

## A Brief Note in Isa 16:14 and 21:16

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But now the Lord says: "Within three years, as a servant bound by contract would count them, Moab's splendor and all her many people will be despised, and her survivors will be very few and feeble." (Isa 16:14)

This is what the Lord says to me: "Within one year, as a servant bound by contract would count it, all the pomp of Kedar will come to an end." (Isa 21:16)

How did a servant bound by contract measure time? Whatever methods he used, it is at least clear from the above passages that they differed from those used by the rest of society, i.e., by people other than servants bound by contract. What does the uniqueness of the servant's case tell us about the way everyone else measured time during the period of Isaiah's ministry?

From David to Zedekiah time was measured by reference to whatever king was in power at the time. The king, in turn, measured his reign by a method that amounts to little more than counting new years. In the southern kingdom of Judah the new year began on Tishri 1; in the northern kingdom of Israel the new year began on Nisan 1.<sup>1</sup> That is one consideration.

A second difference between Israel and Judah also had to do with which new year to use as the beginning of a king's reign, but in an entirely different sense. At issue was the status of the odd months prior to a king's first new year in office. Scribes working for Judean kings for the most part did not count these preliminary months as a separate year. This is the accession year method of calculating the length of a king's reign. Under this system a king's reign began on his first new year. By contrast, scribes working for Israelite kings for the most part did count the accession year separately. This is the nonaccession year method, i.e., that method which ignores the special status of the accession year. Under this system a king claimed not only the months leading up to his first new year but all the months following the previous king's last new year.

"A third point that should be understood is that each nation employed its own system of reckoning for the years of a ruler of the other nation."<sup>2</sup>

There are variations on the above themes. In Judah the kings from Rehoboam (931/30-913) to Jehoshaphat (874/73-848) used the accession year method of counting. From Jehoram (853-841) to Joash (835-796) they did not. Then from Amaziah (796-767) to Zedekiah (597-586) they did again. In Israel the kings from Jeroboam I (931/30-910/09) to Jehoahaz (814/13-798) did not use the accession year method--and this makes for some complex discrepancies between the two sets of king lists up until the time of Joram (852-841). Then from Jehoash (798-782/81) to Hoshea (732/31-723/22) the kings of Israel did use the accession year method.<sup>3</sup>

If the reader is wondering how to manage all these details, it is not necessary. The point to draw from them is very simple. Kings (and the people they ruled) counted time by counting new years. The choice of a new year was different in the two cases (fall in Judah, spring in

Israel), but its importance was not. No king of Judah, Israel, or any country nearby during this period would ever have given thought to counting the years of his reign by counting months and then dividing by twelve. With a lunar calendar the number of months in a year could vary. Every few years an extra month had to be added.<sup>4</sup> Over time the result of month counting would have been entirely chaotic--a scribal historian's worst nightmare. So they counted years without reference to months by counting new years directly.

It is here, in this important fact, that we find the difference between what everybody else did and what a servant bound by contract would have to do. Not every short term contract would begin on new year's day. One could hire on to work a year for someone doing this job or that in the eleventh month. What then? The regnal method was impractical in such cases. So a servant--unlike a king--would have to calculate a year of service by adding up months.

In Isa 16:14 and 21:16 what this means is that the predicted event would not occur a year from last new year (or a year from next new year) but a year from the time when the prediction was made. Thus, the judgment would not be neither hurried or delayed but instead would come on exact time.<sup>5</sup>

NOTE: All Scripture quotations in this paper, except when noted otherwise, are from the Holy Bible, New International Version. Copyright (c) 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society.

<sup>1</sup>See Edwin R. Thiele, *A Chronology of the Hebrew Kings* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), pp. 14-16.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 20. See also Hardy, "The Context for Ezra's Use of a Fall-to-Fall Calendar," *Historicism* No. 8/Oct 86, pp. 2-65.

<sup>3</sup>See Thiele, *Chronology*, pp. 16-20; Hardy, "A Timeline for the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah," *Historicism* Supplement/Nov 86, pp. 15-16. Thiele's chronology sets out all the principles necessary to reconcile the above differences. Unfortunately, however, Thiele feels that the period from Shallum to Hoshea is still a problem: "It is only when Pekah and Hoshea are placed twelve years in advance of their true positions that the synchronisms of 2 Kings 17 and 18 [i.e., 17:1; 18:1, 9, and 10] come into being" (*ibid.*, p. 53). Siegfried Horn avoids the above difficulty by a consistent application of Thiele's own principles (see Horn, "The Chronology of King Hezekiah's Reign," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 2 (1964): 40-52). But 2 Kgs 17:1 remains. (For an earlier attempt to explain this passage see, Edmund A. Parker, "A Note on the Chronology of 2 Kings 17:1," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 6 [1968]: 129-33).

The problem is that the biblical data imply three kings (Uzziah, Jotham, and Ahaz) were all reigning at once during the twenty years from 750 B.C., when Jotham came to the throne, until 731 B.C., when King Uzziah died (see Isa 6:1). Horn wishes to avoid this implication. But why can we not simply accept it? The oldest of the three kings was leprous ("King Uzziah had leprosy until the day he died. He lived in a separate house--leprous, and excluded from the temple of the Lord. Jotham his son had charge of the palace and governed the people of the land" [2 Chr 26:21]). Thus, if we think of Uzziah's fifty-two regnal years (see 2 Chr 26:3) as the time between the beginning of his reign and his death (but not the time during which he actively ruled, which is another matter), all the dates fit. The coregent Jotham was the actively reigning king. So did three kings reign at once? No. (This is Horn's point.) But were three kings all living at once? Yes. At issue is whether Uzziah stopped counting his regnal years when he stopped reigning. I maintain he did not. The reign stopped but the count went on. This fact accounts for

the last of Thiele's residual discrepancies. By accepting it (and only by accepting it) the biblical record of the Hebrew kings can be seen as a perfect and unbroken whole.

<sup>4</sup>The added month would normally be a repetition of the one just before new year. Thus, using a spring-to-spring calendar (and perhaps even with a fall-to-fall calendar), the added month would normally be a second Adar (the month just before Nisan in the spring). "As the matter stands now, it can only be stated that no proof can be given that the Jews ever used a second Elul [the month just before Tishri in the fall], but to prove that they did so is not yet possible" (S. H. Horn and L. H. Wood, "The Fifth-Century Jewish Calendar at Elephantine," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 13 (1954): 12). Among Jews intercalation was probably based on calculation rather than empirical observation and took place on a nineteen-year cycle, as at Babylon.

<sup>5</sup>The literature on Isaiah is vast and I have made no attempt to surround all of it in preparation for this paper, but three commentaries which (though not wrong) fail to approach the topic from a chronological perspective are *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 7 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1953-57), 3:177 ("A hireling works only so long as his contract requires"); George Buchanan Gray and Arthur S. Peake, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Isaiah*, 2 vols., International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1912), vol. 1: *Introduction, and Commentary on I-XXVII*, p. 295 ("years strictly reckoned; the hireling works no longer than he must"); and John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39*, New International Commentary, R. K. Harrison, gen ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), p. 349 ("certainly an indication of reckoning on a very painstaking scale, as one who enters voluntary indenture is not going to stay in that state a moment longer than the agreement requires"). All of this is good so far as it goes, but it does not go far enough.