

Brief notes

on 2 Samuel 15.7, 2 Kings 8.26 and 2 Chronicles 22.2

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2 Samuel 15.7:

‘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.’

‘After forty years’: according to this verse, Absalom asked David for permission to go to Hebron to keep a vow. This vow, probably made during Absalom’s exile, may have been that if God would restore him to Jerusalem he would go to Hebron, his birthplace, and offer there a sacrifice of thanksgiving. The problem is with the ‘forty years’. It is clear that the reference

cannot be to the age of Absalom or to the reign of David. Absalom was born in Hebron *after David had begun to reign* (2 Samuel 3.3), and David only reigned forty and a half years (5.4) – and this incident evidently occurred *several years before the end of his reign*. Some scholars therefore conclude that we have here a copyist's error, particularly as the reading 'four years' is to be found in some Septuagint manuscripts, the Syriac and Arabic versions, and Josephus (*Antiquities* 7.9.1). The reading 'four', however, is not supported by any Hebrew manuscript.

The fact is, we are not told from what point of time the forty years are reckoned. Even if we allow that, in Hebrew usage, the number 'forty' can sometimes bear an approximate sense (for example, to indicate the maturity of someone's age [Exodus 2.11; cf. Acts 7.23] or a whole generation [Numbers 14.33; Judges 3.11]), it would need to be very approximate indeed to refer either to David's reign (up to this point of time) or to Absalom's age (who was born several years after David began to reign).

A solution to the problem is that the period dates from the time of David's anointing to be king of Israel (1 Samuel 16.13). It is estimated that there were indeed forty years from the anointing to the rebellion. This was the view of several ancient Jewish scholars (e.g., R. Levi ben Gershon, 1288–1345) and it was also the view of such men as Dr. E.W. Bullinger, Dr. Henry Cooke, and Dr. Arthur Pink.

Dr. Cooke wrote, 'The ordinary solution of the difficulty is therefore the supposed error of some transcriber. This is a usual, but *a most violent, gratuitous, and dangerous proceeding*.'¹¹

2 Kings 8.26:

'Two and twenty years old *was* Ahaziah when he began to reign; and he reigned one year in Jerusalem. And his mother's name *was* Athaliah, the daughter of Omri king of Israel.'

2 Chronicles 22.2:

'Forty and two years old *was* Ahaziah when he began to reign, and he reigned one year in Jerusalem. His mother's name also *was* Athaliah the daughter of Omri.'

Again, a number of scholars attribute the apparent discrepancy to a copyist's error. We are unwilling to do this, particularly as this discrepancy can be reconciled. The Hebrew Masoretic Text has 'forty-two' in 2 Chronicles 22.2; and while only the original manuscript was 'inspired', God has, in His special providence, preserved the Holy Scriptures so that we do now possess faithful and authoritative copies.

We must admit, of course, that there is a problem in reconciling these two Scriptures. In 2 Kings 8.17, we are told that Jehoram (Ahaziah's father) was thirty-two when he became king, and that he died eight years later, *apparently* at the age of forty. Now if Jehoram was eighteen

years old when he became a father, this would mean that Ahaziah would have been twenty-two years old when he succeeded his father on the throne of Judah. And that is what the inspired historian says in 2 Kings 8.26. But 2 Chronicles 22.2 states that Ahaziah was forty-two years old when he became king. If Jehoram died at forty and Ahaziah became king at forty-two, then Ahaziah appears to have been two years older than his father!

There have been various explanations, but we will confine ourselves to just one of these. According to 2 Kings 8.17, Jehoram (the father) was thirty-two when he began to reign. This appears to have been as co-regent with Jehoshaphat, for note the wording of 8.16, 'Jehoshaphat *being* then king of Judah, Jehoram the son of Jehoshaphat king of Judah began to reign'. If Jehoram, at thirty-two, was co-regent with Jehoshaphat for twenty years, and then sole monarch for another eight years – and Scripture says that 'he reigned eight years in Jerusalem' (8.17) – this would mean that he died at the age of sixty (and *not* forty).

Now this brings us to Ahaziah. Let us suppose that he was admitted to co-regency when he was twenty-two years old (as in 2 Kings 8.26) and that he continued in his office as co-regent for twenty years, he would then have begun to reign *alone* in his father's sixtieth year, when he himself was forty-two years old – exactly as we have it stated in 2 Chronicles 22.2.

Co-regency was a common practice in Israel ever since the time of David, who used it to ensure the succession of Solomon (1 Kings 1.29ff). If we take it into account here, we are able satisfactorily to harmonize 2 Kings 8.26 and 2 Chronicles 22.2.

The explanation given above upholds the Masoretic Text and is perfectly reasonable. The believer in verbal inspiration always takes the position of faith: that is, he always tries to find an answer to a problem posed by the text of Holy Scripture. The believer does not immediately – or indeed after study – jump to the conclusion that there is an error in the text. Instead, he believes there is an answer to all these problems, even if he does not know the answer at that particular time. 'The scripture cannot be broken' (John 10.35).

Endnote

¹H. Cooke, *Brown's Self Interpreting Bible* (London: Blackie and Son, n.d.), 1.355.