

Ussherites and Thieleologists, be gone!

by Dan Bruce

Reprint of Chapter One from the book, *Sacred Chronology of the Hebrew Kings*.

In 1945, writing in the *Bulletin of the American School of Oriental Research*, the esteemed archeologist and Bible scholar W. F. Albright introduced an essay on biblical chronology with these words: “For many years I have occupied myself periodically with the somewhat thankless task of reconstructing the chronology of Judah and Israel between the death of Solomon and the Fall of Jerusalem.”¹ His statement reveals the inherent frustration that anyone who has expended years of effort in trying to reconstruct the reigns of the Hebrew kings eventually comes to feel. Albright’s statement also goes directly to the heart of the matter. Anyone attempting to reconstruct the chronology of the kings must know where in time to start and where in time to end. In other words, he or she must define a time frame into which the reigns of the kings of Israel and Judah will exactly fit. On one end of that time frame must be the date when the divided kingdoms began after the death of Solomon. On the other end must be two dates, one for the fall of Samaria, signifying the end of the northern kingdom of Israel, and another for the fall of Jerusalem, signifying the end of the southern kingdom of Judah. After the beginning and ending points for the time frame have been fixed, the chronological information about the kings---all of it as specified in the Books of 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, and the prophets---must then be harmonized so that the reigns fit within those end points. Furthermore, the chronology obtained from the biblical text must be in general agreement with other chronologies recognized by secular history. As anyone who has tried will affirm, reconstructing a chronology of the Hebrew kings that meets all of those requirements is a daunting task.

The modern history of “kingdoms chronology” (your author’s term for the branch of biblical studies that deals with locating the reigns of the kings of Israel and Judah in history) begins with the publication of *Annales Veteris Testamenti*² in 1650 and *Annalium pars posterior* in 1654, both authored by Archbishop James Ussher, Primate of the Church of Ireland. Ussher’s books are best known for setting a specific date and time for the creation of the world, but, in developing his continuous chronology for the entirety of Bible history, he had to specify dates for the reigns of the Hebrew kings. Like all kingdoms chronologists since, Ussher faced challenges pertinent to the chronology of the divided monarchy period. The first challenge he had to face was that of which source text to use. The figures given for the number of years in the reigns of the kings differed in the source texts available to him. For instance, some figures given in the Septuagint differed from those found in the Masoretic text. As a biblical literalist, that was a major problem for Ussher, one which he solved by relying exclusively on the Masoretic text. This book follows his example unless noted otherwise.

A second, and not as easily solved, challenge was to figure out how to identify the year when the kingdom of United Israel divided into the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Ussher found a continuous sequence of years given in the Masoretic text between Abraham and the entry of the children of Israel into the land of Canaan, so he simply added the years together to arrive at a chronology for that period. That continuous sequence came to an end after the

children of Israel entered the land, and the Bible did not pick up with a new sequence until the time of Saul and the kings of Israel and Judah that followed him, then it ended when the Hebrew Scriptures were completed circa 400 BCE. Because of the discontinuities in the chronology of the Jews after that date, no certain anchor point could be identified to pinpoint the beginning of the kingdoms period. So, Ussher had to rely on cross-referencing the reigns of the Hebrew kings with what was known from the secular history of the surrounding nations to arrive at a starting date for the division of United Israel into its two successor kingdoms. Considering that he did not have the benefit of modern archaeological scholarship (or perhaps because of that circumstance), Ussher made a remarkably accurate contribution to the field of biblical chronology,³ and his chronology is still being used by some branches of fundamentalist Christianity today. This book rejects Ussher's overall chronology and some of the methodology he used to define the time period of the Hebrew kings, but it embraces his belief that the biblical text is accurate and dependable.

Champollion's Discovery

The Ussher chronology was the gold standard among scholars for almost two-hundred years with its authority being unquestioned. As the arts and sciences blossomed in the universities of Europe, however, the authority of the Bible began to give way to human reasoning and scholarship that derived its authority from a long process of academic research and peer review. For the first time, scholars, especially those versed in the discoveries and theories of the new science of Geology and its speculations about the age of the Earth, began to feel that they had an empirical basis for challenging the faith-based Ussher chronological interpretation of the biblical text. The reevaluation of the Ussher dates for the divided monarchy gained momentum in 1822 with one of the most far-reaching developments in the field of biblical studies—the decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphics by Jean-François Champollion. The effect of that event on the field of kingdoms chronology cannot be overemphasized. Prior to the publication of Champollion's translation of the Rosetta Stone hieroglyphs, along with his phonetic dictionary and principles of grammar, the artifacts and monuments of ancient Egypt had successfully secreted a treasury of historical knowledge. No one could understand the inscriptions, and no one could use them to synchronize the details of Egyptian history with the details of biblical history. Thank to Champollion, that synchronization seemed possible.

Immediately after the publication of Champollion's breakthrough linguistic research, scholars began to head for the ruins of Egypt, most of them looking not only to discover and reveal the secrets of the pharaohs to a history-hungry world, but many of them were aggressively seeking physical evidence of the accuracy of the biblical narrative concerning the things of Egypt. Champollion himself was not immune to the lure of exploring the unknown glories of the Nile River cultures. In July of 1828, he boarded a ship for Cairo, leading what was called the Franco-Tuscan Expedition. It was his one and only visit to Egypt, financed by the grand-duke of Tuscany, Leopold II, and the King of France, Charles X, with the announced purpose of validating and perfecting his system of translating hieroglyphs. During his three-plus years in Egypt, Champollion, together with his expedition partner and fellow philologist, Ippolito

Rosellini, examined and translated hundreds of monuments and inscriptions found in the Nile Valley and elsewhere in Egypt. Then, when he reached Karnak, Champollion made the discovery of his young life. An account of the discovery was published in an 1857 edition of Harper's New Monthly Magazine, written by the 19th-century travel writer and journalist William Cowper Prime and supposedly based on a first-person account by Champollion himself, who reported:

“There is on the south wall of the temple of Karnak a sculptured group, in which a god is represented as offering to a king a host of captured cities and countries. The king's name was known as Sheshonk, or Shishak, as our translation of the Old Testament has it; but although a hundred scholars had seen the rows of captives, no one of them had read here any thing by which to connect this with the Scripture history. Champollion landed at Karnak on his way to Upper Egypt, and remained an hour or two in the vast halls that are the wonder of modern wanderers. But his keen eye was not idle, and as he passed this group, reading name by name in it silently, he started [sic] astonished at the blindness of his friends who were before him, and read aloud to them the name Melek Aicdah, or the King of Judah. The oval in which it was inclosed represents a fortified place, and the sign at the bottom, as I have before remarked, represents a country. It was like a voice out of the ancient ages, that sound among the ruins of Karnak, as the great scholar read the story of the son of Solomon on the wall of his conqueror's temple. It was the greatest, as it was almost the first of the new discoveries, and a tribute to the truth of God's revelation that at once consecrated and sealed the truth of the scholar's investigations and their results. That wall at Karnak is the most interesting spot among the fallen temples of the land of the Pharaohs. While other records have been effaced, that one seems to have been kept expressly that the world might discover it.”⁴

The two hours that Champollion spent at Karnak standing before the reliefs located on the Bubastite Portal outside the Temple of Amun---triumphal scenes depicting the military campaign in Canaan by the pharaoh Shoshenq I---were minutes that would change the world's perception of Bible history. Champollion identified the real-life Shoshenq I as the biblical Shishak, an interpretation that electrified the world of scholarship. Kingdoms chronologists were ecstatic, of course. At long last, there was physical evidence that could possibly allow scholars to pinpoint the year of the rending of the kingdom of Israel from Rehoboam and the subsequent beginning of the divided monarchy. After all, if Shishak invaded Judah in Rehoboam's fifth year, then all that was needed to identify the year of the division was to locate the reign of Shoshenq I in history. Using the chronological information in the writings of the ancient Egyptian historian Manetho and other ancient writers, the reign of Shoshenq I was tentatively pegged to a year occurring somewhere between 980 BCE and 908 BCE. Still, the lack of exactitude about the years for the reign of Shoshenq I (now assumed to be Shishak) disappointed kingdoms chronologists. The inability to precisely date his reign meant that they could not use it to arrive at an exact date for the rending of the kingdom of United Israel from Rehoboam. Fortunately for kingdoms chronologists, a way to date the reign of Rehoboam would soon come from a non-Egyptian source, namely, the rapidly maturing field of Assyriology.

Rawlinson's Eclipse

The artifacts and ruins of ancient Mesopotamia were essentially closed to pre-18th-century western scholars while those lands languished under Moslem rule. The few scholars studying ancient Mesopotamian cultures prior to then had to content themselves with information gleaned from a limited collection of classical writings, many of which had dubious historical value. In the late 1700s, exploration societies in Europe began gaining access and sending expeditions to Mesopotamia to collect artifacts and study inscriptions at the ancient sites. The first recorded archeological excavation in Mesopotamia was led by Abbé Beauchamp, papal vicar general in Baghdad. His memoirs, published in 1790, created intense interest in anything Mesopotamian among European scholars and soon generated archeological expeditions to the Middle East. Systematic excavation of Mesopotamian sites was begun in 1842, with major discoveries being reported annually. Over time, fields of specialization developed to deal with the plethora of new information. One of those specialized fields was Assyriology, which would be of special importance to the study of Bible chronology.

The most important Assyrian discovery pertaining to kingdoms chronology was made public by Sir Henry Rawlinson in 1867. Among the cuneiform tablets that had been brought back from Nineveh and stored in the British Museum, Rawlinson found and deciphered four lists of eponyms⁵ that comprise what has come to be called the Assyrian Eponym Canon. In the Neo-Assyrian Empire, each year was named after its *limmu*, a title given to a royal official who would preside over that year's New-Year Day celebrations. Each of Rawlinson's four lists was incomplete, but they overlapped one another to reveal a continuous and unbroken record of the number of years in the reigns of all of the kings of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. In the account of the ninth year of Ashur-dan III was mention of a solar eclipse during the eponymy of a man named Bûr-Saggilê. Rawlinson determined that the eclipse had occurred on June 15, 763 BCE.⁶ For the first time, calculating a date for the beginning year in the reign of Rehoboam of Judah was made possible by using Rawlinson's astronomically anchored and thus assumed-certain chronology of the Neo-Assyrian kings. The Rawlinson chronology was used to date the reign of Rehoboam, as follows:

“With regard to the year when these occurrences took place, some new chronological data are afforded by a recent discovery of Sir H. Rawlinson by which certain Assyrian dates are fixed with astronomical certainty. A chronicle upon a brick tablet in the British Museum, makes distinct mention of an eclipse, the exact date of which has been fixed, and from it the relative dates of the events chronicled can be exactly known. It results from this that a battle in which Ahab, king of Israel, and his allies, were defeated by the king of Assyria happened in the year B. C. 853, and supposing this to be the battle recorded in the books of kings and Chronicles, where Ahab lost his life, the last year of Ahab's reign is hereby fixed. This happened in the 17th year of Jehoshaphat king of Judah, and taking the regnal years of his predecessors Asa, Abijah, and Rehoboam as 41, 3 and 17 as given by the Hebrew records, it follows that Rehoboam's first year must have been about B. C. 930.”⁷

The annals and inscriptions on various steles had revealed that the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III fought a battle at Qarqar in his sixth year, and that he had battled against a coalition of kings that included Ahab of Israel. It was known from 1 Kings, chapter 22, verse 35, that Ahab was killed in battle at Ramoth-gilead. That action was assumed by scholars to have been part of the Battle of Qarqar, or, at the least, a separate battle somehow associated with the Qarqar campaign. By such reasoning, Ahab's final year was equated with the year of the Battle of Qarqar. Biblical chronologists could thus pinpoint the reign of Ahab by equating his last regnal year at Ramoth-gilead with the sixth regnal year of Shalmaneser III. Since Shalmaneser's sixth year could be identified as the year 853 BCE by counting back in time ninety eponyms from Rawlinson's 763 BCE date for the Bûr-Saggilê eclipse, and since that year was assumed to be Ahab's final regnal year, kingdoms chronologist could count back from Ahab's last year to Rehoboam's first year as king of Judah to identify the year when the kingdom of United Israel had divided into two kingdoms. That year was initially calculated to have been 930 BCE.

The result of being able to identify the year for the beginning of the divided kingdoms, combined with knowing their ending years (circa 722 BCE for Israel and circa 586 BCE for Judah), provided the time frame necessary for Bible scholars to begin making a serious attempt to harmonize the reigns of the Hebrew kings. Finally, the long-sought kingdoms chronology seemed to be within reach. Still, chronologists would have to wait almost a century before the next big advance in understanding---a credible system for harmonizing the reigns---was introduced.

Thiele's Mysterious Numbers

Edwin R. Thiele would be the person who would make that advance. Born in Chicago in 1895, he grew up in an age when men and women of letters and science still honored the Bible as a repository of wisdom and truth, and that attitude was reflected in his biblical studies and research. After graduating from Emmanuel Missionary College (later renamed Andrews University) with a Bachelor of Arts degree in ancient languages, Thiele served as a Seventh-day Adventist missionary to China for twelve years. In 1932, he returned to America to pursue advanced studies in graduate school at the University of Chicago. Five years later, in 1937, he received a Master of Arts degree, then proceeded to complete his doctoral work, being awarded a Doctor of Philosophy in Biblical Archaeology degree in 1943. His doctoral dissertation---finished sometime in 1942, the year of your author's birth---was published in book format in 1951 under the title *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*.⁸ Today, that book, updated and revised by Thiele over the course of thirty-two years and three editions, is widely accepted by many biblical and secular scholars as the definitive work on the chronology of the Hebrew kings.

Early in his academic career, Thiele became interested in finding a way to harmonize the reigns of the Hebrew kings. He began his research with knowledge of the general framework into which the reigns had to fit. The anchoring of the Assyrian reigns listed on the Assyrian Kings List accomplished by Rawlinson had allowed kingdoms chronologists to identify the year 931/930 BCE as the probable date for the start of the reigns of Rehoboam of Judah and Jeroboam

of Israel. The Kings List had also allowed the identification of the year 722/721 BCE as the date for the fall of Samaria to Sargon II, the event which ended the northern kingdom of Israel. In addition, it had allowed scholars to align the chronology of the Neo-Babylonian Empire with that of the late Neo-Assyrian Empire, making it possible to identify the year 587/586 BCE as the date for the fall of Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon. So, by the time of Thiele's initial efforts to reconcile the reigns of the kings, the chronological framework into which they had to fit, give or take a year or so on either end, was well established by biblical scholars. The real challenge for Thiele, as it had been for all kingdoms chronologists in the years since Rawlinson's chronology had been published, became that of getting all of the reigns of the kings of Israel and the kings of Judah to line up as specified by the chronological cross-references given in the biblical text. Thus, the task of harmonizing the reigns is where Thiele focused his attention.

Thiele limited his research by using only the Masoretic text, recognizing from his own early struggles to harmonize the reigns of the kings that the differences in chronological data found in other source texts, such as the Septuagint, were probably nothing more than ancient attempts to do the same. He also made a deliberate attempt to distance himself from what he termed "certain preconceived opinions" held by kingdoms chronologists of his day, and instead to try to "ascertain just what the Hebrews did in the matter of chronological procedure." Over the course of his studies, Thiele tried to put himself into the mind of the ancient scribes, to think as they thought. By so doing, he was able to discern that the kingdoms of Israel and Judah had used different methods for recording their chronologies. One kingdom had used the accession-year system for counting its regnal years, the other had not. One had begun the year in Nisan, the first month of the Jewish year, while the other had begun its year in Tishri, the seventh month. Thiele hypothesized that both had used coregencies from time to time, although he did not always find support for his assumed coregencies in the biblical text. Additionally, he found that the years of rule in a coregency were sometimes counted in the total regnal years for a king, sometimes not. Over time, as he refined his chronology by using his new insights, Thiele was able to show where the kingdoms scribes were inconsistent in the way they recorded details about their kings. But, despite the fact that his work was original and provided new insights about the reigns of the kings, Thiele ultimately chose to rely on a secular anchor--the date for the Bûr-Saggilê eclipse that had been determined by Rawlinson almost a century earlier--for anchoring his chronology in time.

When it was published, Edwin Thiele's harmonized chronology for the reigns of the Hebrew kings was generally applauded by secular scholars and religious professionals across academic and theological spectrums, but his system did come with an important caveat. Thiele himself, in the first paragraph of the concluding section of his book, offered the following assessment of his research and its results:

"The vital question concerning the chronological scheme set forth in these pages is whether or not it is a true arrangement of reigns of Hebrew kings. Certainly, this system has brought harmony out of what was once regarded as hopeless confusion. But is it necessarily the true restoration of the original pattern of reigns? At the least this research shows that such a restoration is possible. However, we must accept the premise of an original reckoning of reigns in Israel according to the nonaccession-year system with a later shift to the accession-year method; of the early use in

Judah of accession-year reckoning, a shift to the nonaccession-year system, and then a return to the original accession-year method; of the need to begin the regnal year in Israel with Nisan and with Tishri in Judah; of the existence of a number of coregencies; **and of the fact that at some late date---long after the original records of the kings had been set in order and when the true arrangement of the reigns had been forgotten---certain synchronizations in 2 Kings 17 and 18 were introduced by some late hand twelve years out of harmony with the original pattern of reigns.** When all of this is understood, we see that it may be possible to set forth an arrangement of reigns for the Hebrew kings in which there are both internal harmony and agreement with contemporary history” (from *Mysterious Numbers*, 1983 edition, p. 205; emphasis added).

Today, anyone familiar with the field of kingdoms chronology will agree that Thiele did a masterful job of harmonizing the reigns of the Hebrew kings, of bringing harmony out of confusion. Time has shown that most of the harmonization principles he stated above are valid. Yet, Thiele himself revealed the one glaring weakness of his system, the requirement that a portion of the biblical text be disregarded as unreliable. In the final analysis, Thiele found that he had to ignore chronological details in 2 Kings, chapters 17 and 18, to allow his system to fully harmonize and thus be considered true.⁹ The decision to ignore portions of the biblical text was a serious compromise on his part. Furthermore, it was unnecessary. The reigns of the Hebrew kings can be harmonized without having to forsake any of the chronological details preserved in the Bible.

The remainder of this book [*Sacred Chronology of the Hebrew Kings*, see below] will be devoted to demonstrating how just such a harmonized kingdoms chronology can be achieved and used without having to disregard documented history, as the Ussher chronology requires, or regard portions of the biblical text as untrustworthy, as the Thiele chronology requires.¹⁰

Notes

¹ W. F. Albright, “The Chronology of the Divided Monarchy of Israel” (*Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, No. 100; December, 1945); p. 16-22.

² The full title of Ussher’s monumental work is *Annales Veteris Testamenti, a prima mundi origine deducti, una cum rerum Asiaticarum et Aegyptiacarum chronico, a temporis historici principio usque ad Maccabaicorum initia producto* (*Annals of the Old Testament, deduced from the first origins of the world, the chronicle of Asiatic and Egyptian matters together produced from the beginning of historical time up to the beginnings of Maccabees*).

³ As is always the case with biblical research, especially when working with chronological questions, Ussher benefitted from the work of many other scholars, and from the work of his predecessor chronologists, such as Rabbi Jose ben Halafta (2nd century CE, probable author of *Seder Olam Rabbah*), Venerable Bede (673-735 CE), and Joseph Justus Scaliger (1540- 1609 CE, an early scholar of Persian, Babylonian, Jewish and Ancient Egyptian history).

⁴ William Cowper Prime, “From Thebes to the Pyramids” (*Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, Volume XIV, December, 1856, to May, 1857); p. 468.

⁵ An *eponym* is a person from whom something is said to take its name. In ancient Assyria, each year was denoted by an eponym.

⁶ Henry Creswicke Rawlinson, “The Assyrian Canon Verified by the Record of a Solar Eclipse, B.C. 763” (*The Athenaeum: Journal of Literature, Science and the Fine Arts*; number 2064; May 18, 1867); p. 660-661.

⁷ C. W. Goodwin, “On an inscription by Takelot II” (*Ägyptische Sprache und Alterthumskunde*, published by Professor Dr. R. Lepsius of Berlin; March, 1868); p. 28.

⁸ Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* (1st ed.; New York: Macmillan, 1951; 2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965; 3rd ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan/Kregel, 1983).

⁹ Any system of Hebrew regnal dates can be harmonized if one is allowed to, out of thin air with no evidence to back up one’s speculations about the accuracy of the biblical text, hypothesize that that text is corrupted and then proceed to “shoe horn” the reigns of the kings of Israel and Judah into the resulting too- short time span, as Thiele did (and as those who today defend his chronology for the Hebrew kings are doing).

¹⁰ The last paragraph of this article has been edited from that displayed in the book.

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