

We prefer to write and read things in chronological order, but that isn't always how information is recorded, especially in ancient literature. It's not unusual for Biblical accounts to group events, skip time, and record things out of order.

One example can be found in 2 Kings 19:35-20:1. Verse 35 describes God's destruction of the Assyrian army in 701. Verses 36 and 37 continue with Sennacherib's return to Nineveh and assassination by his sons. Sennacherib was actually killed in 681, twenty years after his loss at Jerusalem, though the Bible does not point out the transition. Then, verse 1 begins the narrative of Hezekiah's illness and recovery "in those days"—obviously not the days in the immediately preceding verses. From the death of Sennacherib's army to his own demise was 20 years. Hezekiah reigned 29 years, but 15 of those were after his illness. Therefore, Hezekiah's illness could not have happened in the days Sennacherib died, for that would put his own death in 666, not allowing enough time for any of Assyria's attacks (713 & 701) to have happened in his 14th year. The time marker for his illness must be linked to Sennacherib's initial attack around 713. Since the narrative seamlessly covers both attacks, "in those days" in 20:1 must refer to the beginning of Judah's trouble with Assyria. If you subscribe to the two-campaign theory (which I do), there's a 12-year jump between 2 Kings 18:16 and 17. Then, there's a 20-year jump between 2 Kings 19:35 and 37. And there's a backward 30-year jump in 20:1. This simply demonstrates the narrative's concern with theme over chronology. It covers Assyrian aggression to its end before covering other contemporary events.

Another example is found in Ezra 4. This section's overall purpose is to demonstrate the opposition to rebuilding Jerusalem. Verses 1-5 occurred during the reigns of Cyrus (539-530) and Darius (522-486), specifically dealing with the rebuilding of the temple. Work began shortly after the first Jews returned in 536. After rebuilding the altar and laying the foundation, they were deterred by threats from their

enemies. In chapter 5, around 520, Haggai and Zechariah reproved and motivated them, and they completed the temple in 516. Ezra 4:6, however, jumps to the reign of Ahasuerus, better known as Xerxes I (486-465), who began to reign 30 years after the temple was finished. The primary objective at that time was rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. Verse 7 jumps yet again to Artaxerxes' reign (465-424), detailing a letter sent by the Jews' enemies to the Persian king. They made the plausible argument that the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls was the first step toward rebellion. Consequently, Artaxerxes ordered work on the wall to stop. However, verse 24 jumps back to the hindrance to the work on the temple some 80+ years earlier. The narrative then continues to follow the completion of the temple. The jumps back and forth between the temple and the wall, many decades apart, can be confusing. Just keep in mind the narrative's purpose to convey the struggles of the Jews during their first century of rebuilding.

In chapter 7, the narrative returns to Artaxerxes' reign, where the Persian king's full support for Ezra and the Jews is documented. Ezra did not provide closure concerning the city walls. He led a second wave of Jews to return from exile around 458, and they focused on spiritual matters. Nehemiah followed in 444 and zealously led the rebuilding of the walls along with correcting spiritual problems.

Disordered portions of Scripture have been used in skeptic's claims of errors and can leave the faithful reader disoriented. Resources such as Bible timelines, apologetics articles, chronological study Bibles, and commentaries can be helpful in sorting out confusing chronologies. Sometimes, we can find the exact solution; sometimes, the best we can achieve is one or more plausible explanation. In the end, the Scriptures can always be vindicated, and we can understand the essential truths God has preserved for us.