

## WAS JERUSALEM DESTROYED IN 587 BCE OR IN 586 BBCE?

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### LIGHT FROM THE ANCIENT PAST:

**The Archeological Background of Judaism and Christianity**, pages 588 – 596  
by Jack Finegan, 1959 (Princeton University Press; London: Oxford University Press)

### PROBLEMS OF BIBLICAL CHRONOLOGY

[page 588] The application of the calendrical principles worked out above to the solution of problems in biblical chronology is not always easy. It is at once evident that one question that arises in the interpretation of biblical dates is when the year was considered as beginning. In the early Israelite calendar, as we have seen, the year began in the autumn, while in the Babylonian calendar it began in the spring. From the tractate Rosh Hashana we learn that a year beginning in the fall and specifically on the first of Tishri, the seventh month, continued in use for a long time, and also a year beginning in the spring and specifically on the first of Nisan, the first month. "On the first of Tishri is New Year for years, for release and jubilee years, for plantation and for vegetables," it is stated; and, "On the first of Nisan is New Year for kings and for festivals."

But in Bible dates it is not always easy to determine which manner of reckoning is used. Thus from I Kings 6:1, 37, 38 Edwin R. Thiele deduces that the regnal year in the time of Solomon was counted from the first of Tishri in the fall, although the year beginning the first of Nisan was used for reckoning ordinary and ecclesiastical dates; but Julian Morgenstern finds that the same passages indicate a regnal year beginning with Nisan. Again, when Nehemiah 1: 1 and 2: 1 refer to the month Kislev and the following Nisan, both in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes, Morgenstern thinks Nehemiah was using a year beginning in Tishri, but Hayim Tadmor suggests that Nehemiah simply carried over "the twentieth year" by mistake when the month of Nisan was actually the beginning of the twentyfirst year or, alternatively, that the text should read "the twenty-fifth year" as in Josephus, although the latter mistakenly changes the ruler to Xerxes. Thiele thinks that the regnal year was counted from Tishri in Judah but from Nisan in Northern Israel; moreover that while the books of Kings and Jeremiah use a regnal year beginning in Tishri for the kings of Judah, in references to Babylonian or Persian kings the writers of Kings, Jeremiah, Haggai, and Zechariah use a year reckoned from Nisan, as Ezekiel also does in giving the years of the captivity of Jehoiachin; but W. F. Albright finds this [page 589] system too elaborate. At all events, whether the year was reckoned from fall or spring, in referring to the months by number the Old Testament always counts from Nisan as the first month.

Another question which arises is as to when the regnal year of a king was considered to begin. The system which prevailed in Babylonia, Assyria, and Persia was that the balance of the calendar year in which a king came to the throne was counted as his accession year, and the first full year of his reign was reckoned as beginning with the next New Year's day. Thus, for example, Shalmaneser V died in the tenth month, Tebetu, of his fifth year of reign, and on the twelfth day of the same month, about the last of December, 722 B.C., his successor, Sargon II, ascended the throne. This calendar year was accordingly both the last year of Shalmaneser and the accession year of Sargon. Only with the following Nisan 1 did the first full regnal year of the new king begin. An event dated in the first year of Sargon II would fall, therefore, in 721 B.C. Since the year began in the spring rather than on our January 1, this date would be more precisely indicated as Nisan 721 to Nisan 720, or as 721/720 B.C.

In the alternative non accession-year system the year in which the king comes to the throne is counted as his first year of reign. If the reign of Sargon II were referred to according to this system, his first year of reign would be 722/721.

Again in the interpretation of biblical dates it is important to determine if possible which system is followed. Thiele thinks that the kings of Judah followed the accession-year system from Rehoboam to Jehoshaphat, the nonaccession-year system from Jehoram to Joash, and the accession-year system again from Amaziah to Zedekiah; and that the kings of Israel followed the non accession-year system from Jeroboam I to Jehoahaz, and the accession-year system from Jehoash to Hoshea. If this is correct, then in the later period of the two monarchies both were using the accession-year system, and at the same time the biblical writers would presumably have used the accession-year system in their references to Babylonian or Persian kings.

Now for concrete illustration of the attempt to apply these principles to the establishment of Old Testament dates we may turn to the closing period in the history of the kingdom of Judah, the relevant [page 590] archeological materials for which have already been presented in the chapter on Egypt and the section on New Babylonia. There it was established from the Babylonian chronicle that the crucial battle of Carchemish took place approximately in Simanu (May /June ), 605 B.C. The contemporary prophet Jeremiah equates the date of the battle of Carchemish with the fourth year of King Jehoiakim of Judah (Jeremiah 46:2). (Footnote here: cf. Josephus, Ant. x, vi, 1. In Jeremiah 25: 1, according to the usual translation, the fourth year of Jehoiakim is equated with the first year of Nebuchadnezzar, but the Hebrew phrase used here is unique in the Old Testament and may perhaps be held to designate or at least include the accession year.) We dated the death of Josiah at Megiddo shortly before Duzu (June /July) , 609 B.C. The three months of reign of his successor, Jehoahaz (II Kings 23:31), were therefore Tammuz (Babylonimi Duzu), Ab (July/August), and Elul (August/September). The accession of the next king, Jehoiakim, was then in Tishri (September/October), 609 B.C. Assuming the accession-year system and a regnal year beginning with Nisan, the first full year of Jehoiakim's reign began on Nisan 1, 608, and his fourth year began on Nisan 1, 605. Since the battle of Carchemish took place in the following summer, this is in agreement with the correlation attested by Jeremiah.

According to II Kings 23:36 and II Chronicles 36:5 Jehoiakim reigned eleven years. If his fourth regnal year was 605/604 B.C., his eleventh year was 598/597.

From the Babylonian chronicle we have learned that it was in his seventh year (598/597 B.C.) and in the month Kislimu that Nebuchadnezzar marched to the Ratti-Iand and besieged Jerusalem, and that it was on the second day of Addaru, March 16, 597 RC., that he seized the city.

The reign of Jehoiachin was three months in length (II Kings 24:8) or, more exactly, three months and ten days (II Chronicles 36:9). If it was counted as extending to the day of the fall of the city, Addaru 2, 597 B.C., three months and ten days before that was the twenty-second day of Arahsamnu, December 9, 598 B.C. It will be noted below that Jehoiachin may not actually have been carried away from Jerusalem into exile until a few weeks after the capture of the city, perhaps on the tenth day of the following Nisan, April 22, 597. If his reign was counted as extending to that point, three [page 591] months and ten days before would have been the first day of Tebeth, January 16, 597 B.C. It was in the immediately preceding month, Kislimu, that Nebuchadnezzar marched to the Hatti-Iand and besieged Jerusalem, hence the change in rulers must have come very close to the time of the inauguration of the siege. II Kings 24:8, 10 may even give the impression that Jehoiachin had already come to the throne at the time the siege was started, and Jeremiah 22: 18f.; 36:30 may be interpreted as suggesting that Jehoiakim was killed in a court uprising which might have had the purpose of replacing him with the presumably more pro-Babylonian Jehoiachin in a last-minute effort to avert the attack of Nebuchadnezzar; but II Chronicles 36:6 says that Nebuchadnezzar put Jehoiakim in fetters, and Josephus states that it was the Babylonian king who killed him and ordered him cast out unburied before the walls.

Jeremiah 52:28-30 gives the number of people carried away captive by Nebuchadnezzar on three different occasions. The first item is: "in the seventh year, three thousand and twenty-three Jews." Josephus doubtless follows this source when he says that Nebuchadnezzar carried three thousand captives to Babylon. Since Jeremiah here specifies the seventh year of Nebuchadnezzar this seems to be in agreement with the Babylonian chronicle which says that Nebuchadnezzar marched to the Hatti-land and took Jerusalem in his seventh year.

In II Kings 24:12-16, however, it is stated that it was in the eighth year of the king of Babylon that Jehoiachin was taken prisoner and he and "all Jerusalem" carried away to Babylon. Also the total number of those deported is given as ten thousand. The apparent discrepancy may doubtless be explained most simply by supposing that Jeremiah 52:28 is using the Babylonian system in counting the years of Nebuchadnezzar's reign, hence states the date exactly as the Babylonian chronicle does; but that II Kings 24: 12 uses the nonaccession-year system, hence calls this Nebuchadnezzar's eighth year; or that II Kings 24:12 uses a year beginning with the preceding Tishri, hence by such reckoning this was already the eighth year. The fact that Jeremiah 52:28-30 is omitted in the LXX might be explained in line with this interpretation as due to the fact that the Babylonian system of dating was not understood in the West.

[page 592] It must be noted on the other hand that the date of the capture of Jerusalem on the second day of Addaru in the seventh year of Nebuchadnezzar means that the city was taken within the very last month of that regnal year of the Babylonian king, and that with the first day of the ensuing month Nisan his eighth year began. If II Kings 24:14 is correct that the total number of persons selected for deportation was ten thousand, and if much booty was taken and prepared for transport, even to the cutting in pieces of the vessels of gold in the temple as II Kings 24:13 states, then it may readily be supposed that the assembling of the captives and goods took several weeks and that the final caravan did not depart until Nebuchadnezzar's eighth year had begun. If some three thousand captives were taken off before the end of Addaru and the balance only after the beginning of Nisan, then both the seventh and the eighth years of Nebuchadnezzar were involved and both Jeremiah and II Kings could be using the accession-year system of reckoning.

That the final deportation took place as a new year was beginning is probably confirmed by II Chronicles 36:10 which gives the time as "in the spring of the year" according to the translation of the Revised Standard Version, but more literally "at the return of the year" (ASV) or "at the turn of the year," which must signify the month Nisan. Likewise Ezekiel 40:1 speaks of what seems to be an exact anniversary ("that very day") of the inauguration of the exile and dates it "at the beginning of the year, on the tenth day of the month." This must mean the tenth day of Nisan, and would date the final deportation on April 22, 597 B.C., a little more than a month, after the fall of the city on March 16.

Upon the capture and deportation of Jehoiachin, Zedekiah was put on the throne at Jerusalem (II Kings 24:17; II Chronicles 36:10), and was king there when the city was taken for the second and last time by Nebuchadnezzar. Jeremiah 52:29 states that "in the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar he carried away captive from Jerusalem eight hundred and thirty-two persons." II Kings 25:8 and Jeremiah 52:12 specify the seventh and tenth days of the fifth month in the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar for the final destruction of Jerusalem.

[page 593] As previously we had given the seventh and the eighth years, so here we have the eighteenth and the nineteenth. Again the simplest explanation is probably that Jeremiah 52:29 uses the Babylonian system, but II Kings 25:8 and Jeremiah 52:12 use either a nonaccession-year system or a year beginning in Tishri, hence designate as the nineteenth year what in the Babylonian system is the eighteenth. The eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar was 587/586 B.C., and the seventh and tenth days of the fifth month were August 26 and August 29, 587 B.C.

There is, however, once more another possibility to be considered. The number of 832 persons taken captive from Jerusalem seems very small to represent the final fall of that city, particularly when it is remembered, for example, that Sargon claims 27,290 captives in the capture of Samaria, hence Jeremiah 52:29 may simply record a preliminary deportation of a group of captives apprehended while the siege of Jerusalem was still in progress. II Kings 25:8 and Jeremiah 52:12 might then also use the Babylonian system of reckoning, and in this case the seventh and tenth days of the fifth month in the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar would mean August 15 and 18, 586 B.C.

The fall of Jerusalem is also dated in terms of the reign of Zedekiah. In the ninth year of his reign, in the tenth month, on the tenth day of the month, the siege began (II Kings 25: 1). In the tenth year of Zedekiah which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar, the siege was in progress and Jeremiah was in custody (Jeremiah 32: 1). In the eleventh year of Zedekiah, in the fourth month, on the ninth day, the walls of the city were breached (II Kings 25:2-4; Jeremiah 39:2). In the fifth month, on the seventh or the tenth day, which was in the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuzaradan came and destroyed the city (II Kings 25:8; Jeremiah 52:12).

[page 594] If the dates in the reign of Zedekiah are stated in terms of the Babylonian system, and his eleventh year coincided with the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar (586/585 B.C.), then his first year would have been the ninth year of Nebuchadnezzar (596/595), and his accession year the eighth year of Nebuchadnezzar (597/596). According to a possible reckoning worked out above, it was in this year on the tenth day of Nisan, April 22, 597 B.C., that Jehoiachin was carried away into exile. Therefore it is quite possible that it was at this time that Zedekiah was installed and that this year, 597/596 B.C., was considered his accession year. On the supposition that 597/596 was the accession year of Zedekiah then his ninth year was 588/587 and the tenth day of the tenth month when the siege began was January 4, 587; his tenth year when Jeremiah was in prison was 587/586; and in his eleventh year (586/585) the ninth day of the fourth month when the walls were breached was July 19, 586, while the seventh and tenth days of the fifth month when the city was finally destroyed were August 15 and 18, 586.

If the second fall of Jerusalem was in the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar rather than the nineteenth, that is in 587 instead of 586, then the accession of Zedekiah could be presumed to have been counted as taking place in 598/597, the seventh year of Nebuchadnezzar, when at almost the end of the year the city and Jehoiachin fell into the hands of the Babylonian king. In this case Zedekiah's ninth year was 589/588 and the siege began on January 15, 588; his tenth year was 588/587; and his eleventh year was 587/586, the walls being breached on July 29, 587, and the destruction coming on August 26 and 29, 587. In this case, however, the tenth and eleventh years of Zedekiah would not correspond with the eighteenth and nineteenth years of Nebuchadnezzar, hence this system seems less likely.

According to II Kings 25:27 Jehoiachin was brought up out of his prison in Babylon in the thirty-seventh year of his exile, the twelfth month, and the twenty-seventh day, which was in the year that Evil-merodach began to reign. Jeremiah 52:31 gives the same date except that the twenty-fifth day of the month is specified, and also says that this was the year that Evil-merodach became king. Evil-merodach is the Babylonian king Amel-Marduk who acceded to the throne in succession to Nebuchadnezzar in 562/561 B.C. If the accession year of Amel-Marduk was the thirty-seventh year of Jehoiachin's [page 595]

exile, the first year of that exile was 598/597, the year in which on the second day of Addaru, March 16, 597 B.C., Jerusalem was captured. It is possible and even probable, however, that the words in II Kings 25:27 and Jeremiah 52:31 concerning Evil-merodach should be translated "in the first year of his reign" (Moffatt Translation). Amel-Marduk's first full year

of reign was 561/560, and counting back thirty-seven years from this Jehoiachin's first year of exile would have been 597/596. This would correspond with his going into captivity on the tenth day of Nisan, April 22, 597 B.C., as we have seen reason to believe was the case.

Ezekiel 1:2 refers to the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin, and there follows in the same book a series of dates (8:1; 20:1; 24:1; 26:1; 29:1, 17; 30:21; 31:1; 32:1, 17; 33:21; 40:1) which are evidently stated likewise in terms of the years of Jehoiachin's exile. It must have been a number of months before Jehoiachin actually arrived in Babylon on the long journey from Jerusalem, even as later it took Ezra a full four months to make the reverse trip from Babylon to Jerusalem (Ezra 7:9). Writing from the point of view of Babylon, therefore, it may well be that Ezekiel considered the balance of 597/596 as what we might call the "inception year" of the exile, just as the same year was the accession year of Zedekiah in Jerusalem, and if this was the basis of reckoning then the first full year of Jehoiachin's exile was 596/595, even as it was the first full regnal year of Zedekiah. Such a basis of reckoning seems required by Ezekiel 24:1 where the beginning of the final siege of Jerusalem is dated, presumably with reference to the years of the exile, in the ninth year, tenth month; and tenth day, exactly as in II Kings 25:1 (cf. Jeremiah 39:1) the same event is dated in the ninth year, tenth month, and tenth day of the reign of Zedekiah (January 4, 587 B.C.). If Ezekiel had also given the date of the fall of the city it would then presumably have been the same as that in II Kings 25:8 and Jeremiah 52:12, the seventh-tenth day of the fifth month of the eleventh year, probably August 15-18, 586 B.C. What Ezekiel does give is the date (33: 21) when a fugitive from Jerusalem reached Babylon with the first news that the city had fallen. This was on the fifth day of the tenth month in what is given as the twelfth year in the usual text, but as the eleventh year in a number of Hebrew, Greek, and Syriac manuscripts [page 596] accepting the latter reading, this date in the eleventh year was January 8, 585, which allows the fugitive slightly less than five months to come from Jerusalem to Babylon, a reasonable length of time compared with the journey of Ezra noted above.

Ezekiel 40:1 speaks of an exact anniversary ("that very day") of the inauguration of the exile on the tenth day of the month at the beginning of the year, that is Nisan 10. This anniversary was in the twenty-fifth year of the exile, that is 572/571. This was also, it is stated, the fourteenth year after the city was conquered. If the city was conquered in the year 586/585, the fourteenth year after that was 572/571.