

This paper was occasioned by a YouTube video created by archaeologist, Joel Kramer.

How we KNOW the dates for the Old Testament!

https://youtu.be/3DJtVILRMGw?si=GKzMNA_ZxCARAOmF

I am offering my own personal opinion –
along with a suggested alternative title (and subtitle) that I think is appropriate:
“What really happened in Hezekiah’s fourteenth year?
(How many scholars **THINK** we know the dates for the Old Testament)”

The reader will note my emphasis in the bold font of the subtitle above.

Proverbs 18:17 LXX famously says,

“When an accuser speaks first, he seems to be a righteous man,
but upon careful examination, *it is* the accuser *who* is convicted.”

For almost a decade, beginning in 1957, the crime drama series entitled “Perry Mason” ran on CBS. In the series, Perry Mason (actor Raymond Burr), played a distinguished criminal-defense lawyer whose clients have been wrongly charged with murder. Mr. Mason was assisted by his confidential secretary Della Street and private investigator Paul Drake. On the other hand, the innocent suspect was prosecuted by district attorney Hamilton Burger and the police investigation was usually carried out by homicide detective Lt. Arthur Tragg. While Burger and Tragg worked to gather evidence for the prosecution, Mason, Drake and Street engaged in a parallel investigation in order to exonerate their client. As the investigation progressed, some clue was uncovered that led to a different interpretation of the evidence. In the preliminary hearing, Mason usually engaged in a line of questioning that revealed the surprise perpetrator (often leading them to break down and confess in the courtroom).

Ideally, an article such as this would carefully examine the “prosecution’s” case and then, not only demonstrate its deficiency, but also provide an excellent alternative theory. In this case, unlike Perry Mason, I will unfortunately fall a bit short of the ideal. Although less satisfying than a “case closed” verdict, I will try to provide further clues for some future hearing. Until that day I will go as far as I can to at least introduce reasonable doubt.

The case for the “Thiele school” view of chronology has been advocated in an otherwise excellent video by Joel Kramer. By “Thiele school,” I am referring to Edwin Thiele and those who built upon his foundation, such as Leslie McFall and Roger Young (as well as many others). This view has been accepted and taught as fact in schools and seminaries world-wide since the 1970’s. In fact, this view is so well regarded that its dates have been used as starting points for further dating, even in the secular world. Viewers will undoubtedly consider that chronology is a very complex subject – and probably best left for the experts. Therefore, most viewers will simply consider the implicit authority of apparently universal acceptance, and assume the Thiele school must be right. Although I do not claim to be an expert (but rather a hobbyist who has gone down the rabbit hole of Biblical chronology), I feel it is important to point out that such a conclusion would be unwarranted and that acceptance of the Thiele school of dating actually undermines Biblical archeology. In fact, upon closer examination, the Thiele school of chronology has succeeded only in building what amounts to a dangerous illusion of knowledge regarding the dates for the Old Testament. 2Kgs 18:13 (relating to the 14th year of Hezekiah) may actually serve to illustrate how things aren’t always as they first appear. On one hand, one might think the statement in 2Kgs 18:13 would be a slam dunk. After all, this account about the Assyrian campaign occurring during Hezekiah’s 14th is also repeated in Isaiah 36:1. Based on the Assyrian chronology (which is, in turn, based on the eclipse of 763 BC¹) the Assyrian campaign did occur in 701 BC. However, the link of that 701 BC date to Hezekiah’s 14th year is what is questionable. A case can be made that 701 BC (the year of the Assyrian campaign) was

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Hezekiah's 26th year rather than his 14th. For better or for worse, this alternative dating would also have repercussions to Isaiah 36:1, since they both accounts relate the same 14th year information. When Thiele first reconstructed the reigns of the Hebrew kings, he did not assume coregencies for Pekah (with both Menahem and Pekahiah), nor for Jotham (with Azariah). He created these multiple coregencies out of thin air (without explicit Scriptural warrant) in order to compress the Masoretic text chronology of the divided kingdom. He did this to fit the Hebrew chronology within the known Assyrian chronology limit of 701 BC (working backwards from the supposed absolute date of the battle of Qarqar in 753 BC).² Thiele used coregencies in his overall methodology in order to explain the presence of more than one accession synchronism for a king, to explain conflicting and otherwise irreconcilable data, and to remove unwanted excess years from the chronology. Yet, by compressing the Biblical chronology, not only did he resort to multiple unwarranted coregencies, but he also completely disregarded three Scriptural synchronization references that did not match his revised timeline. These synchronization references are: 2Kgs 17:1, 18:1-2, 18:9-10. Since the time of Thiele, Leslie McFall has attempted to explain and salvage these references. However, he did so by (you guessed it) proposing yet another coregency. McFall said,

“Hezekiah became coregent in September 729 B.C. and became king just before 1st Nisan 715 B.C. He died between September 687 and September 686 B.C. Thiele overlooked this coregency and those of Ahaziah, Jehoash, and Jehoiachin. Thiele’s omission of Hezekiah’s coregency in the third edition of his book is inexcusable, given the number of reviews that were published following the appearance of his work in 1951 and 1965 challenging his treatment of 2 Kings 17-18.” This methodological use of coregencies seems to be the amazing cure-all for many a chronological malady.

On the other hand, there is a lesser known and only somewhat explored alternative to the Thiele school chronology. It is a chronology which makes use of the chronological timeline and synchronizations in the Lucianic/Antiochian text of the LXX of the books of Kings (abbrev as LXX-L). This chronology might be demeaned as “no frills” in that it does not require coregencies. Yet it is coherent – and it does not ignore synchronizations as did Thiele. The Biblical chronology based on the Lucianic text of the LXX leads to Hezekiah's illness occurring in his 14th year. The 14th year makes sense – and it can also be confirmed deductively by simply subtracting the 15 years his life was extended from his 29-year total reign. The Lucianic chronology for Hezekiah's illness also fits well with the accepted chronology for the reign of Merodach-baladan. Recall, this was the Babylonian king who heard that Hezekiah had been ill and sent emissaries to Jerusalem (2Kgs 20:12–19; Isa 39:1–8). Based on a lunar synchronization, scholars place his reign in Babylon from March, 721 BC to 709 BC (and then again for nine months from 704/3 BC to 703/2 BC). According to the Lucianic chronology, with no imagined co-regency to resort to, it is Hezekiah’s illness that occurred in his 14th year, which Tishri 714 BC.

Note: 2Kgs 18:13 is a problem verse for both chronologies. The report about Hezekiah's 14th year occurs in both the MT and LXX-L. Although Thiele must resort to coregencies, the Lucianic chronology has no satisfying answer. While we should tread lightly before subjecting any doubt as to the veracity of the Biblical witness (especially since both Kings and Isaiah mention the same information), there is at least a possibility this issue may be explained as an early textual error, possibly occasioned by Hezekiah's illness. Some suggest that the events in this section of 2Kings may have originally been correlated. That is, the text may have originally reflected the idea "beginning in the fourteenth year of Hezekiah”

Against this idea:

1) There are no extant textual variants witnessing to any such changes in the text. If a scribal error occurred, it must have occurred at an early point in the history of transmission since both 2Kgs 18 and Isaiah 36 were impacted in both the MT and the LXX. I am not entirely satisfied by toddmoore@comcast.net / chioticstructures.com

this explanation. However, the textual history of the Kings is far from pristine, as any investigation beneath the surface will reveal. We should neither be satisfied with multiple coregencies that have become accepted as part of the Thiele methodology.

2) “Beginning” doesn’t make sense of the text since the accounts are not reported sequentially. According to a straight forward chronological reading (without assuming any coregencies), the order of events appears to have been reversed. The Assyrian campaign comes first (2 Kgs 18:13; Isa 36:1) then his illness (2Kgs 20:1–11; Isa 38:1–8).

Both 2Kgs and Isaiah begin the Hezekiah’s life extension account with “*In those days* Hezekiah was sick.” This timing phrase may imply an original 14th year synchronization.

Regarding this possibility, it is worth noting, there are chiasmic structures in both 2Kgs 18-20 and Isaiah 36-38. Chiasmic structure is very common in ancient writings. In and of itself, the rhetorical structure of a passage has no impact to the chronological sequence of events. Yet, in this case, it may be that a selective reversal of the two events may be due to the actions, whether purposeful or careless, of an early editor. For instance, it may be that the historical order of the accounts was reversed so as to coincide with the historical order of the how threats actually came upon Israel (i.e., the Assyrian threat came first, then the Babylonian threat).

Thus, in 2Kings, the two key verses regarding timing are strategically placed at the beginning of the respective halves of entire structure.

2Kings (Credit: structure modified from that of Dorsey)

A. Summary of Hezekiah’s reign and reference to the fall of the northern kingdom (18:1-12)

B. *Arrival of hostile emissaries and troops from Assyrian king* (18:13-19:13)

- They come with threatening message and hostile intentions
- Hezekiah does not allow them into the city and fears them
- Isaiah reassures: these Assyrians will not destroy Jerusalem!

C. *Hezekiah prays for rescue from Assyrians* (19:14—34)

Isaiah's reassurance that prayer will be answered

X: Yahweh delivers Jerusalem (19:35-37)

C’ *Hezekiah prays for rescue from death* (20:1-11)

Isaiah’s reassurance that prayer will be answered

B’ *Arrival of friendly emissaries from Babylonian king* (20:12—19)

- They come with message and gifts of peace
- Hezekiah welcomes them into the city and trusts them
- Isaiah warns: these Babylonians will destroy Jerusalem!

A’ Summary of Hezekiah’s reign (20:20-21)

In Isaiah, the key timing verses are placed strategically, but this time at the beginning and end of the 2nd half of the structure.

Isaiah (Credit: structure modified from that found in O’Connell)

A. 1. Oracle against Babylon (13:1-22)

2. Funerary Taunt against the Babylonian king (14:1-23)

B. Funerary Taunt against the Assyrian king (14:24-27)

B’ 1. Assyrian Threat - Account of deliverance from against Jerusalem

[a] 36:1-21 The Threat of the Assyrians

[b] 36:22-37:4 Hezekiah’s Contrition Seeking the Lord’s Deliverance via Isaiah

[c] 37:5-9a Isaiah’s Assurance of Deliverance

2’ [a’] 37:9b-13 The Threats of the Assyrians Repeated

[b’] 37:14-20 Hezekiah’s Prayer Seeking the Lord’s Deliverance via the Temple

[c’] Isaiah’s Assurance of Deliverance
Taunt against the Assyrian king 37:21-38

A’ Babylonian Threat – Hezekiah’s Sickness (38:1-22) and prophecy of exile upon receiving envoys from the Babylonian king (39:1-8)

Endnotes:

¹ Conventional chronologists assume that the Assyrian Eponym Canon (AEC) is reliable *before* as well as *after* the solar eclipse of 763 BC.

Yet, Hughes footnotes uncertainty whether the eponym Balatu should be included in the eponyms for the reign of Adad-nirari III. Thus, there is a degree of confusion regarding eponyms *before* 763 BC.

For the years preceding 763 BC, no records of solar or lunar eclipses or other data exist by which the dates can be verified. Even the dates for Egypt’s 22nd Dynasty, during which Shishak/Shoshenq (who most think is I but who is more likely IIa per Engelbrite) campaigned in Judah in Rehoboam’s 5th year (1 Kgs 14:25–27; 2 Chr 12:2–4, 9–10), is set by Kitchen in dependence on Thiele’s date of 925/8 which is itself dependent on the AEC.

(1) scholars acknowledge confusion among the eponyms for Adad-nirari III’s reign; and

(2) aligning the reign of Joash-I with Adad-nirari III, to whom Joash-I paid tribute, is problematic.

Thiele dates the Hebrew kings' reigns to the AEC on the basis that Ahab's last year was Shalmaneser's 6th, which coincided with the battle of Qarqar, commonly dated to 853.

While keeping the synchronism of 2Kgs 18:13 (and Isaiah 36:1), Thiele is forced to discard three other synchronizations:

a. (2 Kings 18:1, 2) "Now in the third year of Hoshea the son of Elah the king of Israel, Hezekiah the son of Ahaz, king of Judah, began to reign. He was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he ruled for twenty-nine years in Jerusalem.

b. (2 Kings 18:9-10). "Now in the fourth year of King Hezekiah, which was the seventh year of Hoshea the 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."

c. (2 Kings 17:1) "In the twelfth year of Ahaz king of Judah, Hoshea the son of Elah became king of Israel in Samaria, and he ruled for nine years."

Thiele asserts that these synchronisms are "late and artificial."

Unlike Thiele, at least L. McFall tried to salvage the synchronisms that Thiele discarded. He proposed (you guessed it) a coregency such that Hezekiah reigned as viceroy with his father (Ahaz) for the first 16 years of his reign. Then he began his sole reign after the death of Ahaz in 715 BC.

Hezekiah's 14th year can be correlated historically not with the Assyrian Invasion, but rather, Hezekiah's illness and the extension of his life by 15 years. Tetley shows this can be deduced by two parallel passages (2Kgs 20:1-11 and Isa 38:1-8 and 39:1ff). Since Hezekiah reigned 29 years (2 Kgs 18:2), his illness would have occurred in his 14th year. Per Hughes, Merodach-baladan seized the Babylonian throne from Assyrian control and reigned from March 721 BC to 709 BC - and then again for nine months from 704/3 BC to 703/2 BC. When this Babylonian king, Merodach-baladan, heard that Hezekiah had been ill he sent an envoy to Jerusalem (2Kgs 20:12-19; Isa 39:1-8). Merodach-baladan reigned from 721 to 709. Hezekiah's 14th year would have occurred in 714/13, (not in 701 per Thiele). The mistaken tradition (in both the MT and LXX-L re: 14th year) may be explained via this illness. See Tetley footnote where Cogan and Tadmor propose that the 14th year was originally placed with the prophetic tradition about Hezekiah's illness and recovery. J. H. Hayes and P. K. Hooker suggest that a number of events have been correlated, "beginning with the fourteenth year of Hezekiah and his illness."

² Based on the AEC dates, Thiele fixed the beginning of the divided kingdom (DK) to 931/930.

The problem is, the Biblical chronology does not fit within our current understanding of Assyrian chronology. The Biblical chronology is too long by 40 to 55 years. The latest reconstruction by Thiele is but one of many attempts in the past 100 years to adjust the Biblical account to match the current conjectured chronology of the Assyrians.

So, Thiele resorted to mainly hypothetical coregencies, i.e., collapsing the length of a king's reign by overlapping it with the king's predecessor. He also resorted to unattested dating systems, the distortion of regnal formulas, and the manipulation of associated narratives - all in order to shorten the Hebrew chronology to fit within the parameters of the AEC. Thiele manipulated the Biblical data to eliminate about 40 years of history.

Thiele's attempt to shorten the Hebrew chronology by overlapping the reigns of kings highlights the problem of chronology bound to the AEC years between 853 (supposedly Ahab's last year) and 701.

The result of shortening the Hebrew chronology to fit the AEC is seen toward the end of the DK when the reigns of the last kings will not fit into the years remaining before Hezekiah's 14th year in 701. This forces Thiele to posit dual coregencies to make the reigns concur with the AEC dates.

- Pekah and Menahem/Pekahiah (Israel)
- Azariah and Jotham (Judah)

These two coregencies need to be considered together. Thiele's fifth example of a dual-dating coregency is Pekah coreigning first with Menahem (10 years) and then with Pekahiah (2 years), followed by 8 years of sole reign for a total reign of 20 years (2 Kgs 15:27).

Thiele's second example of coregency (not employing dual dating) is Azariah and his son Jotham in Judah. This took place concurrently with Pekah's two coregencies in Israel.

After contracting leprosy, Azariah lived in a house by himself and Jotham took charge of the royal household and governed the people (2 Kgs 15:5). Thiele and other scholars use this biblical example for validating coregency as a legitimate method. But, as Hughes (*Secrets of the Times*) points out, "2 Kings 15.5f. is the one clear situation in Kings that might have called for a coregency, with Azariah being unable to carry out his royal duties, and yet the text of Kings plainly indicates that a coregency was not created. This must make it extremely doubtful that coregencies ever existed as a possible form of government in Israel or Judah."

When Thiele first reconstructed the reigns of the kings under consideration, he did not assume a coregency for Pekah with Menahem and Pekahiah or for Jotham with Azariah. However, Thiele realizes that his chronology placed the reigns of Hoshea and Ahaz 12 years later than can be allowed. The accession of Hoshea, who killed Pekah, apparently at the instigation of Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria (see §8.3.3), must fall in 732 because, according to the AEC dates and notations, Tiglath-pileser III came to Damascus in 733/732.

Thiele hypothesized a new arrangement for Judah in which Jotham's reign is thrust back 12 years to overlap with Azariah's, and for Israel Pekah's is thrust back 12 years to overlap with Menahem and Pekahiah.