

February 6, 2005
Venerable Photius

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

It would seem an easy thing, at first, to date the reign of King Hezekiah. From the Bible we know that Sennacherib of Assyria besieged Jerusalem in the fourteenth year of Hezekiah's reign (2 Kings 18:13), and from the inscription on the "Prism of Sennacherib" we learn that that siege occurred in 701. Thus, the conjunction of these two texts indicates that Hezekiah came to the throne in 715. We also know that he occupied the throne twenty-nine years (18:2). Hence, historians feel safe in dating his reign from about 715 to about 687.

Moreover, that terminal date for Hezekiah is further confirmed by the reference to "Tirhaka, king of Ethiopia" in 2 Kings 19:9. Since Assyrian and Egyptian sources put Tirhaka on the throne in 689, these details about Hezekiah line up in harmonious order.

The serene melody of this sequence is disquieted, nonetheless, by one note harshly off-key. That is, the Bible says Hezekiah took the throne in the third year of Israel's final king, Hosea (18:1). That year would be 729/728. Furthermore, the Kingdom of Israel itself came to an end when Sargon II conquered it in 722/721. Both of these dates, we observe, are earlier than 715, the year we postulated for Hezekiah's accession to the throne. In short, there is a problem.

Some defenders of Holy Scripture may object, of course, that this historical difficulty arises only because we are attempting to coordinate the biblical narrative with sources extraneous to the Bible, such as the annals of Sennacherib (whence we derived the date 701 for his siege of Jerusalem) and the Rassam Cylinder (which tells us about Tirhaka). These defenders of Holy Scripture may urge us simply to discount the extra-biblical material when it comes into conflict with God's Sacred Word, which must reign supreme--I hope all of us will admit--in our considerations.

Permit me to suggest, nonetheless, that this approach does not provide an adequate answer. In the instance just reviewed, the extra-biblical sources actually tend to confirm the biblical narrative except in one particular. Were it not for 2 Kings 18:1, the material learned from other sources would be completely in harmony with the biblical narrative.

May I submit that the real difficulty does not arise from the extra-biblical material but from the Bible itself. (I know this sounds scandalous, but please bear with me for a moment.) A single example may demonstrate what I mean.

Holy Scripture tells us that Hezekiah's father, King Ahaz, "was twenty years old when he became king" of Judah. It further informs us that this happened "in the seventeenth year of Pekah," the corresponding king of Israel (16:1-2). Calculated at face value, this

means that Ahaz was twenty years old in King Pekah's seventeenth year. All right, then, we know that Pekah reigned twenty years (15:27). This reckoning would make Ahaz twenty-three years old when Hosea (yes, the same gentleman we mentioned earlier) murdered Pekah and succeeded him (15:30). Therefore, in Hosea's third year--three years later, that is--Ahaz was twenty-six. This seems clear enough.

Please observe--if you have persevered with me up to this point--that I have assigned no dates to these events, nor have I appealed to any source outside Holy Scripture. I have simply asserted what the Bible asserts. I have taken plain biblical texts and compared them.

Let us go on comparing them.

According to a passage we looked at earlier (18:1), Hezekiah assumed the throne of Judah in the third year of King Hosea of Israel, at which time (as we have seen) his father Ahaz was twenty-six years old. We also know from that same text that Hezekiah was twenty-five years old at that time (18:2). Now, if in the same year that Hezekiah was twenty-five (18:2), his father Ahaz was twenty-six, it follows that Ahaz was only one-year old when he became Hezekiah's father! Please note that I have reached this conclusion from the biblical text alone.

Historians are embarrassed by these difficulties, and believers tend, one suspects, not to notice them.

I suggest, however, that a solution to the problematic dating of the biblical kings is ready to hand--namely, the practice of co-regency.

We know that there was a great recurrence of murder and civil war in the succession of ancient kings. The Books of Kings abundantly testify to this fact respecting the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and in the case of Assyria it must be admitted that Sennacherib was one of the very few emperors to succeed to the throne with neither a murder nor great strife. Likewise, we think of the numerous dynasties of Egypt.

In such a context it should not surprise us that some monarchs, especially in the covenanted kingdom of Judah, in order secure a peaceful political transition, assumed their heirs by title into their own reigns. Indeed, according to 1 Kings 1 this is what happened in the case of David and Solomon.

This, I submit, is an easy and reasonable explanation for the dating problems in the Books of Kings. These chronologies appear to fix some of those reigns by two different ways of dating the king's accession to the throne: from the time of co-regency and from the time of actual accession. This simple observation clears up problems that otherwise appear impossible.

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