

Appendix III: Dating Events in Ancient Times

In ancient times the nations did not have a standardized universal method of tracking the years as we do today. Instead, they each had their own way of establishing timelines unique to their particular culture and nation. I believe it is important for us to acquaint ourselves with those dating methods before we proceed with the rest of this study—since we may be referring to them from time to time.

One method of tracking events in time is what is called Eponym years. The word “Eponym” simply means “name” and signifies that a certain year is named after the name of someone important. One example is the year of “Solon” (594 BCE).¹ Various cultures have made use of such a system to identify certain years.² In establishing ancient chronologies, the use of the Eponym can be very important.³

One system of eponym years, which is very important for chronologists, is that created by the ancient Assyrians. The Assyrians developed a custom in which every year would be named after the name of one of the leading statesmen. A consecutive list of these “eponym” are available to us from the years 853 to 703 BCE. We know that these are the years in question because of the fact that the Assyrians also kept track of solar eclipses (which modern science is able to pinpoint to the very day and hour). Eclipses were noted in Assyria for the years 832, 763 and 585 BCE, and along with the record of the eclipses we have the eponym years to firmly fix certain events to certain historical dates.⁴ As a result, we are able to establish generally reliable dates for certain events during that time frame—often accurate to within a year or even hours in some cases.

A second method of dating events is what is called the Seleucid Era. The Seleucid Era was established just prior to the great expansion and conquest of the Grecian empire. It is a time frame which is known to have extended from August of 312 to July of 311 BCE, according to the fall-to-fall calendar of the Macedonian court. According to the Babylonian system (which used a spring-to-spring calendar) the first year of the Seleucid Era

¹Answers.com “Eponym.” <http://www.answers.com/topic/eponym>

²Wikipedia, article under “Eponym.” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eponym>

³Wikipedia, article under “Chronology of the Ancient Near East.” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chronology_of_the_Ancient_Near_East

⁴Wikipedia, article under “Eponym list.” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eponym_list

extended from April of 311 BCE to March of 310 BCE. It is often used to date historical events, especially in the books of 1st and 2nd Maccabees, and is not always as precisely accurate as the Assyrian and Babylonian dates—which can often be confirmed through astronomical events, such as eclipses.⁵

A third method of dating historical events is called the Olympiad. In the year 776 BCE the Olympic games were started in Greece, such that every four years the new Olympic date is given and the fifth year is then established as the first year of the new Olympiad.⁶ From that time going forward, Olympiads were declared as late as the fifth century CE. However, there were some slight changes to the system at a later date making it less than accurate. Sometimes it would provide only a four-year variable date (not a precise year). Therefore, while this dating method is important and can provide useful information, it should not be relied on exclusively to determine accurate dates.⁷

A fourth and very common (and therefore important) method of dating events in history is to link the event with the year of a certain king, which is called “regnal year” dating. This method of dating is almost exclusively used in Scripture, especially in the books of Kings, Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah. Very simply, when a certain king began his reign, events would be dated in accordance with the number of years that particular king remained in his position.⁸ This method of dating is divided into two parts, called “accession years” and “non-accession years.” In regnal dating, an “accession year” of a king is considered to be the last year of the previous monarch. Therefore, using this method, they count the reign of this king according to his first *full* year. Using a “non-accession year” method, the year that the king comes to the throne is considered the first year. Both of these methods of dating events appear to have been used throughout Scripture.⁹

⁵Wikipedia, article under “Seleucid era.” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seleucid_Era#_note-0

⁶Wikipedia, article under “Olympiad.” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olympiad> “By our modern calendar system (Gregorian), the first Olympiad is reckoned to the year 776 BC, which is arrived at deductively. The first year of the common era (1 CE/AD) is equivalent to the seven-hundred and fifty-fourth year from the founding of Rome (AUC 754) according to the Varronian epoch. The founding of Rome, in turn, is testified as being April 21, in the third year of the sixth Olympiad (OL 6) (Plutarch, Romulus 23-24; Eutropius, History 1.1). So, the first year of the games and the start of the first Olympiad was the summer of 776 BC.”

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸Wikipedia, article under “Regnal year.” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regnal_year

⁹For a more complete discussion of Regnal years as it relates to Bible Chronology, please read the book *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, by Edwin Thiele.

Regnal year dating increases in accuracy as we come into the post-temple era, and especially as it is linked with astronomical events and other dating methods. Here is a simple chart to illustrate the differences between these two methods:

| <i>The Ancient Regnal (Kingly) Dating Method</i> | | | |
|--|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Accession Year Method | Accession Year 0 | 1 st Year | 2 nd Year |
| Non-Accession Year Method | 1 st Year | 2 nd Year | 3 rd Year |

In his book *Mapping Time*, E. G. Richards states that this method of dating came “. . . naturally from the practice of regnal dating. Instead of starting the count anew with each successive king, the counting continued through reign after reign. . .”¹⁰ Later he clarifies his point with this statement: “...this gave way to a system of regnal dating: the first year of a king would start with the next 'first of Nisanu' after his accession . . .”¹¹

Earlier, we learned that while many of the kings of Israel and Judah started the year in the spring (on the first day of Nisan) this was not always the case. Sometimes they would change their method and start in the fall, and this is especially true in regards to the dating of foreign kings. For now, it is important that we understand that the year is typically known to have started either in the spring (at the new moon on or after the equinox) or in the fall—depending upon whether it is referring to Israel or Judah or foreign kings. These are the two times most often noted by Bible chronologists as the beginning of the year. Therefore, whatever dating system historians attempt to use, they must also decide whether the people for whom the ancient document was written were generally using a fall-to-fall calendar or a spring-to-spring calendar. When attempting to establish exact dates, such a question as this is of paramount importance. The answers are not always easy to find, since evidence can often appear to be sporadic.

In addition to all of these methods of dating events, we must hasten to add that variations exist with regard to what was considered the start of the year. Unlike our current Gregorian calendar, the year did not start on January 1. Instead, depending on which country is dating the event, the year would start at various key points in the seasons. We already know

¹⁰*Mapping Time: The Calendar and Its History*, by E. G. Richards, p. 106.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 148.

that the year can begin either in the fall or the spring. Another interesting twist to this is in regard to ancient Egypt. In ancient Egypt the year began in the summer at the time of the rising of Sirius in a certain year (1322 BCE) and because of its cycle being out of sync with the true solar year by $\frac{1}{4}$ th of a day we are able to use this grand “Sothic Cycle” to establish several accurate dates in history.¹²



¹²Wikipedia, Sothic Cycle, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sothic_cycle

