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Autor: Na'aman, Nadav
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On the Antiquity of the Regnal Years in the Book of Kings

The chronology of the Israelite and Judean kings has been discussed innumerable times in the past and various chronological systems have been offered in an effort to account for the «mysterious numbers» in the Book of Kings. One issue that has been discussed is the reliability of the transmitted regnal years and the possibility that errors entered the text in the course of transmission. The problem of errors is particularly emphasized in the discussion of the difference of regnal years between the MT and the Greek versions.

It is the purpose of this article to suggest an observation not yet proposed in the long history of research. It seems to me that this observation can shed a new light on the problem of the antiquity of the «mysterious numbers» in the Book of Kings.

J. Wellhausen has pointed out the schematic pattern of 2 x 480 years centred on the foundation of the First Temple (I Kgs 6,1).¹ The number of regnal years of all kings of Judah, from the division of the monarchy to the exile, amounts to 394. Since the temple was founded in Solomon's fourth year (I Kgs 6,1.37) and Solomon reigned for forty years, 430 years passed from the building of the temple to its destruction. Another 50 years passed from the destruction of the temple to the foundation of the Second Temple in Cyrus's second year (Ezra 3,8-9) (587/6-538/7 BCE). Thus, according to biblical chronology, 480 years passed from the First Temple's foundation to that of the Second Temple.² C.F. Burney drew the conclusion that I Kgs 6,1 «appears to be the work of a post-exilic editor, the same no doubt as will later on come into prominence through the insertions made by him under the influence of the Priestly Code».³ All scholars have recognized the late date of I Kgs 6,1.⁴ We may ask, what is the scope of the Priestly editing in the pericope of the building of the temple (I Kgs 6-8)? Are there other passages that may be attributed to this editorial work?

Wellhausen noticed that I Kgs 6,1 uses *hōdeš* whereas vv. 37-38a has *yeraḥ*, and suggested that this is a mark of different authors.⁵ His analysis was

¹ J. Wellhausen, in F. Bleek, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (4th ed.), Berlin 1878, 231-232.

² J. Hughes, *Secrets of the Times. Myth and History in Biblical Chronology* (JSOTSup 66), Sheffield 1990, 36-39, 57, with earlier literature.

³ C.F. Burney, *Notes on the Hebrew Text of the Books of Kings*, Oxford 1903, 61; see Hughes, *ibid.*, 32-33.

⁴ B. Stade, *Der Text des Berichtes ber Salomos Bauten*. 1 Kö 5-7, ZAW 3 (1883), 135; I. Benzinger, *Die Bücher der Könige erklärt* (KHCAT), Leipzig and Tübingen 1899, 30; J.A. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Kings* (ICC), Edinburgh 1951, 38, 143-144; J. Gray, *I & II Kings* (OTL), Philadelphia 1970, 159.

accepted by other scholars, and the use of *yeraḥ*, plus a name of a Phoenician month, was sometimes considered to indicate the use of an old archival source.⁶ However, all epigraphic parallels to the dating formulae in I Kgs 6,1.37-38 and 8,2 are no earlier than the Persian period (KAI 14 from the fifth century BCE is the earliest epigraphic parallel).⁷ Moreover, one Hellenistic inscription even uses *ḥōdeš* instead of *yeraḥ* (KAI 43,4), in parallel to 6,1 (*bēḥōdeš ziw*). The assumption that the three month names used for dating different stages of the building and dedication of the temple (*ziw*, *bul*, *hā'ētanîm*) are old Canaanite and reflect the dating of the First Temple period is without concrete foundation. The close similarity to the date formulae of the Persian and Hellenistic inscriptions establishes the date of the biblical texts. I therefore agree with J. Van Seters that these date formulae are late additions to the text.⁸ In my opinion, the chronological system in I Kgs 6,1.37-38a and 8,2 is part of a larger Priestly redaction of the history of Solomon, the founder of the temple and hence the focus of an extensive priestly editorial work that encompasses (*inter alia*) I Kgs 4,20-5,5 (English 4,20-25) and 8,1-11.⁹

We may now analyze the way in which the Priestly editor established his chronological system. As noted above, his chronology is based on the pattern of 2 x 480 years, centred on the foundation of the First Temple. According to his calculation, 50 years separate the destruction of the First Temple from the Second Temple's foundation. He has combined the regnal years of the kings of Judah and arrived at the sum total of 394 years. By dating the foundation of the temple to Solomon's fourth year (I Kgs 6,1.37) he reached the number of 480 years. I believe that the pattern of 480 years (12 generations, each of 40 years) is the result of a calculation based on the regnal years of the kings of Judah, plus the 50 years span from destruction to foundation, plus an artificial dating for the foundation of Solomon's temple. The number of years he ar-

⁵ Wellhausen (n. 1), 232; idem, *Die Composition des Hexateuchs und der historischen Bücher des Alten Testament* (2nd ed.), Berlin 1889, 267.

⁶ Montgomery (n. 4), 38, 143-144; Gray (n. 4), 23-24, 159; B. Halpern, *The First Historians. The Hebrew Bible and History*, San Francisco 1988, 148-149.

⁷ See the references in V.(A.) Hurowitz, *I Have Built You an Exalted House. Temple Building in the Bible in Light of Mesopotamian and Northwest Semitic Writings* (JSOT-Sup 115), Sheffield 1992, 227-233.

⁸ J. Van Seters, *Solomon's Temple: Fact and Ideology in Biblical and Near Eastern Historiography*, CBQ 59 (1997) 52-53. Hurowitz (*ibid.*, 232) considered the assumption that the date formulae are secondary, but dismissed it for no obvious reason. Contrary to the evidence collected by him, he concludes (p. 233) that «verses 1-2 reflect a votive or a building inscription, while vv. 37-38 echo the royal or temple chronicle.»

⁹ For I Kgs 4,20-5,5 (English 4,20-25), see N. Na'aman, *Sources and Composition in the History of Solomon*, in L.K. Handy (ed.), *The Age of Solomon: Scholarship at the Turn of the Millennium*, Leiden 1997, 79. For the Priestly expansion in I Kgs 8,1-11, see Hurowitz (n. 7), 263-266.

rived at (480) was counted backwards from the foundation of the temple to the beginning of the Exodus (I Kgs 6,1).

In this light, it is clear that the regnal years of the kings of Judah, as recorded in the MT, are identical to the regnal years that were used by the Priestly editor. Otherwise, he would have dated the foundation of the temple differently, in order to make it fit his chronological pattern of 480 years. Whether mistake(s) occur in the regnal years of the kings of Judah in an earlier stage of transmission (namely, from the composition of the Deuteronomistic history onward) remains unknown. We may conclude that the regnal years of the Judean kings remained stable, at least from the time of the Priestly editing of the Book of Kings during the Persian period.

I believe that this conclusion supports the authenticity of the regnal years in the MT as against the tradition of the LXX, but the discussion of this problem is beyond the scope of this paper.

Nadav Na'aman, Tel Aviv