SEDER OLAM AND THE SABBATICALS ASSOCIATED WITH THE TWO DESTRUCTIONS OF JERUSALEM
PART I

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Much has been written about the religious meaning of Israel's system of Sabbatical years and their associated Jubilees, as well as about the social and economic significance of these institutions. Comparatively little has been written about their chronological significance; that is, their usefulness in providing checks on any historical reconstruction that is derived by other methods such as the reign lengths of kings or synchronisms to the histories of surrounding nations. In order to provide this chronological function, it is necessary to recognize allusions to the occurrence of a Sabbatical year in the Scriptures or other writings. These Scriptures are the following:

> *And six years thou shalt sow thy land, and gather in the increase thereof; but the seventh year thou shalt let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of thy people may eat; and what they leave the beast of the field shall eat. In like manner thou shalt deal with thy vineyard, and with thy oliveyard* (Ex. 23:10,11). Leviticus 25:1–8 is similar.

> *At the end of every seven years thou shalt make a release. And this is the manner of the release: every creditor shall release that which he hath lent unto his neighbor; he shall not exact it of his neighbor and his brother; because the LORD's release hath been proclaimed. Of a foreigner thou mayest exact it; but whatsoever of thine is with thy brother thy hand shall release* (Deut. 15:1–3).

> *And Moses commanded them, saying, 'At the end of every seven years, in the set time of the year of release* [shemitah]*, in the Feast*

> *of Tabernacles, when all Israel is come to appear before the Lord thy God in the place which He shall choose, thou shalt read this law before all Israel in their hearing'* (Deut. 31:10, 11).

The observance of a seven-day week has spread to all areas of the world. The observance of the seven-year Sabbatical cycle, however, has always been restricted to the land of Israel, since the commands relative to this institution have been interpreted to refer only to a situation where the people of Israel are in their land. In the 19th Century, Jewish colonists began counting again the Sabbatical cycles. Israel's next Sabbatical year is due to begin in the fall of 2007.

Sabbatical years are of interest to the historian because they can offer a check on any system of chronology that is based on the customary deductions from Scriptural reign lengths and cross-synchronisms between Judah and Israel or between either of the Hebrew kingdoms and other kingdoms. If even a single Sabbatical year can be fixed in the time of the First Temple, then any chronology that agrees with the consequent calendar of pre-exilic Sabbatical years should be preferred over any other chronology that does not agree with such a calendar, other factors being equal.

The usefulness of the Sabbatical years for chronological purposes arises from their regularity. The seven years allotted to each cycle represented a short enough time so that, as long as the people were in the land, there was no danger of losing track of when a Sabbatical year was due. Consequently, if we have two references to Sabbatical years, these years must be an exact multiple of seven years apart. This principle has been used by various scholars in checking the chronology of the Second Temple period, where it is applied to references to the observance of Sabbatical years in Josephus and in I and II Maccabees. In the course of this paper it will be shown that this principle, in conjunction with certain remarks about Sabbatical years in the *Seder Olam*, is also useful in corroborating the 587 date for the burning of the First Temple versus the 586 date, and for establishing Wacholder's calendar of Sabbatical years in the time of the Second Temple.[1] Although the Scriptural passages that refer to the destruction of the First Temple (II Kgs. 25; II Chron. 36; Jer. 39, 52) make no direct reference to a Sabbatical year, there are some comments in the *Seder Olam* that associate Sabbatical years with the destructions of both Temples.

Seder Olam, written in the latter half of the second century CE, is attributed by the Talmud (*Niddah* 46b, *Yebamot* 82b) to Rabbi Yose ben Halaphta, a disciple of the famous Rabbi Akiba. A modern translator of the text, Heinrich Guggenheimer, says of this work:

> The authoritative Rabbinical interpretation of the historical passages of the Bible is given in *Midrash Seder 'Olam. Seder 'Olam* is a composition of Tannaitic material, a companion to the Mishneh. It is the basis of the historical world view of the Babylonian Talmud and of our counting of years "from the Creation."[2]

The *Seder Olam* (hereinafter SO) is quoted or referred to several times in the Babylonian Talmud and once in the Jerusalem Talmud. Most quotations of the *SO* in the Babylonian Talmud do not begin with "Rabbi Yose said"; the omission of the name of the authority is usually regarded as a sign that the following quotation was accepted as authoritative by the scholars of the Talmud, with no need for the presentation of alternative views.

Since Rabbi Yose and his disciples who may have contributed to the *SO* were in the mainstream of early rabbinic scholarship, and since they lived close enough to the time of the destruction of the Second Temple, the comments of the *SO* on this event have been given considerable weight by modern scholars. The reference in *SO* Chapter 30 to a Sabbatical year associated with the fall of Jerusalem has therefore figured largely in discussions regarding the chronology of the Sabbatical years during the time of the Second Temple. The other sources that must be studied in determining the dates of post-exilic Sabbatical [*shemitah*] years are I and II Maccabees, some passages in Josephus, and various legal documents found in the caves of Wadi Murabba'at in the Judean desert.[3] The first definitive study of these sources (except those of Wadi Murabba'at) was that of Benedict Zuckermann, who argued from the known movements of Alexander and the passage in Josephus referring to Alexander that a Sabbatical year was observed beginning in Tishri of 332 BCE. Zuckermann's consequent calendar of Sabbatical years, published in 1857,[4] was accepted by the Jewish settlers in Israel in the late 19th Century. Thus a Sabbatical year was observed beginning in Tishri of 2000 CE in Israel; from 332 BCE to 2000 CE is 2331 years, or 333 Sabbatical cycles, remembering that there was no year zero at the BCE/CE divide.

Not all scholars, however, accepted Zuckermann's dates. The most significant challenge has been from Ben Zion Wacholder, who placed the *shemitah* associated with Alexander one year later than did Zuckermann.[5] For the time associated with the fall of the Second Temple, Zuckermann's calendar began a Sabbatical year in the fall (Tishri) of 68 CE, whereas Wacholder's calendar began it in the fall of 69. Since the destruction of the city and the Temple occurred in the summer of 70 CE, this would have been within the Sabbatical year by Wacholder's calendar of *shemitot*, but in a post-Sabbatical year by Zuckermann's calendar. Which of these two options does the SO support?

To answer this question, it is necessary to examine the relevant passage in SO 30 with some care. It will first be given in Guggenheimer's translation:

> R. Yose says: A day of rewards attracts rewards and a day of guilt attracts guilt. You find it said that the destruction of the First Temple was at the end of Sabbath, at the end of a Sabbatical year, when the priests of the family of Yehoiariv was [sic] officiating, on the Ninth of Ab, and the same happened the second time.

Wacholder used the following translation of this same SO passage:

> Rabbi Jose says: 'Favorable judgment forbode favorable days and guilty judgments guilty days. You find it said: When the Temple was destroyed for the first time, that happened on a day after the Sabbath (Sunday), during a post-Sabbatical year, and during the Watch of Jehoiarib, and on the ninth of Ab; and so also when the Second (Temple was destroyed).'[6]

The first translation says that the destructions were within a Sabbatical year and on a Sabbath day, whereas the second translation says they were in a year after a Sabbatical year and on the day after the Sabbath. Since both translations started from the same text (in rabbinic Hebrew), it is necessary to examine that text to see which translation is correct. The relevant passage is *oto ha-yom motsae shabat hayah, ve-motsae sheviit haytah.*

The important difference between these two translations centers on the word *motsae*. The destructions were in the *motsae* of a Sabbatical year and in the *motsae* of a Sabbath day. Should *motsae* be translated as "at the end of" (Guggenheimer), or in some sense as "the day/year after" (Wacholder)?

Motsa (plural construct *motsae*) is the participial form of the common verb *yatsa*, which has the basic meaning "to go out, to go forth." A literal rendering of *motsa* is therefore "the going-out" or "the going-forth." This understanding definitely favors Guggenheimer's translation, since it is easy to see how the "goings-out" of a year or a day could express the latter part of the time-period, but a time still within the period. The only way that the meaning "after" would be justified would be if there were some idiomatic usage that could be found which suggested this meaning. Are there any such idiomatic usages?

We first look in the Scripture, where the word *motsa* occurs twenty-seven times. In Psalm 19:7 (19:6, English Bible) it refers to the "going forth" of the sun. In Psalm 107:33,35 and II Kings 2:21 it is translated as "watersprings" or "spring of the waters." All of the usages in Scripture can immediately be associated with the idea of going forth or going out. None can be associated with any idea of "after" or "the thing after."

As to rabbinic writing, we can confine the search to the meaning of *motsa* to the places where the passage in question is quoted and also to references in the *SO* itself.

The *SO* passage is quoted in *Tosefta Taanit* 3:9, where the translation into English is as follows: "When the Temple was destroyed the first time, it was the day **after** the Sabbath and the year **after** the Sabbatical year."[7] This provides no new information to help settle the meaning of the original Hebrew, because we are relying on a modern interpretation. The Jerusalem Talmud (*Taanit* 4:5) uses exactly the same translation,[8] which is not surprising because it is by the same translator. The Babylonian Talmud quotes the passage from *SO* 30 three times, in *Arakin* 11b, *Arakin* 12a, and in *Taanit* 29a. In *Arakin* 11b it is translated as follows: "The day on which the first Temple was destroyed was the ninth of Ab, and it was **at the going out** of the Sabbath, and **at the end of** the seventh [Sabbatical] year."[9] Similarly, *Arakin* 12a quotes Rabbi Yose as saying "at the first time it was **at the end** of the seventh year."

All that has been shown by this is that the *SO* passage has been interpreted in different ways by modern translators, and we still have not produced any instance showing that *motsa* has any idiomatic meaning that would allow it to be interpreted as "sometime after," which is necessary to justify those translations that place the two destructions in post-Sabbatical years. There are, however,

some passages in the rabbinic writings that allow us the settle this question definitively. The first of these is in *Abodah Zara* 9b. In this passage, Rabbi Huna ben Joshua gives a formula that allows calculating the year of a Sabbatical cycle for any year subsequent to the destruction of the Second Temple. His formula is to count the number of years since the destruction, add one, and then (in essence) to divide this number by seven. The remainder after dividing gives the year of the Sabbatical cycle. The important information that this conveys is that year one after the destruction of the Temple was considered year one of a Sabbatical cycle, so that the Temple was destroyed in a Sabbatical year. This shows how one of the contributors to the Talmud understood the *SO* 30 passage regarding the Sabbatical years associated with the two destructions of Jerusalem.

It is a matter of some interest that Wacholder[10] cited the formula as given by Rabbi Huna to support a Sabbatical year in 69/70, thus verifying his calendar vs. that of Zuckermann, which put the Sabbatical year one year earlier.

At least one passage in the *SO* itself shows that *SO* 30 must be translated so as to place the fall of the First and Second Temples in Sabbatical years. In *SO* 25, Jehoiachin's exile is said to begin in the fourth year of a Sabbatical cycle. The city fell ten years later, in his 11th year of captivity, which was also the 11th (non-accession) year of Zedekiah's reign. This was therefore 14 years after the Sabbatical year from which the beginning of Jehoiachin's captivity was measured. Consequently that year, the year of the fall of Jerusalem, was also a Sabbatical year.[11] This is perhaps the most definitive text that can be found that shows that *motsae* did not have any connotation of "after" to the people who wrote the *SO*, and so it cannot be translated that way in *SO* 30. The *SO* 30 passage must be interpreted to say that both destructions of Jerusalem occurred on a Sabbath day and in a Sabbatical year.

NOTES

1. B. Z. Wacholder, "The Calendar of Sabbatical Cycles During the Second Temple and the Early Rabbinic Period," *Essays in Jewish Chronology and Chronography* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1976).

2. H. Guggenheimer, *Seder Olam - The Rabbinic View of Biblical Chronology* (Northvale NJ and Jerusalem, Jason Aronson Inc., 1998) p. ix.

3. Wacholder, op. cit.

4. B. Zuckermann, "Ueber Sabbatjahrcyclus und Jobelperiode," *Jarhesbericht des juedisch-theologischen Seminars "Fraenckelscher Stiftung"* (Breslau, 1857), cited in Wacholder, p. 4.

5. Wacholder, p. 8.
6. Wacholder, p. 20. Wacholder cites *Seder Olam Rabbah*, ed. Ratner, for the translation.
7. *The Tosefta, Translated from the Hebrew With a New Introduction*, J. Neusner translator and editor (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002) Vol. 1 p. 632.
8. *Taanit* 4:5 in *The Talmud of the Land of Israel*, tr. J. Neusner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) Vol. 18 p. 273.
9. *The Babylonian Talmud* (London: Soncino Press, 1938). The word "Sabbatical" and its square brackets are part of the translation.
10. Wacholder, p. 23.
11. A complete treatment of the chronology of the Sabbatical years in SO would also need to examine the Jubilee periods mentioned in five chapters of the SO. Such a treatment is beyond the scope of this article.

End of Part 1. Part 2 is scheduled for the Oct-Dec 2006 issue.