

## MESOPOTAMIAN GUIDELINES FOR BIBLICAL CHRONOLOGY

by

Julian Reade

Mesopotamian documents provide good contemporary evidence for some Biblical kings of the ninth to sixth centuries B.C. The reliability of Biblical statements must be judged by their degree of compatibility with the Mesopotamian evidence. This paper suggests that Biblical statements concerning lengths of reign, for kings of both Samaria and Jerusalem, may be essentially reliable and probably derive from straightforward king-lists. This hypothesis would require the elimination of one king of Samaria, who seems to have had the same name as his supposed predecessor. It would be compatible with various Biblical synchronisms that are accompanied by circumstantial detail, but not with simple formulaic ones. It would not require calendrical manipulations. If the hypothesis is correct, then Biblical lengths of reign that cannot be cross-checked against external evidence may also be reliable. A chronological chart is appended.

Most Mesopotamian scholars tend to avoid involvement in Biblical questions, and few Biblical scholars can be expected to be intimately familiar with Mesopotamian evidence. The languages are different; the interests are different; the disciplines have grown apart. It is still desirable, however, from time to time, to check and see whether one discipline can contribute to the other, even in matters that have been exhaustively considered in the past. Something fresh and useful may yet emerge.<sup>1</sup>

Take the case of Merodach-Baladan, king of Babylon, and the 14th year of Hezekiah, king of Judah.<sup>2</sup> Biblical sources tell us of three things that happened in Hezekiah's 14th year: he was seriously ill, he witnessed some kind of celestial phenomenon, and he was attacked by Sennacherib, king of Assyria. The Bible then goes on to tell of an embassy, from Merodach-Baladan, which was well received by Hezekiah. Various motives are given for the

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at a colloquium at the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, in September 1979. I am much indebted to Dr. Dominique Collon, who read it for me when I was unavoidably absent. There are no changes of substance.

<sup>2</sup> Merodach-Baladan is most fully discussed by J. A. Brinkman, "Merodach-Baladan II", *Studies presented to A. Leo Oppenheim* (Chicago, 1964), 6-53, especially 31-3. Most Biblical and Mesopotamian references cited in this paper are conveniently collected by M. Weippert, "Israel und Juda", *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* 5, fascicule 3 (Berlin and New York, 1977), 200-8, and will not be repeated here. Other Biblical references will readily be located by anyone who has read this far.

embassy: to ask after Hezekiah's health, to enquire about the celestial phenomenon, or to explore the political situation with a view, according to Josephus, to joint military action. Now this Merodach-Baladan reigned in Babylon from 722 to 710, and again briefly in 703, on each occasion being deposed by the Assyrians; he is last heard of in 700, when Sennacherib drove him from his retreat in the southern Mesopotamian marshes. It would seem entirely reasonable that Merodach-Baladan, during his first long period of reign that ended in 710, should have sent an embassy to Hezekiah to investigate, for instance, some celestial phenomenon seen in the west; we know that careful astronomical records were being kept in Babylon at this time. An embassy about this or other matters might also have been possible about 703, but thereafter it becomes increasingly unlikely.

Now, if the Biblical accounts are correct, then the embassy was not earlier than a point in Hezekiah's 14th year. Another event of this year, however, according to the Bible, was Sennacherib's attack on Judah, and we can date this from Assyrian sources to 701. By then Merodach-Baladan was no longer king of Babylon. Obviously it is not inconceivable that all these events should have been crammed into 12 months: Hezekiah is sick, something is seen in the sky, messengers arrive from Merodach-Baladan in his marsh, Sennacherib arrives shortly afterwards; but it would seem safer, in the circumstances, to reserve judgement on such an accumulation of incident. It might be possible, for instance, that Hezekiah was merely ill in his 14th year, and that everything else was hung, tidily but wrongly, on this existing chronological peg.

The situation, however, is not always so indefinite. Thus the Bible also tells us that Hezekiah began his reign with an attempt to persuade the people of Samaria, by then an Assyrian province, to join in religious festivities at Jerusalem. This was interference in the internal affairs of the Assyrian empire, and was bound to provoke an Assyrian reaction. The Assyrian evidence offers three possible dates for this. One is shortly before 701, the year of Sennacherib's attack; another is about 712, during an obscure anti-Assyrian intrigue; the third is during the years 721-720, when there was a general western revolt against the Assyrian king, Sargon, and though Judah may not have played the leading part, its name appears beside that of the principal victim of the ensuing 720 campaign.

Let us assume that Hezekiah did indeed become king, and send his emissaries to Samaria, in 721. If we then add together the lengths of reign of Hezekiah and his successors, counting by a well-known Egyptian method of ante-dating (i.e. the first year of a new king is the same as the last year of the king before), then we find that the first capture of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar took place in the early spring of 597. This is precisely the date given in the entirely independent Babylonian Chronicle, and may lead us to wonder whether the Biblical evidence for lengths of reign, and for the date of Hezekiah's interference in Samaria, should perhaps be taken seriously.

There are of course some other synchronisms between Mesopotamia and Judah for the period between 721 and 597, but none of them is in conflict with this scheme.<sup>3</sup> The scheme also fits the

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<sup>3</sup> An imaginary synchronism is that between the death of Josiah and the Egyptian expedition mentioned in the Babylonian Chronicle for 609. This Chronicle, which should be consulted in the edition by A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* (Texts from Cuneiform Sources 5, Locust Valley, New York, 1975), 91-102, mentions movements by the Egyptian army in those years when it came into contact with the Babylonians (e.g. 610, 609, 606, 605); it has no bearing on possible Egyptian moves in those years (e.g. 608, 607) when the Babylonians, perhaps for pressing reasons, campaigned in a different direction.

dates at which, as we again know from both Biblical and Assyrian sources, tribute was paid to Assyria by Hezekiah's father, the earliest king of Jerusalem to be mentioned in a Mesopotamian text. We do not need to juggle with continual changes of calendar to accommodate one anomaly or another. It is as if one source for the biblical Book of Kings was a simple king-list, for kings of Jerusalem, such as we know existed for contemporary kings in Mesopotamia and probably elsewhere.

Now the field of Biblical chronology is notoriously littered with scholars who have lost their heads. I am not claiming that anything proposed in this paper is infallible, but it is worth observing that we have here three categories of evidence which are to a large extent internally consistent. These are: Mesopotamian references to people or events mentioned in the Bible; circumstantial Biblical references, excluding the precise date given for Sennacherib's attack, to people or events mentioned in Mesopotamian sources; and the lengths of reign assigned in the Bible to kings of Jerusalem over the entire period, about 137 years, for which all three categories of evidence are available.

It therefore seems worth considering what results emerge from applying the same categories of evidence to the history of the kingdom of Samaria. It will be convenient, provisionally, to divide this section into two parts: one covering the period from Ahab to Menahem, and the other the period from Hoshea to the fall of Samaria.

Fundamental for the first period are two familiar Assyrian references to Ahab and Jehu in the mid ninth century. These are precisely dated, and by correlation with the Biblical lengths of reign for intervening kings, we can calculate that Jehu came to the throne in 841 or possibly 842. Recently we have seen the validity of both references questioned, one by someone who assumes that the Assyrians could not count, and the other by someone who assumes that when they wrote one name they may really have meant a different one. Both objections have been adequately refuted by competent scholars,<sup>4</sup> and they need not distract us now. If the Biblical lengths of reign are correct, then Jehu became king in 841 or very shortly before.

For the next century there is only one Assyrian reference to a king of Samaria, and it is too imprecise to help us. We then come to the reign of Menahem, and if we use the Biblical lengths of reign for intervening kings, counting forward from Jehu (841) still according to exactly the same system as we used for kings of Jerusalem, then Menahem reigned from 743 to 734. This again is consistent with the Assyrian evidence. We have texts specifying that Menahem sent tribute in 738, i.e. half-way through his reign, a year when the Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser III was active in central Syria.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>W. H. Shea, "A note on the date of the battle of Qarqar", *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 29 (1977), 240-2, corrected by J. A. Brinkman, *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 30 (1978) 173-5. P. K. McCarter's article, "Yaw, son of 'Omri", *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 216 (December, 1974), 5-7, is dealt with by M. Weippert, "Jau(a) mār Humri-Joram oder Jehu von Israel?" *Vetus Testamentum* 28 (1978), 113-8.

<sup>5</sup>The most convenient edition of the excerpts concerning tribute is that of M. Weippert, "Menahem von Israel und seine Zeitgenossen", *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins* 89 (1973), 26-53, specifically 29-30 (the Levine stela) and 34 (Nimrud Annals). M. Cogan, "Tyre and Tiglath-pileser III", *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 25 (1973), 96-9, proposes that the Levine stela refers to tribute paid in 740, i.e. that despite the early date at which it was written (737) and its apparent annalistic form, it is less reliable than the much later Nimrud Annals. This theory would account for the stela's omission of Hamath among the tributaries, but not for its omission of Unqi. Cogan really bases his argument on the assumption that the name of the king of Tyre, certainly Tubailu in the Levine stela, changes to Hiram in the section of the Nimrud Annals referring to 738, but there is no published evidence for the name Hiram in the Nimrud Annals; even if it were present, we should have no means of determining which of the two lists embodied an anachronism.

In 734, moreover, Menahem's last year, Tiglath-pileser reached Palestine itself; his prime objective was the Philistine coast, but he will undoubtedly have received tribute from other states in the vicinity, and his annals refer to what may well have been action against Samaria in this year.<sup>6</sup> There are in fact two complementary Assyrian texts<sup>7</sup> listing what in my view may be tribute received during 734, but both are damaged at the point where we should have expected to find the name of the king of Samaria. If we go back to the Bible, however, we read that Tiglath-pileser did invade Palestine during Menahem's reign, and that Menahem paid him to withdraw. So there is no problem in correlating the Biblical and Assyrian evidence for this first period in the history of Samaria. Our same three categories of evidence are internally consistent.

The same may apply, though in a less clear-cut manner, to the last 12 years of Samarian independence. Hoshea became king, according to Assyrian sources, within the period 734-732, say 733; 12 years later, in 722, the Assyrians captured Samaria. The Bible assigns 9 years of reign to Hoshea: the Assyrians are said to have arrested him, and to have besieged Samaria for 3 years. This is again a total of 12 years. It is possible to differ on the exact details of this series of events, but most scholars would probably accept that the two accounts fit one another, and that a further Biblical statement, that Samaria fell in the 9th year of Hoshea, is a scribal rationalization better left out of account. Again there is no serious conflict between the Mesopotamian sources and the relevant categories of Biblical evidence: length of reign, plus in this case length of siege, and circumstantial Biblical references to Assyrian activity.

Now between the two periods I have discussed there is a very short interval: a maximum of 3 years, 734-732, but more probably 1 or 2 years. Even this gap could be satisfactorily bridged, however, by the 2-year reign assigned by the Bible to Menahem's immediate successor, Pekahiah. Since an Assyrian source specifies that a king in this interval, immediately before Hoshea, was named Pakaha,<sup>8</sup> presumably equivalent to Hebrew Pekah, the latter being regarded by Martin Noth as an abbreviation of the name Pekahiah,<sup>9</sup> our different categories of evidence might again appear to concur. This is not so, however, since after Pekahiah the Bible inserts yet another king of the same name, Pekah, who is said to have reigned for a length of time, 20 years, which even those of fundamentalist leanings such as Thiele have agreed to be impossible.

In order to find out a little more about Pekah, we must look briefly at quite another matter where once again the Mesopotamian monuments assist Biblical interpretation. It seems that, in the ancient Near East, a fighting chariot originally held two men: the driver, and a soldier whose principal weapon was the bow. It was found, however, that such units were dangerously

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<sup>6</sup> P. Rost, *Die Keilschrifttexte Tiglat-Pileasers III* (Leipzig, 1893), 38, lines 227-8. This is part of a passage probably describing events of 733, but it refers back specifically to a previous campaign.

<sup>7</sup> They are given by Weippert, *op. cit.* (above, note 5), 35 and 52. One of these (K3751) is certainly not an annalistic text, the other seems not to be. There remains the possibility, however, that they both list tribute received in a single year. If so, then 737-734 seem to be the only years in which such a combination of tributaries was possible, and 734 is the only one of these years in which Tiglath-pileser visited Palestine.

<sup>8</sup> Rost, *op. cit.* (above, note 6), 80, line 17.

<sup>9</sup> M. Noth, *Die israelitischen Personennamen im Rahmen der gemeinsemitischen Namengebung* (Hildesheim, 1966), 186.

exposed to enemy missiles, and already therefore by the 860's we find that the Assyrian royal chariot carries a third man whose job is to protect the king by waving a shield. The Akkadian word for this shield-bearer appears to have been *tašlīšu*, literally "third man". By about 700 most Assyrian chariots held three or even four men, and they were correspondingly larger than the earlier models. The word *tašlīšu* may have come to be used more loosely for shield-bearers or bodyguards in general, but this is uncertain.

Now the Assyrian sculptures in the British Museum which show the capture of Lachish in Judah in 701 include a scene which probably represents booty taken from the local governor's palace. There are two fine incense-burners or offering-stands; then a throne; and a bundle of scimitars. In addition there is the governor's chariot, and it is virtually identical with Assyrian chariots of the same date. If the Lachishites had used a distinctive type of chariot, it is probable that the Assyrian artists would have indicated its distinctive features with their usual care, but since this is the same as the Assyrian type, it seems that the Lachishites were indeed using efficient up-to-date models. Military technology usually travels fast.

It is not surprising, therefore, to find that a Hebrew equivalent of the term *tašlīšu* has been recognized: this is *šališ*, again literally "third man."<sup>10</sup> Here too the word may have come to be used loosely for shield-bearers or bodyguards in general, but there are at least two instances, both in the Book of Kings, where it is applied to a personal attendant in close contact with the king; such a person would presumably have been the king's shield-bearer in battle. Once we have a *šališ* "on whose arm the king leaned"; and on another occasion, when Jehu is actually standing in his chariot, he turns to his *šališ* to give instructions about disposal of the body of a man he has just shot. So, when we learn that Pekah, the king of Samaria with the disturbing 20-year reign, was the *šališ* of the king before him, we are entitled to regard him as a close and trusted personal attendant. Sometimes he may even have acted as an independent commander in the field, when the king was absent, but we are hardly entitled to see him as a viceroy who had good reason to claim to have reigned in Samaria for a longer period than he really did. This figure of 20 years has to be a subsequent invention.

Essentially, then, in the gap between the two periods already discussed, the Bible presents us with two individuals. One is Pekahiah, described as son of Menahem, who reigned two years and has no further stories attached to him except a standard formula. The other is Pekah, whose name is Pekahiah abbreviated, who was a royal *šališ*, murdered his master, joined with Damascus to attack Judah, was himself attacked by Tiglath-pileser, and was eventually replaced, after a 20-year reign, by Hoshea. One is the kind of colourless figure who might be derived from a king-list.<sup>11</sup> The other is a personality living in adventurous times, about whom stories were told in later days. Is it possible that the two are really the same person, that the compiler of the Book of Kings, with two sets of data before him, failed to realize that they both referred to a single man: Pekahiah, commonly called Pekah, the *šališ* of Menahem, with a hectic reign of 2 years?

<sup>10</sup>R. de Vaux, *Les Institutions de l'Ancien Testament I* (Paris, (1958), 187-8. These are of course other Biblical references to the *šališ*, which can be located through any concordance. W.G. Lambert kindly refers me to a forthcoming *Vetus Testamentum* article, by B. Mastin, which argues against the *tašlīšu/šališ* relationship.

<sup>11</sup>King-lists are liable to invent affiliations, as B. Landsberger, in "Assyrische Königsliste und 'Dunkles Zeitalter'", *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 8 (1954), 42-43, showed for the Assyrian version. The description of Pekahiah as Menahem's son might be an example of this.

Now this discussion of Pekah and Pekahiah has been partly a digression from my main theme, which is the way in which Mesopotamian monuments illuminate the Bible. Here is a plain case of incompatibility. Nonetheless, there is one thing which is equally plain. Were we to accept that Pekah's 20 years were altogether illusory (I repeat that such a 20-year reign is acknowledged as impossible by every serious scholar), then we should have for Samaria, as we have for Jerusalem, satisfactory agreement between our three categories of evidence—contemporary Mesopotamian texts, circumstantial Biblical accounts, Biblical lengths of reign—for the entire period, in this case 112 years, for which they are available. What is more, a number of difficulties in interpreting the evidence for the political dealings between Assyria and Palestine in the 730's would evaporate. I shall not go into that question here; I can only insist that the scheme works.<sup>12</sup>

If then we were to rely on lengths of reign, as recorded in the Bible, for periods that we can cross-check with Mesopotamia, then presumably we could do so for earlier periods too. We should find that Samaria was founded in 880, oddly enough about the same time as the Assyrian capital of Nimrud. The history of Jerusalem is more complicated, because of the Biblical indications of two joint or rival reigns in the eighth century<sup>13</sup> and of one, possibly two, in the ninth,<sup>14</sup> but we do have a circumstantial synchronism with Jehu of Samaria which would enable us to work our way back to the death of Solomon within the period 931-928. There is nothing seriously controversial here. Throughout the joint history of the two kingdoms, however, there is one category of Biblical evidence which we should have to dismiss as late and artificial. These are the formulaic synchronisms between Jerusalem and Samaria, e.g. "so-and-so became king in such-and-such a year of so-and-so". The apparent purpose of these synchronisms was to give an impression of essential unity to the history of two neighboring but frequently hostile kingdoms; they occur in any number of variants, internal contradictions are legion; they are the main reason Biblical chronology is a mess.<sup>15</sup> In practice the only Jerusalem-Samaria synchronisms that have to be taken seriously are those accompanied by circumstantial detail.

One matter I have not considered here is a much-argued technical point: at what time of year,

<sup>12</sup>In fact it seems to suit convergent opinion among current historians who have steered clear of the technical problems of Biblical chronology. See, for example, B. Otzen, "Israel under the Assyrians", *Power and Propaganda* (Mesopotamia: Copenhagen Studies in Assyriology 7, ed. M.T. Larsen, Copenhagen, 1979), 254-7.

<sup>13</sup>Amaziah/Azariah; Azariah/Jotham.

<sup>14</sup>Athaliah/Joash; possibly Asa/Jehoshaphat.

<sup>15</sup>Thus far I have refrained from direct citation of the monstrous literature on this subject; see the select bibliography in *Israelite and Judean History*, ed. J.H. Hayes and J. Maxwell Muller (London, 1977), 678-9. It might seem impossible that there should be anything new remaining to be said, and I cannot pretend to have scoured every conceivable source. So far as I am aware, however, the principal suggestion in this paper, namely the basic reliability of the Biblical lengths of reign, without any changes of calendar, is incompatible with all reputable current chronological schemes. The proposal that Pekah and Pekahiah are identical is, oddly enough, anticipated by H. Cazelles, "Problèmes de la guerre Syro-Ephraïmite", *Eretz-Israel* 14, H.L. Ginsberg volume (Jerusalem, 1978), 70\*-78\*, on p. 77\* "Péqah assassina Menahem", but in view of the description of Pekah on p. 75\* as Menahem's "second successeur", this insight would appear to be a slip of the pen.

spring or autumn, did the regnal year of a Biblical king begin? Either is possible for Samaria, while spring is preferable for Jerusalem, in the scheme outlined above, and I have accordingly created a chronological chart which allows for certain margins of error. Perhaps this problem too is soluble, but I suggest that anyone attempting really close dating for such a remote period should ponder two quotations from a standard handbook on English history.<sup>16</sup> “Thus 28 December 1190 would be reckoned by the English chancery clerk of that day as falling in the second year of King Richard I, but for a clerk of the exchequer the accounts covering this date belonged to the Pipe Roll of 3 Richard I, and a Benedictine chronicler would include the events of that day in the year of grace 1191”. And, similarly, “if we suppose a traveller to set out from Venice on March 1, 1245, the first day of the Venetian year, he would find himself in 1244 when he reached Florence; and if after a short stay he went on to Pisa, the year 1246 would have already begun there. Continuing his journey westward, he would find himself again in 1245 when he entered Provence, and on arriving in France before Easter (April 16) he would be once more in 1244”.

With these quotations in mind, I would not care to suggest that the chronological framework outlined here is final and definitive. If we adopted, for instance, lengths of reign given by Josephus rather than those in the Masoretic text, we should have to undertake emergency repairs. Some newly discovered Mesopotamian text could bring the whole structure down in ruins. What I am saying is that there are three categories of evidence, Mesopotamian and Biblical, which are essentially consistent for both kingdoms over long periods of time, and that where one of them falters, as with Hezekiah's busy 14th year, there are independent reasons for suspicion. What I have presented is a working hypothesis, a scheme which scholars can, if they wish, employ in the knowledge that it does not do violence to the Mesopotamian sources that are our nearest approach to a contemporary record of these troublesome kings.

<sup>16</sup>C. R. Cheney (ed), *Handbook of Dates for Students of English History* (London, 1945), vii, 3.

## Chronological Chart

(All years are treated as running from spring to spring: thus 841 = Julian 841/0. It is assumed that each kingdom used a consistent method of dating regnal years throughout its existence.)

## SAMARIA

(Regnal years are given as dating from the spring; autumns before or after are possible.)

Omri	885 - 874
Ahab	874 - 853
Ahaziah	853 - 852
Jehoram	852 - 841
Jehu	841 - 814
Jehoahaz	814 - 798
Jehoash	798 - 783
Jeroboam	783 - 743
Zechariah	743
Shallum	743
Menahem	743 - 734
Pekah(iah)	734 - 733
Hoshea	733 - 725
Siege of Samaria	724 - 722 (summer)



## JERUSALEM

(Regnal years are given as dating from the spring.)

Solomon	circa 970 - 931, 930, 929, or 928
Rehoboam	931, 930, 929, or 928 - 915, 914, 913, or 912
Abijam	915, 914, 913, or 912 - 913, 912, 911, or 910
Asa	913, 912, 911, or 910 - 873 or 872
Jehoshaphat	873 or 872 - 849 or 848
Joram	849 or 848 - 842 or 841
Ahaziah	842 or 841
(Athaliah	842 or 841 - 836 or 835)
Joash	842 or 841 - 803 or 802
Amaziah	803 or 802 - 790 or 789 (alive until 775 or 774)
Azariah	790 or 789 - 751 (alive until 739 or 738)
Jotham	751 - 736
Ahaz	736 - 721
Hezekiah	721 - 693
Manasseh	693 - 639
Amon	639 - 638
Josiah	638 - 608
Jehoahaz	608 (summer)
Jehoiakim	608 - 598
Jehoiachin	598 (winter)
Zedekiah	597 (spring) - 587 (summer)

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Volume 4

Issue 1

May 1981

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Undena Publications

Malibu 1981



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ISBN: 0-89003-050-2

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