

The Problem of Jehoiachin's Age 2 Kings 24:8 vs. 2 Chronicles 36:9

by Fred Butler

As a believer reads the scriptures, he will occasionally come across what are termed "copyist's errors." These are apparent discrepancies found primarily in the OT, particularly within the historical books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles. The two books of Samuel with the two books of Kings parallel the two books of Chronicles in recording the history of Israel. Together, the six books begin with the monarchy of Saul and then finish with Cyrus's decree to allow the Jews safe return to the land. The "copyist's errors" occur when the two sets of histories are studied concurrently. Information contained in Kings will be exactly the same as the account in Chronicles, but a slight alteration exists between the two narratives. This is the case with the two passages before us:

2 Kings 24:8 reads: *Jehoiachin was 18 years old when he began to reign, and he reigned in Jerusalem 3 months.*

2 Chronicles 36:9 reads: *Jehoiachin was 8 years old when he began to reign, and he reigned 3 months and 10 days.*

The disparity has to do with Jehoiachin's age: Was he 18 when he began his reign as king or was he 8?

A standard study Bible will usually contain a footnote for these two passages that will read something like, "This is a copyist error and the '18' of 2 Kings 24:8 is the correct rendering." The footnote may even state such ancient translations of the original Hebrew like the Septuagint even correct the "error." Other scholarly works tend to provide a similar, vague and inconclusive answer. For example, in Gleason Archer's *Encyclopedia of Biblical Difficulties*, the author's comments on this problem are identical to the traditional study Bible footnote. Archer writes, "Obviously there has been a textual error committed by the copyist. This type of error occurs now and then because of blurring or surface damage in the earlier manuscript." Archer then goes on to explain how a miswritten stroke over a series of numerical characters can be mistaken for an "8" rather than an "18." Another book, *When Critics Ask*, also deals with such problems. The authors, Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe, give the same answer to the dilemma. They write, "This is probably a copyist error. The text gives the description of an older man rather than a younger boy. Additionally, the Chaldeans condemned him to prison, indicating that they considered him to be a responsible adult."

It seems as if no one really grapples with the biblical account itself to find an answer. I respect their answer in that these solutions recognize the presence of textual variants, errors that arise between ancient, handwritten manuscripts copied and transmitted from one generation to the next and these variants will produce discrepancies between historical accounts. However, I do not believe all discrepancies are necessarily "copyist's errors." With many of these difficult passages, I think scholars lazily sweep the

problem under the category of “copyist error” and do not provide a full study of the overall text where the alleged error is found. Can we honestly say that all such difficult discrepancies fall into the realm of a “copyist’s error?” I do not think so and when we reconsider these portions of scripture, I believe there are some other reasonable solutions from the actual passages.

(1). The first solution is quite simple. During a monarchy a king would make a son co-regent with him while he was still alive. This practice would assure the king's favored son (usually the first-born of the favored wife) as being the next king. Some of the kings had more than one wife, and thus several sons from these wives. To prevent civil war and fighting among the family, he would appoint the selected son as co-regent, so when he died, the co-regent son would be in place to take over completely. An example of this is seen in the life of David. In 1 Kings 1 and 2, David in his dying days called Solomon and had the high priest, as well as the prophet Nathan, anoint him before the people. David, though he was still king, made his son Solomon co-regent. Coming to 2 Kings 24:8, the biblical record is giving the age of Jehoiachin as 18. The cross-reference of “8 years old” in 2 Chronicles 36:9 could be his age when he was made the co-regent with his father.

(2). A second solution involves the king's mother. When Jehoiachin was 8 years old, his father, Jehoiakim, was deported (2 Chron. 36:6). The young king ruled jointly with his mother, the queen, until he too was led away captive. The reasoning behind this view is that women were not necessarily listed in the historical record. Even though the king was young and the queen was probably making decisions, the official record would name Jehoiachin as the king. The one difficulty with this view, however, is that the biblical narrative would more than likely be more specific about such a situation. The one place that names a queen is 2 Kings 11 with Athaliah. If there were a joint rulership between Jehoiachin and his mother, such a deviation from the norm would have been discussed in the scripture. Some writers point out 2 Kings 24:12 where the text describes the king going to Babylon with his mother. They say this implies she ruled jointly with him, but nothing in the text remotely suggests such a conclusion. The phrase “his mother” does not mean she ruled with him anymore than the servants, princes, and officers also listed in the deportation recorded in the verse. Another passage is Jeremiah 13:8, where it speaks of the coming deportation of the king and queen. It is argued the queen is Jehoiachin’s mother, but the text is not specific. This queen could be his wife for all we know.

(3). The third solution, and the one that appears to be more biblical, hinges on the phrase *8 years old* from 2 Chronicles 36:9. The 8 years does not refer to the actual age of Jehoiachin but is a time marker pointing to an event: the first invasion of Judah by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians. In 605 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar invaded the Mediterranean countries including Judah. It was during this first invasion when Daniel and many others were taken to Babylon in what was to be the first of 3 deportations. The second was in 598-597 B.C. with the taking of Jehoiachin’s father Jehoiakim. The Babylonians left Jehoiachin in power as a sort of puppet regent, but only for 3 months (2 Chron. 36:9 gives the exact figure

of 3 months, 10 days). Like his father, Jehoiachin rebelled and the Babylonians returned to have him removed. They took him back to Babylon, and left his brother Zedekiah as king. Jehoiachin's appointment as king was 8 years after Nebuchadnezzar came to power and invaded Judah. This is the reason 2 Chronicles 36:9 has "8 years old." Second Kings 24:12 affirms this solution where it states, "and the king of Babylon took him (Jehoiachin) in the 8th year of his (Nebuchadnezzar) reign."

On some occasions the biblical writers will count chronological dates from significant events. We reckon chronology in similar ways in our modern world. For all Americans, the 11th day of the 9th month of the year 2001 will forever be a significant date. In fact our society speaks of a pre-9/11 world and a post 9/11 world. This is the case here with Jehoiachin. The writer of Chronicles is reckoning his kingly appointment and his eventual capture from the time Nebuchadnezzar came to rule Babylon. Ezekiel, for example, does this in his book. He reckons dates and years from the captivity of Judah, (Ez. 1:7, 33:21, 40:1). Another example is found in 2 Chronicles 16:1 where the 36th year spoken of Asa may refer to the number of years after the division of the kingdom in 930 B.C., rather than his actual years as king.

It can be concluded, then, with a little study, these so-called "copyist errors" can be explained biblically. Granted, "copyist's errors" may very well exist, but how much richer is the Bible to our souls when we first endeavor to dig a little and let God show us biblical based solutions to problems like these.

Sources cited:

Gleason Archer, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Difficulties*.
Leon Wood, *Survey of Israel's History*.
Edmund Theile, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*