

## EZEKIEL 40:1 AS A CORRECTIVE FOR SEVEN WRONG IDEAS IN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

RODGER C. YOUNG  
St. Louis, Missouri

Ezekiel 40:1 is often viewed by commentators as a mere chronological note that can be passed over quickly before taking up the formidable task of interpreting the last nine chapters of Ezekiel's book. Yet a careful analysis of this verse, when combined with some knowledge of the various events and institutions to which the verse makes explicit or implicit reference, shows that it is rich in information that sheds light on the events and institutions to which it refers. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that the five pieces of chronological data given in the verse provide useful correctives to several ideas that have gained widespread currency in biblical and historical interpretation, while at the same time allowing us to replace those ideas with counterparts that are more in keeping not only with the information in this verse, but also with the teaching of other Scriptures that deal with these matters. It will be shown that this one verse, used in conjunction with a small amount of external historical data, contradicts the following seven wrong ideas:

- The idea that Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 586 B.C.
- The idea that Ezekiel reckoned the calendar year to start in Nisan.
- The idea that Judah used Nisan years for the reign length of kings.
- The idea that Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, was always on the First of Tishri.
- The idea that Jubilees were never observed in the history of Israel.
- The idea that the Exodus occurred in the thirteenth century B.C.
- One more idea that will be explained later, having to do with literary sources in the Scripture.

Those familiar with OT interpretation, particularly in the area of chronology, will recognize that these are all controversial questions. It may seem hard to believe that this one verse can shed light on all these matters. Yet a careful analysis of each phrase in the verse, followed by reconciling each phrase with the other phrases in the verse and with events that the verse is referring to, will confront the interpreter with information that is pertinent to each of these questions. To pursue this analysis, it is necessary to look at the verse first *in toto*, then quite carefully at its particular parts.

*Preliminary Analysis of the Verse*

In the twenty-fifth year of our exile, at the beginning of the year, on the tenth of the month, in the fourteenth year after the city was taken, on that same day the hand of the Lord was upon me and He brought me there (Ezek 40:1, NASB).

There are five items here of chronological interest. Each is the subject of controversy:

1. It was “*the twenty-fifth year of our exile.*” This was an exile that Ezekiel shared with King Jehoiachin (see Ezek 1:2; 2 Kgs 24:10-16; and 2 Chron 36:10). Although Nebuchadnezzar’s first capture of Jerusalem and its King Jehoiachin can be firmly dated from the Babylonian Chronicle to Adar 2 of 597 B.C., various scholars have advocated that Jehoiachin’s exile should not be measured from that month, but from some time in the following month, Nisan of 597. Others have maintained that such an interpretation was only introduced to resolve chronological problems that do not appear if a different chronology is adopted, and so there is no reason to move the beginning of the captivity (or exile) from the month of Adar given in the Babylonian records.

2. It was “*at the beginning of the year.*” This translates the phrase בְּרֵאשִׁית הַשָּׁנָה—“at Rosh Hashanah.” Some have interpreted this to be the beginning of the religious new year, in the spring month of Nisan, in spite of the connotation that this phrase continues to bear down to modern times, namely that it refers to the beginning of the civil new year in the fall month of Tishri.

3. It was “*on the tenth of the month.*” There are two opinions regarding which month is meant, differing basically on their interpretation of the preceding phrase.

4. It was “*in the fourteenth year after the city was taken*” by the Babylonian army, thus ending the Judean monarchy. Great has been the controversy over whether the city fell in 586 B.C. or in 587 B.C.<sup>1</sup>

5. It was “*on that same day,*” indicating there was something special about this day. The ideas about what made the day special depend on the question of which month is intended.

In resolving the various issues, such as which year is indicated by Ezekiel’s date-formulas, we should first adopt the viewpoint that the prophet was able to express with exactitude each of the five pieces of data specified above. It is not only those who have a high view of the inspiration of Scripture who could be

<sup>1</sup>Jeremy Hughes listed eleven scholars who dated the fall of Jerusalem to 586 and eleven who dated it to 587 (*Secrets of the Times* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1990], 229 n.). Several verses that bear on this question can be interpreted in favor of either a 586 or a 587 date, depending on the assumptions made regarding, for example, accession vs. nonaccession years for kings, Nisan vs. Tishri years. However, if we approach the question by making it our first priority to determine the methods of counting that were used by the authors of Scripture, and then checking to see if the methods so determined are consistent with all the biblical data, then only one date, 587, survives. For a study showing that this is the case for all the relevant texts in 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, see R. Young, “When Did Jerusalem Fall?” *JETS* 47/1 (2004): 21-38.

expected to agree with this presupposition, since Ezekiel is one book of the Bible that radical criticism has had difficulty in attributing to anyone other than the prophet of that name who lived during the exile. Ezekiel was also a priest (Ezek 1:3). Among all societies of the ancient Near East, it was the duty of the priests to keep track of such chronological matters as when the month was to begin and when the religious feasts were to be held, as well as such longer-term matters as, for example, when a Sabbatical year was due. Therefore, unless Ezekiel's date-formulas can be shown to be in irreconcilable conflict with established external dates, or in conflict with other statements within Ezekiel's own writings, then the chronological data in this verse should be treated as matters of exact measurement and knowledge from a reliable source. There was no reason why Ezekiel would not record the dates exactly, and his multiple way of specifying the date shows that this was a matter of some concern to him. If any interpretation can be found that is in harmony with all of Ezekiel's data, that interpretation must be preferred over any interpretation that is in conflict with such data or that is not in accord with a strict examination of the Hebrew phrases used in the text under review. With this understanding, let us examine the phrases regarding which year, month, and day are implied in Ezekiel's dating of his vision.

#### *Resolving Which Year Is Indicated*

It was "the twenty-fifth year of our exile (לְגִלוֹתֵנוּ)," and also "in the fourteenth year after (אַחֵר) the city was taken" by the Babylonians. The two prepositions used here, לְ and אַחֵר, must be clearly distinguished as to their meaning. לְ is the "of" in the phrase "of our exile," and its use in Hebrew time expressions means that the full amount of time had not elapsed, but it was in the "xth year" of the period mentioned. This is similar in English to our speaking of our first year of college, meaning the time before we had been there one full year.<sup>2</sup> The preposition אַחֵר, in contrast, means that a full fourteen years had passed since the destruction of the city, an interpretation that can be verified by examining the usage of this word in Gen 5 and elsewhere in Scripture. When used in a temporal sense, the word is identical in meaning to the English preposition "after," so that Gesenius in this regard defines it as "after, Gen. 9:28." These two phrases therefore mean that twenty-four full years had elapsed since the year that marked the beginning of Ezekiel's exile, and fourteen full years had elapsed since the destruction of the city. It might seem to be an easy matter, then, to give the date of Ezekiel's vision, since the date that Jehoiachin was captured can be determined from the Babylonian Chronicle to be the Second of Adar, 597 B.C. And, once the date of the vision is established, going back fourteen years should give the year in which the city fell.

There are, however, three complicating factors that must be investigated

<sup>2</sup>See a more extended discussion of this matter in R. Young, "When Did Solomon Die?" *JETS* 46/4 (2003): 602. The issue discussed there is that the proper interpretation of this preposition in 1 Kgs 6:1 means that 479 years had passed, not 480, from the Exodus to the time of the laying of the foundation of Solomon's Temple.

before this simple calculation can be done: Did Ezekiel consider that the year began in Nisan, the beginning of the religious year, or in Tishri, the month that marked the beginning of the civil year and the beginning of years for a king's reign?<sup>3</sup> Should Jehoiachin's exile be dated from Adar, when the Babylonian Chronicle indicates he was initially captured, or from some time in the following month, Nisan, therefore bringing in a new year if Ezekiel considered the year to start in Nisan?<sup>4</sup> Did the city fall in 586 or 587?

This represents three variables, each of which can take two possible values. At this point, a fundamental question of methodology arises. For each of these three variables, there have been able advocates for both of the values that the variable can take. Therefore, any proper methodology would have to give due consideration to every one of these possible values, and all the combinations thereof, before a conclusion is reached regarding the most suitable choice. It is a matter of some concern that, to my knowledge, no OT scholar has ever stopped to make the simple observation that three variables, each of which can take two possible values, give eight possible combinations that must be investigated. Each of these combinations might produce a different value for the result that is sought, namely the years to be assigned to the vision and to the fall of the city fourteen years prior.

The same problem occurs to anyone attempting to derive chronological data from the stereotyped formula given for synchronisms in the books of Kings and Chronicles, namely that "In year X of Y, King of Israel, King Z of Judah began to reign." The way that any verse that follows this pattern is to be understood depends on how each of the separate parts of the verse is interpreted. The variables are: whether year X of King Y refers to the year that

<sup>3</sup>For evidence that Judah measured its regnal years from Tishri, see Edwin Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1981), 51-53; or D. J. A. Clines, "The Evidence for an Autumnal New Year in Pre-Exilic Israel Reconsidered," *JBL* 93/1 (1974): 22-26.

<sup>4</sup>Thiele, 187, argued that Ezekiel was using a Nisan-to-Nisan year, contrary to the practice of Judean court recorders, and that Jehoiachin's exile is not to be measured from his capture in Adar, but from the next month, Nisan, when Thiele presumed he began the journey to Babylon. This delay of one month was introduced in an attempt to accommodate Thiele's date of 586 for the second capture of the city. Since his date for this event was one year too late, means had to be found to move the first year of Jehoiachin's captivity one year later than that suggested by a normal interpretation of the relevant texts. Another attempt to accommodate the 586 date for the fall of Jerusalem was given by Gershon Galil, "The Babylonian Calendar and the Chronology of the Last Kings of Judah," *Bib* 72/3 (1991): 367-378. Galil conjectured that in 597 B.C. the Babylonians had already inserted the intercalary month, but that Judah had not yet taken this step, with the consequence that when the Babylonians captured Jerusalem it was 2 Adar according to their calendar but 2 Nisan by Judah's calendar. Both these methods of getting Jehoiachin's captivity to start after Nisan 1 of 597 are covered by the decision table in the appendix of this article. The Decision Table shows that neither of these stratagems is capable of putting the fall of the city in 586 unless we assume that Ezekiel was inaccurate or wrong in his dating methods.

his sole reign started, or whether it possibly refers to the year he became coregent or rival (two possible values); whether year X of King Y is measured according to a Nisan year, such as the northern kingdom used throughout its history, or according to the Tishri years that Judah used throughout its history (two possible values); whether year X of the King of Israel is according to accession (noninclusive) or nonaccession (inclusive) reckoning (two possible values); and whether this verse is referring to the year that Z, King of Judah, began his sole reign, or to the year he became coregent with his father (two possible values). Unless some of these possibilities can be ruled out at the start (for instance, King Y may have usurped the throne by killing his predecessor, thus ruling out a coregency), there are sixteen combinations that need to be investigated before it can be said that all the possibilities inherent in this formula have been investigated. A complete analysis should first seek to eliminate some of the various possibilities through other information, and then, for those options that cannot be eliminated, a way must be chosen to fully explore all their combinations. Any methodology that does not take these steps in analyzing this kind of information is a deficient methodology.

There are two methods of dealing with the complexity introduced when two or more variables can assume two or more states, and the resulting combinations produce different values of a desired result. These two methods are the case structure and Decision Tables.<sup>5</sup> They are logically equivalent, as long as both are used correctly. Of the two, Decision Tables provide a more graphic or tabular way of organizing the data and displaying all possible combinations and their results, and so this is the recommended method that should be mastered by those who deal with the chronological data of the Hebrew divided monarchies, or with other selected texts, such as the one of current interest, Ezek 40:1. In an earlier article,<sup>6</sup> I used Decision Tables to decide which combinations of the three variables previously discussed are viable for Ezek 40:1.<sup>7</sup> The conclusion from the tables is as follows: there are no combinations of the twenty-fifth year of exile and a year fourteen years after the city fell that allow for a 586 date. Neither are there any combinations that indicate that Ezekiel was using Nisan years. It is therefore concluded that the city fell on the ninth of Tammuz (July 28<sup>8</sup>) of 587 B.C. (Jer 52:6-7), and that Ezekiel was consistent with the method of Judean court recorders throughout

<sup>5</sup>Case structures resemble an outline. Examples of Decision Tables may be seen in the tax tables of Form 1040 for the U. S. income tax. For an introduction to Decision Tables, see [www.cems.uwe.ac.uk/~jharney/table.html](http://www.cems.uwe.ac.uk/~jharney/table.html).

<sup>6</sup>Young, "Jerusalem," 26.

<sup>7</sup>By permission of the editor of the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, the tables are reproduced in the appendix.

<sup>8</sup>Month and day according to the Julian calendar are from the NASA tables at <http://sunearth.gsfc.nasa.gov/eclipse/phase/phases-0599.html>. The older tables of Richard Parker and Waldo Dubberstein would make the ninth of Tammuz to be July 29 (*Babylonian Chronology 626 B.C.–A.D. 75* [Providence: Brown University, 1956], 28).

the history of the southern kingdom when he reckoned that the year began in Tishri. These then are the first conclusions that can be inferred by a careful study of just two pieces of data from Ezek 40:1. It therefore must be concluded that the idea that the city fell in 586 and that Ezekiel used Nisan years (the first two of the seven wrong ideas initially presented) are not compatible with Ezekiel's twofold method of expressing the year.

If Ezekiel was using Tishri years in his calculations, then the only adequate explanation for this is that he was following the practice of Judean court recorders, and probably also the practice of the people in general.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps Ezekiel could have switched from a Tishri year to a Nisan year, since the Babylonian New Year was in Nisan and Ezekiel was in exile in Babylon, but if both Judah and Babylon were using Nisan years, then there would have been no reason for Ezekiel to switch to Tishri years. Therefore, a third consequence of the analysis of the two year-formulas used by Ezekiel is that, since it has been shown that Ezekiel *was* using Tishri years, this verse refutes the idea that Judah measured the reign of its kings using Nisan years, as taught in the Talmud.<sup>10</sup>

#### *Resolving Which Month Is Indicated*

Ezekiel's vision was "at the beginning of the year" *בְּרֵאשִׁית הַשָּׁנָה*—"at Rosh Hashanah"], but the month is not otherwise named. It has already been shown that Ezekiel used Tishri years, in keeping with the practice of Judah throughout its history. The month was, therefore, Tishri. Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, is celebrated in Tishri to the present day.

#### *Resolving Which Day Is Indicated*

The vision was "on the tenth of the month," that is, the tenth of Tishri. This is the great Day of Atonement, the most solemn date of the Jewish calendar. Ezekiel adds "on that same day," indicating the special recognition that has been given to this day ever since its institution in the Desert of Sinai. The Talmud (*b. 'Arakin* 12a) agrees with this, saying that Ezek 40:1 refers to the tenth day of the month Tishri. Edwin Thiele interpreted the phrase "on that same day" in light of his idea that Jehoiachin began the journey to Babylon in Nisan, and since the day of Ezekiel's vision was the tenth of the month, Thiele maintained that this verse taught that Jehoiachin's journey to Babylon began on

<sup>9</sup>It has already been mentioned that the work of Thiele has shown that Judah measured its regnal years from Tishri throughout the lifetime of the southern kingdom. The Gezer Calendar, usually dated to the latter half of the tenth century B.C., is based on a Tishri year, showing that others in Judah besides official court recorders were using a Tishri year long before the exile (Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998], 29).

<sup>10</sup>*b. Rosh Hashanah* 1a: "On the first of Nisan is New Year for kings and for festivals. . . . On the first of Tishri is New Year for release [Sabbatical] and jubilee years, for plantation and for the title of vegetables."

the tenth of Nisan.<sup>11</sup> But it has been demonstrated that the month was Tishri, and the day was the Day of Atonement.

*How Can Rosh Hashanah Be on  
the Tenth of the Month?*

Ezekiel said his vision was both “at the beginning of the year”—at Rosh Hashanah—and “on the tenth of the month.” It might be thought that this is a mistake at worst or an inexactitude at best, since Rosh Hashanah, the New Year, is observed on the first of Tishri, not the tenth. That is true today, but it has not always been true. There was one time in the calendar of Israel when Rosh Hashanah, the New Year, was celebrated on the tenth of the month. That was when the year was a Jubilee. The Talmud, in the passage already cited dealing with this verse (*b. Arakin* 12a), asks: “Now which is the year the beginning of which falls on the tenth of Tishri? Say: This is the jubilee year.” *b. Rosh Hashanah* 8b explains further: “Surely [the New Year for] Jubilees is on the tenth of Tishri,” citing then Lev 25:9, which says regarding the Jubilee: “You shall then sound a ram’s horn abroad on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the day of atonement you shall sound a horn all through your land” (NASB). Since this was to be done in the seventh month of the forty-ninth year of a Jubilee cycle, according to a calendar that measured the months from Nisan, it might be conjectured that the Jubilee year did not start until six months after the blowing of the ram’s horn, that is, in Nisan of the next year. This idea that the Jubilee did not start when the ram’s horn was blown is contradicted by several factors, one of which is that the Talmud specifically says (*b. Rosh Hashanah* 1a) that Sabbatical and Jubilee years began in Tishri. Some reflection on what the Leviticus passage is saying would also dictate that the year began on the tenth of Tishri. Surely the dramatic effect of the blowing of the ram’s horn throughout the land would indicate an immediate event, not one that was to be deferred six months. For these and other reasons, the Talmud must be correct when it says that the Jubilee year started when the ram’s horn was blown on the tenth of Tishri, the Day of Atonement. This was the only time in the history of Israel when Rosh Hashanah was not on the first of Tishri, and, therefore, the information in Ezek 40:1, by saying that it was both Rosh Hashanah and the tenth day of the month, establishes that the date of the vision, Tishri 10 of 574 B.C.,<sup>12</sup> marked the beginning of a Jubilee year. The Jubilee, however, could not be celebrated because the people were captive in a foreign land.

An objection has been put forth to this interpretation, as follows: it is claimed that since this is the only place in the Hebrew Bible where the phrase Rosh Hashanah occurs, this phrase might not have quite the precision that it had in later years and still bears today, namely in referring to New Year’s Day, the very

<sup>11</sup>Thiele, 187.

<sup>12</sup>For the year, see Young, “Jerusalem,” 28, or Table 1a of the present article. The Julian month and day were November 1, according to the NASA tables of phases of the moon, or November 2, according to the tables of Parker and Dubberstein, 28.

first day of the new year. Instead, it is suggested, Rosh Hashanah may have meant just the general time of the year, in the same way that the “turn of the year” (Exod 34:22) was the general time during which the Feast of Ingathering occurred. If this were so, Ezekiel would only be saying that it was the general season for a new year, and it also happened to be the tenth day of the month, so that the argument that it was a Jubilee because the new year’s day was on the Day of Atonement would not hold. The year could be any ordinary year.

This inference is not likely for the following reasons:

1. It implies that there was a change in meaning of this phrase between the time of Ezekiel and later Jewish history. The burden of proof should be on the argument that there was such a change—evidence for the change should be given—rather than having the burden of proof on the simpler interpretation that Rosh Hashanah meant the same in Ezekiel’s day as it did later.

2. The objection would imply that the rabbinic scholars who gave us the Talmud were wrong when they stated that Ezekiel’s date-formula is explicit in designating a Jubilee year. It is instructive to consider how this passage is presented in the Talmud, in tractate *b. Arakin* 12a. As is well known, the general format of the Talmud is to present a scriptural text or some piece of information that rabbinic scholars accepted as true, and then to present a series of divergent interpretations of the Scripture or datum. In the passage of interest, the text of Ezek 40:1 is presented, immediately followed by the question (and answer): “Now which is the year the beginning of which falls on the tenth of Tishri? This is the Jubilee year.” The discussion that follows presents many controversial issues: for example, whether it was really the twenty-fifth or twenty-sixth year of exile, and how many periods of exile were involved. But one thing that is never questioned is that the text implies a Jubilee. If this question were at all open to debate, why is it not debated along with all the other relevant issues in the Talmudic discussion? The rabbis knew that Rosh Hashanah meant the New Year’s Day, not a general time of year.

3. A rabbinic work that is even older than the Talmud also mentions Ezek 40:1 and associates it with a Jubilee. This is the *Seder Olam* of Rabbi Yose ben Halaphta, which dates from the second century A.D. In chapter 11 of the *Seder Olam*, Rabbi Yose quotes the first few words of Ezek 40:1 and then rhetorically asks when Ezekiel saw the vision introduced in the verse. His reply is “At the beginning of a Jubilee.”<sup>13</sup> There is no appeal here to the argument that the text says it was both Rosh Hashanah and the tenth of the month. This part of the verse is not even supplied in the original Hebrew text, as given by Heinrich Guggenheimer (only the first few words of the verse are supplied, since the reader was expected to provide the rest of the verse from memory). This means that either it should have been obvious to the reader that the text of this verse

<sup>13</sup>The recent translation of Heinrich Guggenheimer, *Seder Olam—The Rabbinic View of Biblical Chronology* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005) renders בחולה היובל in the *Seder Olam* passage as “[a]t the beginning of a Jubilee period,” which is misleading. The proper translation is “at the beginning of a Jubilee.”



implied a Jubilee year (and thus "Rosh Hashanah" meant specifically the New Year's Day), or else Rabbi Yose was not basing his statement about the Jubilee on the circumstance of Rosh Hashanah being on the tenth of the month, but was instead basing it on historical remembrance of an actual Jubilee. Either alternative argues against the idea that Rosh Hashanah was a general term and that Ezek 40:1 only refers to any ordinary year, not a Jubilee year.

It has been shown that the proposition that "Rosh Hashanah" meant the same to Ezekiel as it did in all later periods is more reasonable than the alternative proposition that there was a change of meaning. Nevertheless, this falls short of an absolute proof that there was no change in meaning. But this brings up the question of whether "absolute proof" should be the criterion for the historical reconstruction of any period of history. It could be argued that there is no absolute proof for any of the following supports for the thesis that Sabbatical and Jubilee years were known before the exile: that the passage about the year of no sowing or reaping in Isa 37:30 refers to a Sabbatical year; that the release of slaves in the days of Zedekiah had to be done in a Sabbatical year; that the widespread tradition that Jerusalem fell to Nebuchadnezzar in a Sabbatical year is correct; and even whether the passages about Jerusalem falling to the Babylonians in the early sixth century B.C. are real history. All of these points could be challenged by someone whose criterion for reconstructing history is "absolute proof." But is "absolute proof" the proper criterion for determining the validity of historical and scientific theories? Is it not instead the modern scientific paradigm built on that seven-hundred-year-old principle known as Ockham's Razor? Ockham's Razor states when there are alternate explanations of a phenomenon or series of phenomena, the explanation that is simplest and requires the fewest additional assumptions is always to be preferred. The whole scientific revolution of modern times is built on this principle, as contrasted to the principle that no new idea will be accepted until the powers that be have received what they arbitrarily consider an "absolute proof" that each phenomenon supporting the new idea is correct.

One simple idea explains the whole series of phenomena that have already been presented and those that will be presented in the remainder of this paper. That idea is that the priests really did start counting the Jubilee and Sabbatical cycles when they were commanded to do so in Lev 25, namely at the entrance into Canaan, and then they continued the counting, which is also implied in the command. With this, everything else falls into place. Much quibbling can be done about the individual phenomena that are explained by this thesis. What has not yet been explained, except by this simple thesis, is why all these phenomena that attest to preexilic knowledge of the Sabbatical and Jubilee years fit into a harmonious pattern, a pattern that in every case harmonizes with the calendar of Sabbatical and Jubilee cycles that can be constructed from a Jubilee established on the text of Ezek 40:1. Until we have an alternate thesis with equal or better explanatory power, the final argument against any change in the meaning of "Rosh Hashanah" over the years is that the idea that there was no change fits with a significant number of other phenomena that follow, based on the thesis that the

priests really were counting the Jubilee and Sabbatical cycles, as they were commanded to do. The best way to overthrow this thesis will not be to demand absolute proof for each of the phenomena, but to produce and clearly state an equally simple alternate thesis that explains them. Until that is done, we might be forgiven for entertaining the idea that the real stumbling block in accepting the thesis presented here is not the several specific things that the thesis can explain, but a fear of the consequences if the thesis is true.

The conclusion that the language of Ezek 40:1 implies the beginning of a Jubilee year refutes two more ideas in our initial list, namely that Rosh Hashanah was always on the first of Tishri, and that no Jubilee years were observed in the history of Israel. This does not mean that the people were obeying the stipulations of the Jubilee; all that has been demonstrated is that the priests, one of whom was the prophet Ezekiel, knew when the Jubilees were due to be observed.<sup>14</sup>

#### *Some Additional Information About the Time of the Jubilees*

The priests such as Ezekiel knew when the time of a Jubilee was due because in Lev 25:8 they were commanded to count seven Sabbatical cycles until the year of the Jubilee. But if they counted the Sabbatical cycles, would they not have also counted the Jubilee cycles? The Talmud (*b. Sanhedrin* 40a, b) relates that in the time of the judges, the dating of events was done by relating in which Jubilee cycle, in which Septennate (Sabbatical cycle) within the Jubilee cycle, and in which year within the Septennate an event occurred. The necessity of counting the Sabbatical years suggests that a similar practice for calendrical purposes would be adopted by the society. Besides knowing that his vision was on the New Year's Day of the seventh year of the seventh Septennate, and, therefore, at the start of a Jubilee, would Ezekiel also have known the numbering of the Jubilee? Since the text of Ezek 40:1 is sufficient by itself, even without the Talmud's explanation of this matter, to show that Ezekiel knew which year and which Septennate it was, then it is not at all improbable that he also knew which Jubilee it was.

Ezekiel did not leave us any record of the number of this Jubilee, but the Talmud (*b. 'Arakin* 12b) states that it was the seventeenth. The *Seder 'Olam*, chapter 11, also says that Ezekiel's Jubilee was the seventeenth. Combining this

<sup>14</sup>There is also a certain psychological harmony that appears when Ezekiel's vision is placed on the Day of Atonement *and* at the beginning of a Jubilee year, as contrasted with the opinion that his vision was on the tenth day of the month of Nisan. If the vision had been given in Nisan, the context would have been the preparation for the Passover. But the Passover celebration has always been a looking back into Israel's past to the deliverance that God gave the people in bringing them out of Egypt. The Jubilee, in contrast, has long been recognized as having eschatological overtones, much more in keeping with Ezekiel's great eschatological vision than would be the case if the vision had come in a Passover setting.

information with the Jubilee cycle-length of forty-nine years,<sup>15</sup> it can readily be calculated that the starting of counting for the Jubilees at the entrance of Israel into Canaan must have been in 1406 B.C., with the Exodus in 1446 B.C. These dates are in exact agreement with the dates for the Exodus and the entry into Canaan that can be calculated from Thiele's date for the beginning of the divided monarchies and the 480-year figure of 1 Kgs 6:1.<sup>16</sup>

Ezekiel 40:1, by placing Rosh Hashanah on the Day of Atonement, provides adequate information to determine that the time of Ezekiel's vision marked the beginning of a Jubilee year. Given the Jubilee cycle of forty-nine years, there is only one chance in forty-nine that the year starting in Nisan 1406 B.C. would match the first year of a Jubilee cycle. Since this date is consistent with a Jubilee beginning in 574, this gives strong support for the correctness of the chronology that dates the Exodus in 1446 and the entry into Canaan in 1406, in keeping with the LORD'S instructions to Moses in Lev 25:2-10 that the people were to start counting Sabbatical years and Jubilee years when they entered the land of promise. Negatively, the agreement of a Jubilee in 574 with the start of counting in 1406 is evidence against chronologies that give any other date for the Exodus, such as those that place it in the thirteenth century B.C. This much information can be deduced simply by the proper interpretation of Ezek 40:1 and the passage that instituted the Jubilees in Lev 25. But when we combine this with the *Seder 'Olam's* (and the Talmud's) statement that Ezekiel's Jubilee was the seventeenth Jubilee, then the fact that this gives 1406

<sup>15</sup>That the cycle length was forty-nine years, not fifty years as assumed by most modern commentators, can be shown by several considerations: (1) The oldest references to Jubilee cycles outside the Bible are the *Book of Jubilees* (second century B.C.) and the fragments from Qumran known as *11QMelchizedek* (early first century A.D.). Both of these assume a forty-nine-year cycle. (2) All ancient writings that deal with the Jubilees, including the *Seder 'Olam* and the Talmud, always assumed that the Sabbatical and Jubilee cycles would be in phase. This would not be the case for a fifty-year Jubilee cycle unless an extra year were inserted in the Sabbatical cycles at every Jubilee, and there is no support in the Scriptures or any other ancient writing for such an extra year. (3) There is no indication in the Scriptures (certainly not in Lev 25:21-22 or Isa 37:30) that the people were commanded to observe two voluntary fallow years in succession, which would be the case if the Jubilee was a separate year following the seventh Sabbatical year (see Rodger Young, "The Talmud's Two Jubilees and Their Relevance to the Date of the Exodus," *WTJ* 68 [2006]: 76, n. 14). (4) By stating that the Sabbatical year and the Jubilee year both began in the seventh month of a Nisan-based year, the Talmud (*b. Rosh Hashanah* 1a) supports the idea that the seventh Sabbatical year and the Jubilee began at the same time, in year forty-nine-and-one-half of the cycle. This is called the "fiftieth year" in Lev 25:10-11. (5) The Samaritan community always observed a forty-nine-year cycle, a remembrance which they have to this day, even though they do not currently observe the Jubilee.

<sup>16</sup>See Young for the correct way to calculate this date, given that the division of the kingdoms occurred sometime between Nisan 1 of 931 B.C. and the day before Nisan 1 of 930 B.C. ("Solomon," 601-602), as Thiele determined. Thiele's date for the beginning of the divided monarchies has been widely accepted among scholars and has needed no modification since it was published in the first edition of *Mysterious Numbers* in 1951.

as not just the start of a cycle, but the start of the very first cycle, in agreement with the date of 1406 for Israel's entry into the land as measured by an independent method, then it logically follows that the counting really did begin in 1406, and the Levitical priests were faithfully measuring the Sabbatical and Jubilee years over all the time that Israel was in its land.

The Talmud mentions another Jubilee in Josiah's eighteenth year (*b. Meg.* 14b). The dates of the last two Jubilees, and their agreement with the date for the entrance into Canaan derived from 1 Kgs 6:1, could not have been contrived by the authors of the *Seder 'Olam* and the Talmud because their known calculation methods are incapable of producing this agreement.<sup>17</sup> The reason that the seventeenth Jubilee in the time of Ezekiel is exactly consistent with the date of 1406 B.C. for the entry into Canaan as derived from Thiele's date for the beginning of the divided monarchy is because the following items are all authentic: Thiele's date for the beginning of the divided monarchy, the statements of the *Seder 'Olam* and the Talmud that Ezekiel's vision was at the beginning of the seventeenth Jubilee, and the statement of 1 Kgs 6:1 that Temple construction began in the 480th year of the Exodus era. But the connecting thread that allows us now, in the twenty-first century, to see that all figures are in harmony was the steadfastness of Israel's priests in faithfully marking the Sabbatical and Jubilee cycles over the centuries of Israel's time in its land. Beyond this, we get a glimpse of one aspect of the divine wisdom that went into the formulation of the laws that established the Jubilee and Sabbatical cycles—namely the aspect of their chronological function. The interlocking nature of the Sabbatical and Jubilee years, with seven Sabbatical cycles making one Jubilee cycle, was an excellent method of keeping track of the years over a long period of time. Many chronological difficulties of the OT would have been resolved long ago if Israel had faithfully observed the stipulations of the Sabbatical and Jubilee years when the priests proclaimed their set times, so that we would have more references to the observance of these institutions than the few allusions presently found in the OT.<sup>18</sup>

### *The Egyptian Connection*

Whenever a date is derived for the Exodus from the biblical data, then it is always of interest to correlate that date with events in the history of Egypt.

<sup>17</sup>For the demonstration that these calculation methods could not have been used to back-calculate the date of the Exodus, thereby allowing a correct placing of Josiah's and Ezekiel's Jubilees under the presumption that the timing of the Jubilees had been lost or that the whole concept was invented in exilic or postexilic times, see Young, "Talmud's Two Jubilees," 77.

<sup>18</sup>For scriptural allusions to the observance of Sabbatical years before the exile, see my "Seder Olam and the Sabbaticals Associated with the Two Destructions of Jerusalem," Part 2, forthcoming in *JBQ* 34/4 (October-December 2006). This article demonstrates that the dates associated with all these references are compatible with the preexilic calendar of Sabbatical cycles.

There is quite a diversity of opinion over how such a correlation should be made. Those holding these diverse opinions may be grouped into three main camps: those who hold to a thirteenth-century Exodus during the reign of one of the pharaohs of the Nineteenth Dynasty,<sup>19</sup> those who hold to a fifteenth-century Exodus during the reign of one of the pharaohs of the Eighteenth Dynasty,<sup>20</sup> or those who hold to a fifteenth-century Exodus, but who maintain that Egyptian chronology needs emendation so that a dynasty prior to the Eighteenth was in power in the fifteenth century B.C.<sup>21</sup> There is quite a large amount of discussion and literature advocating positions in each of these three camps, and at present no one theory of Egyptian-Hebrew correlation has reconciled all the archaeological findings. It would be far beyond the scope of the present article to deal with all the issues involved in reconciling the history of Egypt with the biblical account of the Exodus. It may be stated, however, that the proper understanding of the chronological notes of Ezek 40:1 gives yet another argument to add to the many difficulties of theories that place the Exodus anywhere but in the middle of the fifteenth century B.C.

*A Necessary Consequence, Given That  
Counting Started in 1406*

The preceding sections showed that many phenomena have an immediate explanation if we assume that counting for the Sabbatical and Jubilee cycles began in 1406 B.C. and that the priests kept track of these cycles over the years down to the time of the final Jubilee in the twenty-fifth year of Ezekiel's captivity. These assumptions explain why rabbinic tradition, as found in the *Seder 'Olam* and the Talmud, remembers that Ezekiel's vision was at the beginning of the seventeenth Jubilee and why the numbers all come out exactly correct when compared to a chronology based on 1 Kgs 6:1 and the regnal years of Solomon. They explain why the other Jubilee mentioned in the *Seder*

<sup>19</sup>The chief modern proponent of this view is Kenneth Kitchen. See, for example, his *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 307-310. For a recent critique of the thirteenth-century Exodus theory, see Bryant G. Wood, "The Rise and Fall of the 13th-Century Exodus-Conquest Theory," *JETS* 48 (2005): 475-489.

<sup>20</sup>Recent attempts to reconcile the history and inscriptions of Egypt's Eighteenth Dynasty with the biblical account of the Exodus are William Shea, "Amenhotep II as Pharaoh of the Exodus," *Bible and Spade* 16 (2003): 41-51; Wood; Douglas Petrovich, "Amenhotep II and the Historicity of the Exodus Pharaoh," *TMSJ* 17/1 (2006): 81-110.

<sup>21</sup>Two of the more interesting alternatives in this regard are David Rohl, *Pharaohs and Kings* (New York: Crown, 1995); and Ted Stewart, *Solving the Exodus Mystery* (Lubbock, TX: Biblemart.com, 2003).

Perhaps one other view should be mentioned, namely that the Exodus never happened, or that it was a very minor event that was immensely exaggerated in the biblical history and in other ancient accounts. This view has never been able to explain all the phenomena that have a natural explanation if we assume that the Exodus was a real event (see Kitchen, 241-245).

*‘Olam* (chap. 24) and the Talmud (*b. Megillah* 14b) in Josiah’s eighteenth year was exactly forty-nine years prior to Ezekiel’s Jubilee, as determined by modern chronological findings. They explain the widespread tradition that Jerusalem fell to Nebuchadnezzar in the latter part of a Sabbatical year.<sup>22</sup> They also explain why the language of Ezek 40:1 takes the unusual step of placing Rosh Hashanah on the Day of Atonement. The simple hypothesis just given accounts for all these phenomena. Unless another hypothesis can be advanced that can also explain these things in such a simple fashion, then it would seem that the reasonableness of this proposition could be accepted by all calm and rational minds, and we can go on from there to draw whatever secondary conclusions reasonably follow from it.

Realistically, however, it should be expected that many historians will not accept the hypothesis because of the consequences it entails, even though they can offer no alternative hypothesis to explain the phenomena just listed. Their reason for not accepting the hypothesis will not be because they have a better one, but because they realize that accepting it would challenge the last of the seven wrong ideas to be addressed in this paper. This last wrong idea may now be presented: it is the Goliath of them all, the idea that the Pentateuch was written at any time later than the time of Moses.

But how can a little pebble from the brook of Ezek 40:1 slay such a giant as this? In the first place, we should be under no illusion that the giant will be slain, because it has survived many other onslaughts that should have been fatal.<sup>23</sup> Our goal must be something more modest, namely, to show that the idea that Israel began counting for the Sabbatical and Jubilee cycles in 1406 is not compatible with the idea that the Pentateuch was not in existence in 1406.

The incompatibility of these two ideas can be demonstrated quite simply. It is based on a finding of archaeology, in contrast to most of the theories of the higher-critical school, which are based on theories brought from outside the Bible and archaeological findings and which are then imposed on the scriptural

<sup>22</sup>*Seder ‘Olam* chap. 30; *t. Ta’anit* 3:9; *y. Ta’anit* 4:5; *b. ‘Arakin* 11b; *b. ‘Arakin* 12a; *b. Ta’anit* 29a. See my analysis of this tradition in “Seder Olam and the Sabbaticals,” Part 2.

<sup>23</sup>A central tenet of the Documentary Hypothesis, which has been the most widely known of challenges to the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, was that the use of different divine names implies different sources. This was disproved at Ugarit, but it is still taught as axiomatic in various universities and seminaries. The Documentary Hypothesis and later critical approaches, such as the traditiohistorical school and the socioeconomic approaches, assumed that the Pentateuchal legislation was from the seventh century B.C. or later, but it was found that the treaty forms used in this legislation are similar to those of the middle of the second millennium B.C. and dissimilar to those of the middle of the first millennium B.C. (Kitchen, 283-300). The developmental approach in these various theories dictated that monotheism was a very late development in history, whereas a monotheistic poem praising the one Creator of all things was found at Ebla and dated to 2500 B.C. by its translator (Giovanni Pettinato, *The Archives of Ebla: An Empire Inscribed in Clay* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981], 259).

writings.<sup>24</sup> The archaeological finding is that cultic practices, such as the observance of special days and years, were always codified in writing in Near Eastern societies. In the words of R. K. Harrison:

The scribal practices of the ancient Near East point to a custom of preserving at an early stage those sources of information or procedure that were of importance to the particular profession. As regards cultic functionaries, the liturgies and rituals that they utilized were committed to writing and treasured in one form or another for many succeeding centuries. They were not transmitted down the ages in an oral form before emerging in their written state, as the modern oral-traditionists imagine. . . . This contention is supported, as observed above, by the religious rituals and incantations from the third-millennium B.C. texts in the pyramids of Unis, Teti, and Pepi I (Fifth to Sixth Dynasties) at Saqqarah as well as by the third-millennium B.C. Sumerian religious texts, divine hymns, and mythological compositions from Ur, Nippur, and elsewhere.<sup>25</sup>

If the Sabbatical and Jubilee laws were being observed in the fourteenth century B.C., then they necessarily would have existed in written form at that time. Do we have any candidates for the text (or *der Urtext*) of these laws? There is only one candidate, and it is found in Lev 25 and 27, and Exod 23:10-11. These passages must have been written either in 1406 B.C. or shortly before then.

At this point, the theories of the higher criticism (for those who accept them) can be used to draw a further conclusion. Despite all the blows that these theories have suffered from archaeological findings and sound biblical scholarship, almost all their advocates tenaciously hang on to the tenet that the document they call the "Priestly" or "P" document was the last part of the Pentateuch to be written, as shown by the following quotes:

- *New Interpreter's Bible*. "Today, most biblical scholars think that Leviticus (and parts of Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers) originated during post-exilic times in conjunction with the Priestly source, often designated as "P." . . . [T]he similarities between P and Chronicles, especially emphasis on ritual matters, suggest that most of the materials in Leviticus derive from the same period as Chronicles—namely the post-exilic era."<sup>26</sup>
- *The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible*. "[T]he jubilee year is found in the Old Testament only in Leviticus and in Num. 36:4, a piece of late priestly material. It is possible, therefore, that the regulations for it were only framed after the exile."<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup>Kitchen, 494, writes of Wellhausen's deductive method: "Not only did Wellhausen (like his peers) work in a cultural vacuum—that is how he *wanted* it to be, undisturbed by inconvenient facts from the (ancient) outside world. He resented being pointed toward high-antiquity data from Egypt and Mesopotamia. . . . How he hated Egyptologists! . . . In due course he also lashes out at the Assyriologists. . . . Clearly, he resented any outside impact that might threaten his beloved theses on the supposed development of Israelite religion and history. And that attitude, one can detect in his equally resistant disciples today."

<sup>25</sup>R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 592.

<sup>26</sup>*New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 1: 995-996.

<sup>27</sup>J. R. Porter, *Leviticus*, CBC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 197.

- *Harper's Bible Dictionary*. "The Book of Leviticus is assigned by modern critics to the so-called Priestly Code (designated by "P"), compiled by the priests of Jerusalem in the period 500–450 B.C., but incorporating considerably earlier legislation, like the Holiness Code (11:43–45, 17–26) which seems to date from 650 B.C. in its original form (which was known to Ezekiel)."<sup>28</sup>
- R. H. Pfeiffer. "Only gradually was the relative lateness of the "First Elohist" or "Fundamental Writing" (*Grundschrift*, now called Priestly Code or P) recognized. . . . The narrative portions of P were shown by J. W. Colenso, Bishop of Natal (1862–1879), to be unhistorical and late . . . [.] while A. Kuenen (d. 1891) finally proved conclusively that the *Grundschrift* as a whole, both in its legal and in its narrative parts, was postexilic in date."<sup>29</sup>
- Otto Kaiser. "Accordingly the *terminus a quo* [earliest possible date] for the origin of P is placed by most scholars at the end of the seventh century, but by a minority only at the end of the sixth century."<sup>30</sup>
- Jeffrey Fager. "For the purpose of this study, I will focus on the priestly group which formulated the jubilee legislation in the late exilic period. . . . The jubilee land laws were used by P to perform this threefold function in the social milieu of the exile for the sake of the community and in order to promote some of their own interests."<sup>31</sup>

The whole scheme that sees the development of Israel's religion as based on an evolutionary process depends on placing the P document late because the priestly phase, according to these theories, was the last stage in the development of Israel's religion. The Scripture passages regarding the Sabbatical and Jubilee years are often assigned by liberal scholarship to the P tradition, or to the "H" (for Holiness Code) tradition within P. But if these passages, as part of P, were in existence in written form in 1406 B.C., then the earlier writings J, E, and D of the JEDP theory also existed in written form in 1406 B.C. If we accept the premises of the classical Documentary Hypothesis regarding the priority of writing, then it follows that the whole Pentateuch was codified, written, and known when Israel entered Canaan.

This line of reasoning shows the weakness of the Documentary Hypothesis. If the critical premise is true, that these passages about the Sabbatical and Jubilee years were part of the latest portions of the Pentateuch to be written, then it follows that the rest of the Pentateuch had an even earlier date.<sup>32</sup> Thus it is hoped that the goal of the present article has been achieved,

<sup>28</sup>Madeline S. Miller and J. Lane Miller, *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, 7th ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 391, s.v. "Leviticus."

<sup>29</sup>Robert H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1948), 139.

<sup>30</sup>Otto Kaiser, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, trans. John Sturdy (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975), 105.

<sup>31</sup>Jeffrey Fager, *Land Tenure and the Biblical Jubilee: Discovering a Moral World-View through the Sociology of Knowledge* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 15 n. 4, 52.

<sup>32</sup>The traditional view of the Scriptures, of course, maintains that the Pentateuch's frequent phrase "The LORD said to Moses" is an accurate statement about its authorship. Conservative scholarship does not claim that every word in the Pentateuch



---

namely to show that a careful exegesis of Ezek 40:1, in conjunction with a few external facts and simple arithmetic, provides positive evidence against theories of post-Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch.

---

had to be in existence in 1406 B.C. The last chapter of Deuteronomy, e.g., was obviously written after the death of Moses. But any position that denies Mosaic authorship to the preceding chapters of Deuteronomy and to the preceding four books of the Pentateuch conflicts directly with the teaching of Christ in the NT.

**APPENDIX**  
**DECISION TABLES SHOWING ALL POSSIBILITIES**  
**FOR INTERPRETATION OF THE TWO**  
**YEAR-FORMULAS OF EZEKIEL 40:1**

<b>Table 1a.</b>				
<b>Options for Ezekiel 40:1 Assuming Tishri Years</b>				
<b>Possible interpretation of dates in Ezek 40:1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
Does Ezekiel use Tishri or Nisan years?	T	T	T	T
Captivity started before or after Nisan 1, 597?	before	before	after	after
City fell in (B.C.)	587	586	587	586
<b>A. 25th year of captivity (implies non-acc. reckoning)</b>	598t-24 = 574t	598t-24 = 574t	598t-24 = 574t	598t-24 = 574t
<b>B. 14 years after city fell (implies acc. reckoning)</b>	588t-14 = 574t	587t-14 = 573t	588t-14 = 574t	587t-14 = 573t
<b>C. Overlap of A and B</b>	574t	none	574t	none

<b>Table 1b.</b>				
<b>Options for Ezekiel 40:1 Assuming Nisan Years</b>				
<b>Possible interpretation of dates in Ezek 40:1</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>
Does Ezekiel use Tishri or Nisan years?	N	N	N	N
Captivity started before or after Nisan 1, 597?	before	before	after	after
City fell in (B.C.)	587	586	587	586
<b>A. 25th year of captivity (implies non-acc. reckoning)</b>	598n-24 = 574n	598n-24 = 574n	597n-24 = 573n	597n-24 = 573n
<b>B. 14 years after city fell (implies acc. reckoning)</b>	587n-14 = 573n	586n-14 = 572n	587n-14 = 573n	586n-14 = 572n
<b>C. Overlap of A and B</b>	none	none	573n	none

Years in these tables are expressed in terms of the Nisan/Tishri notation, in which a year starting in Nisan of 598 B.C. and ending the day before Nisan

1 of 597 B.C. is written as 598n. The year starting in Tishri of 598 B.C. and ending the day before Tishri 1 of 597 B.C. is written as 598t; notice that this represents a twelve-month period that is six months later than 598n. To use the tables, start at the top of one of the columns (also called rules) numbered 1 through 8. Read down through the three assumptions in the left part of the table; the values for those assumptions will be in the top part of the column, and their consequences will be in the lower part, below the heavy line. For the present table, row C must show an overlap if the assumptions in the column are to be tentatively accepted.

No scenario (set of hypotheses) works that assumes that the city fell in 586 B.C. Scenarios that work assuming the city fell in 587 B.C. are Rules (columns) 1 and 3 (Tishri years, captivity began before or after Nisan 1, 597) and Rule 7 (Nisan years, the captivity beginning after Nisan 1, 597). Rule 7 can be eliminated when its hypotheses are tested against the statement in Ezek 33:21 that news of the fall of Jerusalem reached Ezekiel in the tenth month of the twelfth year of his exile, which would be in Tebeth (January) of 585 B.C., eighteen months after the city fell in 587 under the conditions of Rule 7. This is an unreasonably long time for the news to reach Babylon, compared to the six months under the conditions of Rules 1 and 3, and so Rule 7, the last possibility that Ezekiel was using Nisan years, must also be eliminated. Rules 1 and 3 differ on whether Jehoiachin was taken captive in Adar or in Nisan, but for calculation purposes this question is immaterial, since the year started in Tishri.