Serious Error in the Assyrian Eponym Chronology

by Dan Bruce

In most academic circles, it is considered heresy to suggest that the chronology derived from the Assyrian Eponym List and the Assyrian Chronicle is in error. However, one example of contradictions in the Assyrian record should be enough to make an honest seeker take a second and serious look at the possibility that traditional Assyrian chronology is wrong. That example involves the length of reign attributed by Assyriologists to Tiglath-pileser III. Proponents of the Assyrian chronological order say that he reigned as king for eighteen years. That eighteen-year figure is stated once in a late (and possibly redacted) copy of the Assyrian Chronicle, but in the Babylonian Chronicles the ancient scribes left a blank space for the reign of Tiglath-pileser III on the cuneiform tablet that records the lengths of each king’s reign, so there is room for doubt about the actual length of Tiglath-pileser’s reign since the sources disagree.

On this all sources seem to agree: The fourteenth year of Tiglath-pileser’s reign over a united Assyria can be aligned with the first year of the Babylonian king, Mukan-zeri, and the first year in Mukan-zeri’s reign can be easily identified by modern astronomy as occurring in the year 731 BCE, that precise identification made by locating in time an eclipse mentioned in the Babylonian astronomical records. However, the Mukan-zeri eclipse verifies only that Tiglath-pileser III reigned over Assyria after 745 BCE. It says nothing about how long he may have reigned over part of Assyria before 745 BCE, and that uncertainty becomes a major embarrassment when other documented facts about Tiglath-pileser’s reign are considered.

For instance, the ancient records say that Tiglath-pileser III was contemporary with the following kings: Menahem of Israel, who paid tribute to him; Pekah of Israel, who joined a coalition headed by Rezin of Damascus to oppose him; and Ahab of Judah, who paid the Assyrian king for his help when Judah was attacked by Pekah and Rezin. The Assyrian inscriptions also clarify the relationship between Hoshea of Israel and Tiglath-pileser, revealing that Hoshea was appointed king in Israel by the Tiglath-pileser. The Bible also says that Menahem of Israel paid tribute to Tiglath-pileser, and the Assyrian inscriptions confirm the tribute payment. So, when all of the information is assembled, it says that Tiglath-pileser III’s reign spanned a period when Menahem, Pekah, and Hoshea reigned.

If we assume that Menahem paid tribute to Tiglath-pileser III during the last year of his reign, that Menahem was succeeded for two years by Pekahiah before Pekah killed him, that Pekah reigned over Israel for twenty years, that Hoshea killed Pekah to bring his twenty-year reign to a close, that Tiglath-pileser then appointed Hoshea as king over Israel after Pekah’s death circa 732 BCE, and that Tiglath-pileser himself died in 727 BCE (all of those events are documented in either the Bible or Assyrian records, or both), we can begin to see, by adding up the years involved, evidence indicating that the Assyrian king reigned more than the eighteen years traditional historians allot to him.

At the very least, Tiglath-pileser’s reign spanned one regnal year of Menahem, two regnal years of Pekahiah, at least eighteen regnal years of Pekah (allowing the possibility that the first two years of Pekah’s 20-year reign were concurrent with the two-year reign of Pekahiah),
and probably four or five regnal years of Hoshea between the time Tiglath-pileser appointed him king of Israel and the death of the Assyrian king. That adds up to a “best case” minimum of twenty-four years, which is more than the eighteen years attributed to Tiglath-pileser III by traditional historians. In addition, the \textit{Seder Olam} says that Israel’s throne was vacant for about eight years prior to Hoshea being appointed king by Tiglath-pileser, possibly adding more years to the total. So, obviously something is wrong with the length of reign attributed to Tiglath-pileser III, and that means something is wrong with the traditional chronology derived from the Assyrian Eponym Lists and the Assyrian Chronicles.

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