allis begins:

"Among the early results of excavation in Assyria was the discovery and publication by Rawlinson a century ago of tablets containing the Eponym Canon. These tablets recorded the names of the kings and high officials who, like the archons at Athens and the consuls at Rome, gave their names in succession, each to a year, thereby establishing the chronological sequence. While the system of dating by eponyms began centuries earlier, these lists cover a period of about 250 years, beginning about 900 B.C. A gratifying result of the discovery of these lists lies in the fact that they connect with and overlap for about a century the Ptolemaic Canon, which had been known and used for centuries, but which only began with the Era of Nabonassar, 747 B.C. It was quickly discovered that the two canons were in agreement for the periods which they both covered; and thus the year 722 B.C. for the fall of Samaria, as given by Ussher on the basis of the Ptolemaic Canon, served to anchor the Eponym Canon for the Assyrian chronology" (p. 398f.)

Now, if we take the 490 years of Daniel 9 literally, as we are doing in these essays, we shall have to move these dates forward by quite a bit, but that is not the problem at issue in the Assyrian King List. Let Allis continue:

"The Eponym Canon was preserved in two forms; the one consisted merely of the names of the eponyms (*limmu*), while the other of which several fragmentary duplicates were discovered, added to the name of the year a brief notation of some important event. Thus for the eponym of Pur-sagale, which was the ninth year of Ashur-Dan III, there was mention of an eclipse of the sun, which astronomers were able to verify as having occurred in 763 B.C., a further anchoring of the Canon" (p. 399).

Here we have another problem, also discussed in these essays, which is that we cannot be sure of the dates of

ily calculate when and where eclipses took place in the ancient world. When we find an eclipse referred to, we can easily fix the date. Catastrophists argue that there were significant changes in the relative positions of the moon and the earth during the period in question, nullifying any such calculation of eclipses. (See for instance, Arie Dirkzwager, "Expanding the End of Assyrian History," in *Catastrophism and Ancient History* 6:1 [January, 1964], p. 45f.)

One does not need to be a catastrophist to question the validity of eclipse dating, however. As we pointed out in *Biblical Chronology* 2:1, Robert R. Newton has called attention to the established fact of small accelerations and decelerations in the rotation of the earth and of the earth-moon revolution, which means that the farther back we go in history, the less certain we can be of when, where, and how eclipses took place.

This, however, is not the problem we are taking up at present. Let Allis continue: "It was also discovered that, according to the Annals of Shalmaneser III, this king, in his sixth year fought a battle at Qarqar against an alliance of kings, among whom Ahabbu of Sir'iala was mentioned. This was in 854 B.C. So it was at once pointed out that if this Ahabbu was the Ahab of the Bible, as many assumed to be the case, this made a difference of more than forty years in the biblical chronology, which placed the death of Ahab, according to Ussher, in 897 B.C." (p. 399).

Virtually all modern evangelical (Bible-believing) scholars assume that the Assyrian King List is inviolable and that Ahabbu is Ahab, and thus that some kind of adjustment must be made in the Biblical chronology. It is this problem that we must now address, with Allis as our guide. Allis summarizes: "This difference between the biblical and the Assyrian chronologies led to a vigorous debate. Three main positions were taken regarding it. We may describe them as the Gap Theory, which sought to harmonize the Assyrian chronology with the biblical, the Co-Reign Theory, which sought to harmonize the biblical chronology with the Assyrian, and the Objective Theory, which sought to do justice to both" (p. 399).

The Gap Theory proposes that somewhere in the Assyrian Eponym Canon there is a gap of 40 + years. The Biblical chronology is assumed to be correct as it stands, and the Assyrian in error. An early proponent of this view was Jules Oppert, "one of the most distinguished of the pioneers in the Assyriological field" (p. 399). Unfortunately, further archaeological discoveries in the near east have shown Oppert's suggested reconstruction of Assyrian history, which allowed for a gap, to be impossible. Anstey

there is a better solution to the problem, we need not concern ourselves at this point with that discussion.

### The Co-Reign Theories

Allis summarizes: "It was maintained by Rawlinson and Schrader that there was no evidence of any break in the sequence of names in the Eponym Canon and that the biblical chronology must be shortened to accord with the new data supplied by the Canon. This view has quite generally prevailed, even in conservative circles and the means used to accomplish the reduction has been... the postulating of a series of co-reigns. Both of these explanations [Gap Theory and Co-Reign Theory - JBJ] have this in common: They proceed upon the assumption that the *Ahabbu* and *Iaua* mentioned by Shalmaneser are to be identified with the Ahab and Jehu, kings of Israel, referred to in Kings" (p. 400).

Allis proceeds to discuss the Co-Reign approach as it is found in *The New Bible Dictionary* and in Edwin Thiele's *Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*. Had he written later than 1972, Allis might also have discussed E. W. Faulstich's *History, Harmony, and the Hebrew Kings*, which also proceeds on the same assumption. Allis shows that there are indeed co-regencies referred to in the Biblical account of the kings (as we have seen in our survey of the same era thus far in these essays). The Co-Reign Theory, however, adds new co-regencies that have little or no Biblical support. Allis suggests that the objective Theory cuts the knot of this problem and eliminates it by denying that the *Ahabbu* and *Iaua* of the Assyrians are the Ahab and Jehu of the Bible.

### The Objective Theory

Allis writes: "This theory was proposed by George Smith in his book, *The Assyrian Eponym Canon*, which was published in 1875. . . . We may call his solution objective because it consisted, he tells us, 'of taking the Assyrian records to be correct as to Assyrian dates, and the Hebrew as to Hebrew dates' and also of recognizing 'the possibility of errors in the Assyrian accounts where they differ on Jewish matters from the Bible.'" (Smith, pp. 185, 192; Allis, p. 412.) Smith added, "If we allow that the Ahab and Jehu mentioned in the Assyrian records may not be the Ahab and Jehu of the Bible, were not under the

cause an not mes o e-brew monarchs" (Smith, p. 154; Allis, p. 412).

Allis continues that Smith's arguments, which seem "so fair and judicious, apparently attracted little attention; and the identification of the *Ahabbu* and *Iaua* of the inscriptions with the Ahab and Jehu of the Bible, which had been vigorously advocated by Schrader in 1872, has been quite generally accepted as established fact. It will be well, therefore, to reexamine carefully the evidence for these and other widely accepted identifications. In doing so it is to be carefully noted at the outset that the data, both biblical and extra-biblical, bearing on the chronology of this period, are meager and insufficient for a wholly satisfactory solution of the problems of the whole era involved" (p. 413).

Allis now proceeds to demonstrate that these identifications are extremely unlikely. He begins: "First of all it is to be noted that there is no clear mention in the Bible of any Assyrian king until the time of Menahem (772-81), who sought the help of Pul king of Assyria 'to confirm the kingdom in his hand' (2 Kings 15:19). This fact is important and deserves careful consideration. Egypt is frequently mentioned from the time of the Patriarch Jacob. Solomon married a daughter of Pharaoh; and a few years after his death Shishak invaded Palestine and claimed to have captured many cities. Zerah the Ethiopian [a Pharaoh - JBJ] invaded Judah in Asa's time. Later on Isaiah and Jeremiah warned their peoples against looking to Egypt for help against Assyria. The Syrians were enemies of Israel for centuries from the time of David on; and several Ben-hadads and Hadadezers are mentioned. We read of wars with the Philistines and that, as late as the time of Jehoshaphat, they brought him presents. The Hittites are also frequently mentioned in the Pentateuch and in Joshua. Solomon traded with them (1 Kings 10:29; 2 Chron. 1:17); and in the days of Elisha they were regarded as a serious threat to Israel (2 Kings 7:6). But not a word is said in the Historical Books about Assyria until the time of Menahem of Israel. If a century and more earlier Assyria had been regarded as so dangerous an enemy of Israel that Ahab felt obliged to fight against Shalmaneser at distant Qarqar, it is certainly remarkable that no mention of Assyria is made in Kings or Chronicles until so much later" (p. 414).

We shall continue our investigation into this important question next month.