

## DID DAVID USE ASSYRIAN-TYPE ANNALS?

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In the study of ancient history, the various systems of chronological reckoning are of incalculable value. The B.C. and A.D. dates, of course, can be expanded indefinitely to include all possible events, and so the Christian era is unique in this respect. Many nations of antiquity had their own individual systems of chronological reckoning which covered long periods or eras of their history. However, to the student of the Biblical records it becomes readily apparent that no single coherent system was used for Biblical history.

It is obvious to any Bible reader that in the times of the divided kingdoms historical events, both in the Northern Kingdom of Israel and in the Southern Kingdom of Judah, were dated to particular years of the kings' reigns. In this respect, this era of Biblical history utilized a system closely resembling the method of reckoning used by Babylonians, Persians, and others. For all practical purposes, for contemporary people this was a rather satisfactory method for keeping track of both historical events and business transactions or any others matters in which dating was necessary.<sup>1</sup>

Leaving aside entirely the question as to when Judah or Israel were using postdating or antedating,<sup>2</sup> the earliest Biblical reference to an event dated by a specific king occurs

<sup>1</sup> Some difficulties arise for us to determine the exact year, however, when several of the kings bore the same name. Thus there are Darius I, Darius II, and Darius III; Artaxerxes I, Artaxerxes II, and Artaxerxes III. Since the documents do not refer to the kings by number but only by name, the historian must depend upon context or some other way of determining the sequence in order to properly place these documents within the reigns of their respective kings.

<sup>2</sup> See Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* (2d ed.; Chicago, 1955), pp. 14ff.

in the United Monarchy, referring to one of the years of King Solomon's reign as follows:

And it came to pass in the four hundred and eightieth year after the children of Israel were come out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel, in the month of Zif, which is the second month, that he began to build the house of the Lord (1 Ki 6 : 1).

Thus the beginning of the building of the Temple is said specifically to have taken place in the fourth year of Solomon's reign. Similar is the statement that the completion of the Temple building took place in the eleventh year of Solomon's reign (1 Ki 6 : 38). The same method of dating was used in the reigns of the successors of Solomon. In the Southern Kingdom the first dated event took place in the fifth year of Rehoboam's reign (1 Ki 14 : 25), and in the Northern Kingdom the first dated event is dated to the 18th year of Jero-boam's reign (1 Ki 15 : 1).

It only takes a casual reading of the subsequent records in the books of Kings and Chronicles to realize that this method of dating events was employed during the reigns of all the subsequent kings of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms—on and on down to the end of the existence of the two states. But what of the period before Solomon's reign? What system of chronicling history was employed during those periods of the monarchy when Saul was reigning or when David was reigning? Admittedly, the Bible has no direct evidence as to what type of system was used, and the absence of any specific event dated to any specific year of the reigns of either Saul or David cannot be construed as absolute proof that they did not use this method of dating historical events. However, there remains the possibility that another type of reckoning was used, and for such a possibility it is quite relevant to make a comparison with the various types of records preserved from ancient Assyria.

The ancient Assyrian practice was to designate each year, not by its numerical order in the years of the king's reign, but

rather by the name of an annual honorary official who was called *limu* or *limmu*, also known as an "eponym" (a term derived from the Greek ἐπώνυμος). Thus it is generally held that the Assyrians originally used neither an era nor the years of the king upon which to base their records. From at least the period of the Third Dynasty of Ur and apparently down to the end of Assyria, the Assyrians appointed someone to this honorary office of *limmu*, either a high court official, the governor of some province, a general, or the king himself.<sup>3</sup> The Assyrian calendar year (which began in the spring and ended in the spring) was then given the name of the individual who held the office of *limmu* for that calendar year, and historical events that took place in Assyria were dated by the names of these men. Lists of these officials, the so-called *limmu* lists, were apparently kept in every city for use for official or business purposes.

There were two main types of *limmu* lists, which have been discussed by Sidney Smith as follows:

Long lists of these officials were compiled, which fall into two main classes; the more important of the two gave the name of the *limu*, his official capacity in the Assyrian state, and a brief note concerning the chief event in the year so far as the king himself was concerned, while the second class simply recounted the names. The two classes may be conveniently referred to as the eponym chronicle and the eponym lists.<sup>4</sup>

What Smith calls the "eponym chronicle" is called by other historians the "Assyrian Chronicle" or the "Assyrian Expedition Lists."<sup>5</sup>

Whereas the records preserved in the eponym lists have always been simple, containing usually only one main event for each year or at the most two events, there is another class of Assyrian records which have been grouped together

<sup>3</sup> Sidney Smith, *The Early History of Assyria* (London, 1928), p. 343.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> A. H. Sayce, ed., *Records of the Past*, II (London, 1889), 112; Robert W. Rogers, *History of Babylonia and Assyria* (2d ed.; New York, 1915), I, 502, 503.

under the general term "annals." The various annals of the Assyrian kings represent a wide spectrum ranging from simple accounts of what happened year by year, to very elaborately detailed records of military expeditions and other activities. They date back at least to the reign of Arik-dên-ilu.<sup>6</sup> The annals of the kings of Assyria may be divided into three general groups in regard to the dating methods employed. First, the records might refer to events as occurring in the year of a specific *limmu* or eponym. Secondly, the annals might be dated to a numbered year of a king's reign. Thirdly, the events contained in the annals might be simply dated to a certain military campaign of the king in numerical order, which, in turn, might or might not be in consecutive years of his reign. Any one of these three methods could be used by the various kings, or there could be any combination of these methods. In general, the earlier annals tended to date events by referring to the *limmu* or eponym.

In addition to these records, there are annals that list campaign after campaign, without giving the number of the campaign (whether it is the first campaign, or the second, etc.), as, for example, the annals of Ashur-dân II.<sup>7</sup> The successive campaigns of the king might be against a new foe each year, or there could be a second campaign in a subsequent year against the same country. For example, the annals of Ashur-bêl-kala are dated by the regnal years of the king, and in his first year there was an expedition against Uruaîri and another one in his third regnal year.<sup>8</sup> The annals of Ashurnasîrpal are usually dated to the *limmu* or eponym.<sup>9</sup> Actually, he dated the events of his first year by the year of

<sup>6</sup> Daniel D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, I (Chicago, 1926), 24.

<sup>7</sup> Ernst F. Weidner, "Die Annalen des Königs Aššurdân II von Assyrien," *AfO*, III (1926), 151-161.

<sup>8</sup> Weidner, "Die Annalen des Königs Aššurbêlkala von Assyrien," *AfO*, VI (1929), 75-94.

<sup>9</sup> J. M. Rodwell, "The Annals of Assur-nasir-pal," *Records of the Past*, III, 45, 55, 59, 65.

his reign, but the events of his second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth years by the *limmu* or eponym; and the events of his seventh, eighth, and ninth years follow in order but without dating by the *limmu* or any other method.<sup>10</sup> In the "Monolith Inscription" of Shalmaneser III he refers either to his "accession" year or to the first year of his reign, then to his second year as his own *limmu* year, and in subsequent years to the various eponyms, whereas in his so-called "Black Obelisk" inscription he refers to his "accession" year, his first year, his second year, his third year, then to an eponym year, then to his fifth year, sixth year, etc.<sup>11</sup> In another edition of his annals the events are dated specifically to successive eponyms for the first five years, and then the pattern changes to the sixth campaign, seventh campaign, eighth campaign, ninth campaign, tenth campaign, etc.<sup>12</sup> Sargon II apparently always dated his records to the specific year of his reign rather than to the year of an eponym or *limmu*.<sup>13</sup> The annals of Sennacherib were recorded chiefly by campaigns. The known number of his campaigns is eight, but his eighth and last campaign was not in the last year of his reign.<sup>14</sup> The records of Ashurbanipal were also dated by campaigns, and in his first campaign against Egypt, he completely subdued 22 lesser kings along the way to his main foe.<sup>15</sup>

In summarizing these records of Assyria it may be said that, as a general rule, there was one major event recorded for each year as indicated by the *limmu* lists, although there might have been many minor expeditions in the same year.

<sup>10</sup> E. A. Wallis Budge and Leonard W. King, *Annals of the Kings of Assyria*, I (London, 1902), 269, 288, 302, 311, 326, 346, and lxvii.

<sup>11</sup> Luckenbill, *op. cit.*, I, 213, 216ff, 201ff.

<sup>12</sup> Joachim Ménant, *Annales des rois d'Assyrie* (Paris, 1874), pp. 109ff, 113ff.

<sup>13</sup> Luckenbill, *op. cit.*, II, 2-23; Julius Oppert, "The Annals of Sargon," from *Records of the Past*, VII, 29.

<sup>14</sup> Luckenbill, *The Annals of Sennacherib* (Chicago, 1924), p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> Luckenbill, *Ancient Records*, II, 292, 293.

For example, Tiglath-pileser I seems to have conquered 42 lands in five years, besides other small localities, stated as follows:

In all, forty-two lands and their princes from beyond the Lower Zab, a region of distant hills, unto the further side of the Euphrates, and the land of Hatti and the Upper Sea of the West, from the beginning of my rule up to the fifth year of my reign, my hand has conquered. I have made them to be under one rule; I have taken hostages from them, and have laid tribute and tax upon them.—This does not include many other wars against enemies who could not oppose my might.—I have pursued them in my chariots where the country was good, and on foot where it was difficult. I have kept back the foot of the enemy from my land. <sup>16</sup>

The records for certain years might be very brief and for other years fairly expansive. For example, in the inscriptions of Sargon II there is only one campaign listed for each of his second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth years respectively, but he records two campaigns for his ninth year, and then for his twelfth and thirteenth years, the records were greatly expanded in details. These were the last of his annals but not the last years of his reign. <sup>17</sup> Usually when more than one country or land was involved in one year's fighting, the two or more countries were located near each other. But this was not always true; Tiglath-pileser I, for example, carried out two military campaigns in his accession year requiring his army first to march to the northwest, and after the successful completion of that campaign, to the east. <sup>18</sup>

Thus the records of the Assyrian kings could be very brief or could be expanded, could have one main event for each year or could have more than one event, and could on occasion show campaigns conducted against the same enemy, in several

<sup>16</sup> Luckenbill, *Ancient Records*, I, 85; cf. George S. Goodspeed, *A History of the Babylonians and Assyrians* (New York, 1909), p. 167, and Budge and King, *op. cit.*, pp. xlv-xlvi.

<sup>17</sup> Arthur G. Lie, *The Inscriptions of Sargon II: The Annals* (Paris, 1929), pp. 7, 9, 11, 13, 29, 35ff.

<sup>18</sup> Luckenbill, *Ancient Records*, I, 74-76; H. W. F. Saggs, *The Greatness that was Babylon* (London, 1962), p. 89.

consecutive years, but each time that same enemy would be mentioned again for that subsequent year. All of these various possibilities are reflected in the records of the reign of David, as a close comparison will show. The main conclusion is that the Assyrian records, if complete as far as can be ascertained, had at least something of interest or value indicated for each calendar year, minor though that historical event might appear. This careful accumulation of year-by-year records was the outstanding distinction of the Assyrian records.

Turning now to the Biblical records of the reign of David during the United Monarchy, the length of his reign is given as 40 years. That this particular period of 40 years is far more exact than other similar periods mentioned in Biblical records (where, in some cases, 40 years may be equivalent to "a generation"), is seen by the fact that the period represents the sum of two periods, one of 7 1/2 years and one of 33 years, as follows:

David was thirty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned forty years. In Hebron he reigned over Judah seven years and six months: and in Jerusalem he reigned thirty and three years over all Israel and Judah (2 Sa 5 : 4, 5).

This text is identical for all practical purposes with the record found in 1 Ki 2 : 11. Of the total number of 40 years mentioned for David specifically in these verses, the first year he reigned in Jerusalem apparently would be counted as the eighth year of his reign. The principal events of his reign will be examined in the order in which they are referred to in 2 Sa, to see if there is any discernible pattern in the reign of David (remembering that often the principal event might be a military campaign against some neighboring nation or city—if these records are similar to the historical records of Assyria—unless, of course, some event at home transcended in importance the military campaign, in which case that would be the important event for the year).

The military highlight of the year in which David began to reign over all Israel would be the campaign against Jeru-

salem and the Jebusites (2 Sa 5 : 6ff.). This event would then have occurred in the eighth year of David's reign.

The next major campaign was against the Philistines in the valley of Rephaim (2 Sa 5 : 17-21), and if this were the next annual event, it would have taken place in the ninth year of David's reign.

The next major event recorded is another campaign against the Philistines in the same valley (2 Sa 5 : 22-25), and if this is the next annual occurrence of major importance in the chronological list, it would have fallen in the tenth year of David's reign.

The Biblical record continues:

Again, David gathered together all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. And David arose, and went with all the people that were with him from Baale of Judah, to bring up from thence the ark of God, whose name is called by the name of the Lord of hosts that dwelleth between the cherubims (2 Sa 6 : 1, 2).

This is the next major event discussed in the Biblical record (which devotes 23 verses to it), and it would thus be the highlight of that particular year, *i.e.*, the eleventh year of David's reign.

The next chapter begins with the statement: "And it came to pass, when the king sat in his house, and the Lord had given him rest round about from all his enemies; . . ." (2 Sa 7 : 1). It will be noted that this verse corresponds very closely to some of the references in the Assyrian *limmu* lists, where the simple expression "in the land" is used to indicate the absence of any military campaign for that year. For example these records mention for three consecutive years: "753 Ashur-nirâri, king of Assyria, in the land, 752 . . . in the land, 751 . . . in the land"; as well as for various previous years: "764 . . . in the land, 768 . . . in the land."<sup>19</sup> In other words, in both the Biblical and the Assyrian records, that particular year was marked by no outstanding military campaign nor any major event at home that was more

<sup>19</sup> Luckenbill, *Ancient Records*, II, 435.

important than the simple fact that the land had rest, or had lived in peace during that particular year. If this interpretation is correct, the statement of 2 Sa 7 : 1 would then refer to the twelfth year of David's reign.

The next outstanding event seems to be the campaign against the Philistines at Methegammah (2 Sa 8 : 1). Again, if this is the next annual event, it would mark the 13th year of David's reign.

The next event recorded was the campaign against Moab, which resulted in the subjugation of that nation (2 Sa 8 : 2). If this represents the highlight of the year, it would indicate the 14th year of David's reign.

The next occurrence was a war against Zobah, a powerful Aramaean city-state. This war also involved Damascus (2 Sa 8 : 3-13). As a result of this campaign, David was able to extend his borders far to the north, which then must have happened in the 15th year of David's reign.

The next highlight of his reign was a campaign against Edom (2 Sa 8 : 14ff.), and this would have occurred in the 16th year of David's reign.

The next main activity recorded was the beginning of a campaign against the Ammonites, who solicited extensive support from their Aramaean neighbors (2 Sa 10 : 6ff.), probably in the 17th year of David's reign.

The next recorded campaign was against Hadadezer<sup>20</sup> of Zobah again, for he had enlisted Aramaean support from the other side of the Euphrates (2 Sa 10 : 15-19). This Aramaean rebellion was completely crushed, an activity which would then have taken place in the 18th year of David's reign.

The highlight of the following year, which would be the 19th year of David's reign, was the campaign against the Ammonites. Having crushed the Aramaeans, David was free to attack the Ammonites at this time, at their capital city (2 Sa 11 : 1). But connected with this, and beginning with

<sup>20</sup> The same king is variously called Hadadezer (2 Sa 8 : 3) and Hadarezer (2 Sa 10 : 16).

verse 2 and onward, there is a domestic event recorded which is preserved by the later prophets, and so there were two major events during David's 19th year, the rest of the chapter being devoted to David's experience with Bathsheba and Uriah.

Whether or not the visit of Nathan the prophet to David (2 Sa 12 : 1ff.) occurred during his 19th year, or, as indicated by 2 Sa 12 : 15, the child of David and Bathsheba had been born at the time of Nathan's visit, the events of chapter 12 from verses 15 through 23 may be considered as the main events during the 20th year of David's reign.

One of the highlights of the following year, the 21st year of his reign, as recorded in the Biblical chronicles, would be the birth of Solomon (2 Sa 12 : 24, 25).

However, the Biblical record immediately returns to a consideration of military affairs, and the successful conclusion of the campaign against the Ammonites was also an important event for the same year (2 Sa 12 : 26-31), which would be the 21st year of David's reign.

The outstanding event of the next year was a domestic scandal (2 Sa 13 : 1ff.). The experience of Tamar and Amnon was probably the talk of the land during David's time, as well as being something which later prophets incorporated in the Scripture record. This would have occurred in the 22d year of David's reign.

The record continues: "And it came to pass after two full years, that Absalom had sheepshearers in Baalhazor, which is beside Ephraim: and Absalom invited all the king's sons" (2 Sa 13 : 23). Because of the specific expression used here, "two *full* years," it seems that these would cover the 23d and 24th years of David's reign.

The narrative continues:

But Absalom fled, and went to Talmi, the son of Ammihud, king of Geshur. And David mourned for his son every day. So Absalom fled, and went to Geshur, and was there three years (2 Sa 13 : 37, 38).

In the absence here of the expression "three *full* years," it may be assumed that the normal inclusive reckoning was used; in other words, the time that Absalom fled would be the time that he killed Amnon, or in the 24th year of David, and so this three-year span would include the 24th, 25th and 26th years of David's reign.

The next highlight is recorded as follows: "So Joab arose and went to Geshur, and brought Absalom to Jerusalem" (2 Sa 14 : 23). Following the principles noted above, this event also would have taken place in the 26th year of David's reign, in other words, at the end of the three-year period, inclusive, of Absalom's exile.

The next recorded event is as follows: "So Absalom dwelt two full years in Jerusalem, and saw not the king's face" (2 Sa 14 : 28). Again note the expression "two *full* years"; following the same principle, this represents the highlights of David's 27th and 28th years.

The record continues: "And it came to pass after forty years, that Absalom said unto the king, I pray thee, let me go and pay my vow, which I have vowed unto the Lord, in Hebron" (2 Sa 15 : 7). Here there is an obvious error or discrepancy. It is outside the purpose of this study to analyze or discuss the text in detail; this error must have come in fairly early, for it is also found in the LXX. It is impossible that a forty-year period is meant here, so an alternative will be followed, according to which some ancient authorities read "four years."<sup>21</sup> If this is correct, the four years would be inclusive, and would thus cover the 28th, 29th, 30th, and 31st years of David's reign. It was in the 31st year of David's reign, then, that the rebellion of Absalom occurred, and this was, of course, a major event, as is shown by the number of chapters devoted to it.

After settling this major rebellion, the next chief event is recorded in the following words:

<sup>21</sup> Kittel's *Biblia Hebraica*<sup>3</sup> refers to Lagarde's LXX edition and the Peshitto as having the reading "four years" instead of "forty years."

Then there was a famine in the days of David three years, year after year; and David inquired of the Lord. And the Lord answered, it is for Saul, and for his bloody house, because he slew the Gibeonites" (2 Sa 21 : 1).

The three years referred to would be the 32d, 33d, and 34th years of David's reign.

Again a campaign against the Philistines, Israel's ancient enemies, was the highlight of the following year of the reign of David (2 Sa 21 : 15-17), which would be the 35th year of his reign, if our sequence is correct. An interesting sidelight is recorded when David was told: "Thou shalt go no more out with us to battle, that thou quench not the light of Israel" (2 Sa 21 : 17). Imagine the king wanting to do his part, still with a fiery spirit, though his body might be aged—going out to battle at the approximate age of 65.

The next recorded highlight was also a campaign against the Philistines at Gob, or Gezer (2 Sa 21 : 18; cf. 1 Chr 20 : 4), which then would have taken place in the 36th year of David's reign.

The succeeding year's campaign was similar to that which was conducted the year before (2 Sa 21 : 19), and this would have occurred in the 37th year of David's reign.

Once again, in the following year, the opponents were still the Philistines, but this time the locale of the military action was the city of Gath (2 Sa 21 : 20), and this would have happened in the 38th year of David's reign.

Chapters 22 and 23 of 2 Sa are concerned with some of the final incidents and speeches or pronouncements of the reign of David. The next main historical event is recorded in chapter 24, as follows: "And again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he moved David against them to say, Go, number Israel and Judah" (2 Sa 24 : 1). The numbering of Israel was the main event of David's 39th year and thus closes the book of 2 Samuel. Coming into the book of 1 Kings, the first few verses would also be a record of some of the later events of David's 39th year.

The main event of the 40th and final year of David's reign was the rebellion of Adonijah and the seating of Solomon upon the throne (1 Ki 1 : 5ff.).

In summarizing this comparison of the Assyrian records with the Biblical records of the reign of David, it seems quite apparent to the present writer that there is a strong probability that there existed annual year-by-year records for David's reign. This year-by-year record for the events of his reign seems to have been carefully preserved from the time of his reign in Jerusalem on, although there is complete silence for the seven years' reign in Hebron before he reigned over all Israel. As noted above, the reference to some of the time when there was peace in the land closely parallels those Assyrian records in which it simply says, "in the land," meaning that there was no military expedition outside of Assyria.

Another very interesting comparison is that the major expedition in so many of David's years of reign was against the perennial enemy, the Philistines. This parallels very closely the records of one of the kings of Assyria, Adad-nirâri II, in which, year after year (dated by the *limmu* or eponym), it is stated that he marched against the "wide land of Hanigalbat," until finally he had successively marched against Hanigalbat six times.<sup>22</sup>

Admittedly, there are not enough data to prove that this proposed reconstruction of the events of David's reign is correct, but those data which are preserved, such as the ages of David and Solomon respectively, fit very well into the picture. The record of basic skeletal events of his reign before their expansion by later prophetic writers seems to parallel rather closely the Assyrian records, especially the expanded or longer *limmu* lists.

<sup>22</sup> Luckenbill, *op. cit.*, I, 111, 112, 113.