

# The Reign Of Hezekiah

*by John Brug*

One of the most vexing problems of Old Testament chronology is establishing the dates of the reign of Hezekiah. There seem to be irreconcilable differences within the scriptural data concerning this reign, especially when an attempt is made to synchronize this biblical information with dates derived from Assyrian and Egyptian records. The difficulties associated with this data have led scholars to suggest many different solutions to the problem, but none of these solutions is without problems of its own. In this article we will first examine the basic chronological data concerning Hezekiah's reign and some of the suggested solutions to the problems which it creates. Then, an explanation which accounts for all of the biblical data will be suggested as the most plausible solution to the problem.

## The Data

The basic biblical data concerning Hezekiah's reign seems fairly straightforward:

Hezekiah ruled for 29 years.

He was twenty-five years old when he became king.

He became king in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of Hoshea, king of Israel.

Hezekiah began religious reforms in the 1<sup>st</sup> year of his reign.

Samaria was besieged in Hezekiah's 4<sup>th</sup> year (Hoshea's 7<sup>th</sup>).

Samaria fell to the Assyrians in Hezekiah's 6<sup>th</sup> year (Hoshea's 9<sup>th</sup>).

Sennacherib of Assyria threatened Jerusalem in Hezekiah's 14<sup>th</sup> year.<sup>1</sup>

Non-biblical sources supply the following information:

Samaria fell in 723 or 722 B.C.

Sennacherib was king of Assyria from 705-681 B.C.

Sennacherib campaigned against Jerusalem in his 3<sup>rd</sup> year, 701 B.C.

Tirhakah, the king of Egypt who opposed Sennacherib's invasion, ruled from 690-664 B.C.

Merodach-Baladan, the king of Babylon who sought alliance with Hezekiah, ruled from 721-710 B.C. and again in 703.<sup>2</sup>

## The Problem

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Kings 18:1, 2, 9, 10; 2 Chronicles 29:1, 3; Isaiah 36:1.

<sup>2</sup> These dates are based primarily on the court records of the kings of Assyria. Events mentioned in these records can be dated to specific years because of astronomical references which are included in the list of Assyrian annual officials. For further information on how this dating is done, see the bibliography. Assyrian and Israelite years do not correspond to a single year in our calendar since they did not begin in January, but in either the spring or fall. Therefore, the dates in this article should be listed with a one-year leeway, e.g. 723/722 B.C. However, for sake of simplicity and to lessen confusion they are listed as single years, e.g. 722 B.C. It should be recognized that this will allow for a leeway of one year in all the dates and for a discrepancy of one year in all the-time intervals used in this article.

It is immediately apparent where the problem lies. If Samaria fell in the 6<sup>th</sup> year of Hezekiah, his reign must have begun about 728 B.C. If so, his 14<sup>th</sup> year, the year in which Sennacherib threatened Jerusalem, must have been about 714 B.C., but this is nine years before Sennacherib became king and about fourteen years before his campaign against Jerusalem which Assyrian records date to 701 B.C. On the other hand, if Hezekiah's reign began fourteen years before Sennacherib's campaign, that is in 715 B.C., it began about fourteen years too late for Hezekiah to have been king for six years before the fall of Samaria. In short, the problem is whether the starting point of Hezekiah's reign should be dated in relationship to the fall of Samaria in 722 B.C. or to the campaign of Sennacherib in 701 B.C.

### Suggested Solutions

There are more than a dozen suggested solutions to this problem. There are three basic approaches to solving the problem: 1) Rejecting or "correcting" some of the dates in the Bible; 2) proposing more than one invasion of Judah by Sennacherib, or 3) suggesting that there was more than one system for dating Hezekiah's reign.

Perhaps the most widely accepted chronology of the kings of Israel and Judah is that of Edwin Thiele. However, his treatment of Hezekiah's reign is the least satisfactory part of his work. Thiele proposes that 701 B.C. is the year of Sennacherib's only attack on Jerusalem and that it is therefore both the 14<sup>th</sup> year of Hezekiah and the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of Sennacherib. This synchronism places the beginning of Hezekiah's reign in about 715 B.C., fourteen years too late for the fall of Samaria (722 B.C.) to have occurred in the 6<sup>th</sup> year of Hezekiah as 2 Kings 18:10 claims. Thiele solves this problem by rejecting the statements in 2 Kings 18 which say that Hezekiah was king before the fall of Samaria as historical errors by the writer/compiler of Kings.<sup>3</sup>

Other scholars suggest that the passage stating that Sennacherib's invasion took place in Hezekiah's fourteenth year has been garbled in transmission and should place this event in Hezekiah's 24<sup>th</sup> year or some other year which makes it easier to reconcile this statement with the claim that Hezekiah was king before the fall of Samaria.<sup>4</sup>

E.W. Faulstich solves the problem by breaking the synchronism of Hezekiah's 14<sup>th</sup> year with Sennacherib's 3<sup>rd</sup> year and adopting a two-campaign theory. He places the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of Sennacherib in 702 B.C. and the 14<sup>th</sup> year of Hezekiah in 715 B.C. He distinguishes the campaign recorded in Scripture (which allegedly occurred about 715 B.C.) from the one recorded in the Assyrian records (which occurred in 702 B.C.). According to Faulstich the 715 campaign was made while Sennacherib was serving as tartan (military commander) during the 7<sup>th</sup> year of his predecessor Sargon's reign.<sup>5</sup>

Faulstich's solution does not make it necessary to assert historical errors on the part of the writer of Kings. In that respect it is superior to Thiele's approach. However, Faulstich's solution is not without difficulties of its own. Dating the campaign of Sennacherib which is recorded in the Bible to 715 B.C. (i.e. 10 years before the beginning of Sennacherib's reign in 705 B.C.) does not accord well with the language of 2 Kings. In 2 Kings 18:13-14 Sennacherib is called "King of Assyria" at the time of his campaign against Judah. Sometimes historical records

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<sup>3</sup> Thiele, *Mysterious Numbers*, p. 118

<sup>4</sup> Thiele, *Mysterious Numbers*, p. 135-139

<sup>5</sup> Faulstich, *History, Harmony*, p. 99-113

call a person “king” even when describing events of his life which occurred before he became king as we might do when we say, “President Bush was born in 1927.” However, that does not seem possible in this case, because 2 Kings 18:17 distinguishes the king from the commanders and generals of the army. It is therefore improbable that Sennacherib could have been serving as supreme commander during this campaign. Furthermore, Sennacherib’s predecessor Sargon does not mention Jerusalem or Hezekiah in any of the accounts of his campaigns, so it is unlikely that such a campaign occurred during his reign. Faulstich’s solution also increases the difficulties concerning the age of Tirhakah, king of Egypt, at the time of Sennacherib’s campaign. Tirhakah led an army in opposition to Sennacherib (2 Kings 19:9). According to Egyptian records Tirhakah seems to have been no more than 20 years old in 701 B.C.<sup>6</sup> This would be a reasonable age for him to lead an army as coregent for his uncle or brother who preceded him on the throne. In 715 B.C. he would have been only about-six years old and unable to lead an army. Furthermore, the most recent defenses of the two-campaign theory have presented evidence that if there was a second campaign, it was later than 701 B.C., not earlier.<sup>7</sup> Such a later invasion would do nothing to solve the problem of dating the beginning of Hezekiah’s reign.

## **The Coregency Solution**

### **Hezekiah**

In view of the difficulties created by solutions like those of Thiele and Faulstich, it seems that the resolution to this problem is to be sought in a coregency of Hezekiah with his father Ahaz which carried the beginning of his reign back to 728 B.C. Hezekiah’s sole rule began in 715 B.C., and Sennacherib’s invasion came 14 years later in 701 B.C. This solution requires a double system of dating Hezekiah’s reign (according to the coregency and according to his sole rule). It also requires a complicated scheme of coregencies during the reigns of previous kings in order to come up with feasible ages for the various kings of Judah at the births of their heirs. This seems somewhat improbable at first glance, but there is considerable evidence in the biblical text which suggests, and in some cases even compels such an approach. The problem is very complicated and only an overview treatment is possible in an article of this scope, but we will briefly summarize the relevant data for each reign, working backwards from Hezekiah.

The standard Judean method for dating events of Hezekiah’s rule was in terms of his assumption of sole rule. According to this system Hezekiah’s rule began at the death of his father Ahaz in 715 B.C. and lasted until Hezekiah’s death in 687 B.C. Although Hezekiah’s young son Manasseh was coregent with him during the last ten years of his reign, Hezekiah was the true reigning power throughout the twenty-nine years from 715 to 687. Hezekiah was twenty-five years old when he became king in his own right after the death of his father Ahaz in 715 (2 Kings 18:2 & 2 Chronicles 29:1). He was therefore born in about 740 B.C., when his father Ahaz was 22 years old. Hezekiah began his religious reforms in the first year of his sole reign, after his idolatrous father Ahaz had been removed from the scene. The description of these reforms in 2 Chronicles clearly is most appropriate to the time after the fall of the northern kingdom, and thus must occur in the first year of Hezekiah’s sole rule, not the first year of his coregency. Sennacherib of Assyria threatened Jerusalem in 701 B.C., the 14<sup>th</sup> year of Hezekiah’s sole rule (2

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<sup>6</sup> See the discussion in Young, *Isaiah*, p. 554-556

<sup>7</sup> Shea, *JBL* 104-3 (1985), p. 401-418

Kings 18:13, Isaiah 36:1). No further campaigns of Sennacherib are necessary to explain either the biblical or Assyrian accounts of Sennacherib's attack on Jerusalem.

However, in 2 Kings 18:1, 9, 10 three events of Hezekiah's reign are dated in terms of the coregency with his father Ahaz which began about 728 B.C: Hezekiah became king in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of Hoshea, king of Israeli; Samaria was besieged in Hezekiah's 4<sup>th</sup> year (Hoshea's 7<sup>th</sup>); Samaria fell to the Assyrians in Hezekiah's 6<sup>th</sup> year (Hoshea's 9<sup>th</sup>). This departure from the normal practice of dating events from the beginning of Hezekiah's sole rule was necessitated by the fact that the writer of Kings planned to use material about the fall of Samaria (2 Kings 18:9-12) which dated this event in terms of Hezekiah's coregency with Ahaz. Therefore, he felt it necessary to introduce his account of Hezekiah in such a way that his readers would realize that according to one system of dating, Hezekiah had already begun to rule before the fall of Samaria. This system of dating Hezekiah's rule may have been the standard system in the northern kingdom.

The strangest result of this approach is that the writer of Kings places data from two different dating systems side by side in 2 Kings 18:1 and 2. In 2 Kings 18:13 he reverts to the more standard way of dating events which occurred during Hezekiah's rule, namely, in terms of his sole rule. This seems to be a very strange way of operating, but it is the standard procedure followed by the author of Kings. It is clear from his own comments that the author of Kings had access to many historical documents as source materials for his writing (1 Kings 11:41, 14:19, 29). It is equally clear that his method of using the chronological data in these sources was to accurately report the data which he found in each source without trying to harmonize them into a uniform system. This was his standard method of using any material from his sources. To cite but one example, in 1 Kings 8:8 he refers to the Temple and to the ark of the covenant as if they were still in existence, even though his book goes beyond the time when the Temple was destroyed. The probable reason for this is that the source material for his description of the Temple contained this reference, which he simply left as he had found it. His style of writing history seems strange to modern readers, but this "paratactic" style (the stringing together of different sources without blending or harmonization) is very similar to that of the Greek historian Herodotus, who wrote about a century after the author of Kings and is who credited with being the "father of history." (Perhaps this title should be reassigned to the author of Kings and his biblical predecessors.)

Is such a coregency of Hezekiah and Ahaz compatible with the dating of the kings who precede Hezekiah?

### Ahaz

Hezekiah's father Ahaz was twenty years old when he became king and ruled sixteen years (2 Kings 16:2). He had already been king for twelve years when Hoshea became king of Israel in about 732 B.C. (2 Kings 17:1). This means he had been king since at least 743 B.C. But since Hezekiah became sole ruler in 715 B.C., Ahaz must have ruled until 715. This means that by 715 Ahaz had been king in some sense for nearly thirty years. It is certain that Ahaz was coregent with his father Jotham, since according to 2 Kings 15:30 and 17:1 the twentieth year of Jotham was identical with the twelfth year of Ahaz. This requires a coregency of twelve years. This coregency began in about 743, the year of the first invasion of the West by Tiglath Pileser of Assyria, and was likely precipitated by that event. During this campaign Tiglath Pileser exacted tribute from Menahem of Israel. This crisis may have led the appeasement faction of the

Judean government to demand the appointment of Ahaz as a hedge against the Assyrian threat or because his government could be expected to follow a more pro-Assyrian policy than Jotham. It appears, however, that Jotham kept firm control until about 735 B.C. According to 2 Kings 16:1 Ahaz became king in the 17<sup>th</sup> year of Pekah, which was 735 B.C. This year fell between further invasions of the West by Tiglath Pileser in 738, 734, 733, and 732. It is clear from 2 King 16 that during the last of these invasions Ahaz was promoting a pro-Assyrian policy as a counter to his enemies Rezin of Syria and Pekah of Israel. Thus it appears that there were three different starting points for dating the rule of Ahaz: 743 B.C. when he became coregent with his father Jotham; 735 B.C. when he and his pro-Assyrian policy gained control of the Judean government; and 732 B.C., the death of his father Jotham. Among the contemporaries of Jotham and Ahaz, the dating system which they used very likely depended at least in part on which king they recognized as the legitimate or *de facto* ruler in a given year. It is very likely that the coregency of Hezekiah and Ahaz which began around 728 was also a result of the ongoing power struggle between the pro- and anti-Assyrian parties in the government of Judah. Hezekiah represented the anti-Assyrian faction, which grew more alarmed at the unsatisfied ambitions of Assyria which led to the fall of Samaria in 722 and which were becoming increasingly threatening to Judah. Since Hezekiah was only about 12 years old when he designated as coregent in 728 B.C., he was probably a figurehead for a strong anti-Assyrian faction of the government, rather than an independent force at first. Nevertheless, Ahaz seems to have retained the upper hand until his death in 715. Only then did the anti-Assyrian policy become established as the diplomatic position of Judah.

How does the data for Ahaz's rule fit into this picture? The sixteen years of Ahaz's reign are probably the years after the death of Jotham (732-715 B.C.). These were the years recognized as the "legitimate" years of his power by most of the people of Judah. But when was Ahaz 20 years old? In 732 when he became sole ruler, in 742 when he became coregent, or in 735 when he seems to have asserted power over his father Jotham. If it was in 742, Ahaz would have been about 22 when his son Hezekiah was born in about 740. If it was in 735, he would have been 15 at the birth of his son, a possible age. If he was twenty in 732, he would have been 12 at the birth of his son—possible but less likely. None of the three options would be impossible of itself, but since Hezekiah apparently had an older brother (2 Chronicles 28:5), option one seems most likely.

How would these various options co-ordinate with the reign of Ahaz's father Jotham?

### **Jotham**

Jotham was twenty-five when he became king and reigned sixteen years (2 Kings 15:32). Jotham's father Uzziah died in 740 B.C., but Jotham apparently exercised a coregency with him from about 750 B.C. This coregency was due to the leprosy of Uzziah. This coregency is described in 1 Kings 15:5 and is required by the synchronization of Jotham's first year with the second year of Pekah (750 B.C.) in 1 Kings 15:32 and Jotham's twentieth year with the first year of Hoshea in 2 Kings 15:30 (about 732 B.C.). As we saw previously, Jotham did not die until about 732, but it appears that Ahaz was becoming dominant already in 735 B.C. The sixteen years of Jotham's reign thus appear to cover the time from Uzziah's leprosy in about 750 until Ahaz became the real power in about 735. It was during these years that Jotham was the actual reigning power. It is not likely that Jotham could have been 25 in 740 when he assumed sole rule, since in that case he would have been only 3 years old in 762 B.C. and 10 years old in 755

B.C., the two most likely dates for the birth of Ahaz. He would have been 13 in 752 B.C., but that is the least likely date for Ahaz's birth. If Jotham was 25 in 750 when he became coregent, he would have been about 13 at his son's birth if Ahaz was born in 762 or 20 if he was born in 755. If Jotham was 25 in 750, he was born in 775 when his father Uzziah was about 33. The option that Jotham was 25 when he became coregent in 750 fits well with all the evidence.

### **Uzziah And Amaziah**

Jotham's father Uzziah (also called Azariah) began to reign when he was 16 and ruled 52 years (2 Kings 15:1). From 792-767 he ruled with his father Amaziah, who had become king in about 796. This seems very strange, but it fits well with the information that Amaziah was taken as a prisoner of war by Jehoash, king of Israel (2 Kings 14). It appears that this occurred early in Amaziah's reign, perhaps in 792 when Uzziah became coregent. Amaziah may have remained a prisoner for many years, perhaps until the death of Jehoash in about 782. At some point Amaziah was released from captivity, since he was assassinated by his own officials in about 767. Uzziah ruled alone for only about 17 years (767-750). As we have seen, from 750 to 740 Jotham had to assume the royal power because of his father's leprosy. Uzziah's 52 years must cover the entire span of his rule from 792 to 740 B.C. Sixteen must have been his age when he first became king in 792, because he had already ruled for more than 16 years when his father died in 767. However, the 27<sup>th</sup> year of Jeroboam (the synchronization for the beginning of Uzziah's reign found in 2 Kings 15:1) is 767 B.C., the year Uzziah obtained uncontested power after the death of his father.

### **Pros And Cons**

This solution to the problem of dating Hezekiah's reign has the following strengths:

It accepts all the biblical data and does not resort to claims of textual or historical errors to explain some of the data away.

It also accepts the chronological data obtained from the Assyrian and Egyptian records. There is no need to arbitrarily discard any of the data.

None of the coregencies which are necessary for this system are arbitrary inventions. All of them are required by synchronisms between the kings of Israel and Judah. The only real alternative to such coregencies is textual or historical errors in the synchronisms between the kings of Israel and Judah. Furthermore, there are reasonable explanations for all of the coregencies which this theory requires:

Uzziah with Amaziah—Amaziah's captivity

Jotham with Uzziah—Uzziah's leprosy

Ahaz with Jotham—pressure from the pro-Assyrian faction

Hezekiah with Ahaz—pressure from the anti-Assyrian party.

This theory produces reasonable ages for each king at the birth of his heir. Only the age of Jotham, who may have been 13 at the birth of Ahaz, tests the limits of probability.

If the dating of the kings suggested in this article is correct, the books of Kings and Chronicles do not use a uniform system for measuring the length of a king's reign or for reporting his age at the beginning of his rule. These figures were sometimes provided in terms of his sole rule, sometimes in terms of a coregency. This lack of uniformity, which at first glance appears arbitrary, is obviously the greatest threat to the credibility of this solution to the

chronology of this period. It seems improbable that such a confusing diversity of dating methods could have coexisted at one time. However, we have already seen that this lack of uniformity can be explained by the conflict and instability of the period which led to differences of opinion as to how the reign of a given king should be calculated. The choice of different dates as the beginning of a given king's reign may often have been due to different political opinions about the legitimate starting point of his reign, rather than to a preference for different systems of dating. The methodology of the author of Kings led him to preserve these conflicting viewpoints without trying to harmonize them into a standard system.

This solution is not entirely satisfying since it is based on several assumptions which cannot be proven at the present time. It also requires the acceptance of several improbabilities. However, improbabilities are not impossibilities, especially in extraordinary times. This theory shows that it is possible to explain all of the data concerning Hezekiah's reign without rejecting any of the biblical information. It is clear that any explanation which desires to do justice to the biblical data must place the beginning of Hezekiah's reign before the fall of Samaria. There was really no need for Thiele to abandon his principles and claim historical errors in the account of Hezekiah's rule. The problems associated with Hezekiah's reign can be explained by the same principles which Thiele used in the rest of his chronology. If they are credible in the rest of the chronology, they should be credible here as well.

There are other suggested solutions to the dating of Hezekiah's reign which remain possible as alternative answers to the problem. Most of them require the assumption of textual errors or a more drastic departure from Thiele's chronology. Although it cannot be claimed that Thiele's chronology is a proven fact, it remains viable as a plausible explanation of the chronology of the Hebrew kings. It is possible to suggest solutions to all of the chronological data of the Hebrew kings and their contemporaries within the basic framework of Thiele's system. Although it cannot be claimed that the chronological framework of the Hebrew kings has been reconstructed with certainty, it seems fair to claim that it has been demonstrated that the chronological data of Kings and Chronicles is not a error-filled jumble, but a careful transmission of data which makes sense within the framework of known systems of neareastern chronology and within the methodology and purpose of the author of Kings.

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