

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

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In the previous issue of this journal, the first of the two articles in this series established that the *Seder Olam* of Rabbi Yose ben Halaphta stated that the two destructions of Jerusalem were both in the latter part (*motzae*) of a Sabbatical year. Those Sabbatical years began, respectively, in Tishri of 588 BCE and Tishri of 69 CE. This understanding is compatible with the proper understanding and translation of all talmudic passages that relate the two destructions to a Sabbatical year.

The destruction of the First Temple was much further removed in time from Rabbi Yose and his school. Therefore, his chronology for this event has, understandably, not been given as much significance as the comment regarding the Sabbatical year at the destruction of the Second Temple. There is even a good reason that would discredit the *Seder Olam* (hereinafter *SO*) chronology for this time: Rabbi Yose's chronology for the Persian and Greek periods is demonstrably too short, giving only 70 Sabbatical periods from the destruction of the First Temple to the destruction of the Second.¹ If the destruction of the Second Temple was correctly remembered as occurring in a Sabbatical year, then an event that occurred 70 heptads earlier could also be concluded to be in a Sabbatical year. If this is the only reason for assigning the destruction of the First Temple to a Sabbatical year, then this reason can be discarded along with Rabbi Yose's erroneous 490-year timespan between the two destructions.

However, there is some evidence that the comment in *SO* 30 that the First Temple was destroyed toward the end of a Sabbatical year is historically correct, even though that conclusion cannot be established by measuring back 70 heptads from the destruction of the Second Temple. The evidence that the statement is

correct and therefore based on historical remembrance arises from a consideration brought out in the 18th Century by William Whiston² and then again in the 20th Century by Cyrus Gordon.³ These scholars associated the release of slaves mentioned in Jeremiah 34 with a Sabbatical year, consistent with the designation of the Sabbatical year as a year of release [*shemittah*] in Deuteronomy 31:10. Nahum Sarna developed this idea further by a study of the dates associated with the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem.⁴ The covenant for the release of slaves and its subsequent revocation must fit into the dates of the siege (Jer. 34:1, 21).

To establish the date for the beginning of the siege, we first note that Ezekiel dated it to the tenth month of the ninth year (Ezek. 24:1). Ezekiel measured time by the years of captivity of Jehoiachin and never mentioned Zedekiah. Jehoiachin was taken captive in Adar of 597 BCE, so that his first year of captivity according to the Tishri years used in Judah began in Tishri of 598, and his ninth year began in Tishri of 590.⁵ The tenth month of this year was Tevet (approximately January) of 589 BCE.⁶ Related to this is Jeremiah's date for the same event: The tenth month of the ninth year of the reign of Zedekiah (Jer. 39:1). Jeremiah's tenth month of the ninth year of Zedekiah's reign is the same as Ezekiel's tenth month, ninth year of Jehoiachin's captivity. Since Ezekiel's "year of captivity" always implies non-accession (inclusive) numbering, these two Scriptures taken together show that Jeremiah reckoned Zedekiah's reign in a non-accession or inclusive numbering sense.⁷

Between Tevet of 589 and the fall of the city in Tammuz of 587, the month of Tishri occurred only twice, in 589 and 588. Which of these two Tishris marked the beginning of a Sabbatical year? Sarna mentions another Scripture that helps us decide on 588: In Jeremiah 28:1, the confrontation between Jeremiah and the false prophet Hananiah occurred in the beginning of the reign [*be-reshit mamlekhet*] of Zedekiah, but this year is also called the "fourth year" of something. Since *be-reshit mamlekhet* is the technical phrase used for the accession year of a king – the year he came to the kingship – it cannot refer to the fourth year of his reign. Sarna deduced that it refers to the fourth year of a Sabbatical period. Zedekiah's accession year began in Tishri of 598, so the Sabbatical year four years earlier would have begun in 602. Two Sabbatical cycles later would give a Sabbatical year beginning in the fall of 588.⁸

Recall that *SO 25* said that Jehoiachin's exile began in the fourth year of a Sabbatical cycle. Since Jehoiachin's exile and Zedekiah's reign began at the same time, the *SO* statement also places Zedekiah's accession in the fourth year of a Sabbatical cycle, agreeing with Sarna's interpretation of the "fourth year" in Jeremiah 28:1.

These dates relative to the fall of Jerusalem and the burning of the First Temple are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Dates associated with the destruction of the First Temple.*

| Date | Event | Scriptural and Seder Olam References |
|---------------------------------|--|---|
| Adar 2 597 BCE | Latter part of fourth year of a Sabbatical cycle; Jehoiachin captured and Zedekiah's reign begins. | II Kgs. 24:12,17; Jer. 28:1; SO 25 |
| Tevet (Jan) 589 | Nebuchadnezzar begins second siege of Jerusalem. | Jer. 39:1, Ezek. 24:1,2 |
| Tishri (Oct) 588 | Sabbatical year begins; Zedekiah releases slaves. | Jer. 34:8 |
| From Tishri 588 to Nisan 587 | Babylonian army withdraws at approach of Egyptians; slaves taken back into servitude. | Jer. 34:16 |
| Before 7 Nisan 587 | Egyptians defeated; Babylonian army returns. | Ezek. 30:20,21 |
| Tammuz 587 | City falls to Babylonians. | Jer. 52:6,7 |
| Ab 587 | Temple and city burnt in latter part of a Sabbatical year | Jer. 52:12,13; II Kgs. 25:8; SO 30 |

The wording of the text of *SO 30* shows that Rabbi Yose was passing on a tradition regarding the destruction of the First Temple. That tradition was that the First Temple was destroyed on a Sabbath and in a Sabbatical year. Rabbi Yose did not derive this statement by doing a calculation, such as measuring back 490 years from the second destruction. Note how Rabbi Yose introduces his note regarding the destructions: "*You find it said* that the destruction of the First

Temple . . ." (emphasis added). These words imply that he was referring to a tradition about the matter. The tradition, furthermore, did not just relate to the Second Temple, of more recent memory, but it is stated so that it referred to both temples, with the First Temple mentioned first.

If Sarna's (and Gordon's) theory that a Sabbatical year started in Tishri of 588 is correct, then the fall of Jerusalem, in the summer of 587, was before that Sabbatical year had expired. This is consistent with the statement in *SO* 30 that the First Temple was destroyed in the "goings-out" of a Sabbatical year. A Sabbatical year beginning in Tishri of 588 would not be consistent with either Zuckermann's or Wacholder's calendars of post-exilic *shemitot*, since the nearest *shemithah* in Zuckermann's scheme would start in 591, and with Wacholder's it would start one year later.

The *SO* has an explanation of why a calendar of post-exilic *shemitot* should not be expected to agree with a calendar of pre-exilic *shemitot*: The people were not able to observe the Sabbatical cycles during the Babylonian exile, and they had to start over again in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah's reform (Neh. 8–10). It is also indicated in *SO* 30 that the new obligations and a new beginning were undertaken when the covenant was renewed:

Just as in the time of Joshua they became obligated for tithes, Sabbatical and Jubilee years and they sanctified walled cities and were happy before the Omnipresent, [similarly at their coming in the time of Ezra] as it is said (*Neh.* 8:17): "The joy was exceedingly great." And so it says (*Deut.* 30:5): "The Eternal, your God, will bring you to the land that your father had inherited and you shall inherit it." He brackets your inheritance with that of your forefathers. Just as the inheritance of your forefathers implies the renewal of all these things so also your inheritance implies the renewal of all these things.⁹

In accordance with *SO* 30, it could be said that the returnees who re-initiated the observance of Sabbatical years in the 19th century of the present era were following the example of the returnees under Ezra and Nehemiah. Both groups had the right to establish a new calendar of *shemitot* even though their calendar may not have been in strict accordance with previous observance of the Sabbatical years.

Additional support of the idea that the year beginning in Tishri of 588 BCE was a Sabbatical year comes from II Kings 22–23, where it is related that after the discovery of a copy of the Torah in the Temple, King Josiah called together the people and their leaders to a convocation in Jerusalem for a public reading of the Law. One of the stipulations that Shaphan the scribe read to the king before the convocation was that the Law should be read to all the people in every Sabbatical year (Deuteronomy 31:10–13). The book of the Law was found in the 18th year of Josiah (II Kings 22:3), which Edwin Thiele established as the year beginning in Tishri of 623 BCE.¹⁰ This is 35 years, or five Sabbatical cycles, before the Sabbatical year that started in Tishri of 588.

Another passage that indicates a pre-exilic Sabbatical year is Isaiah 37:30, with its parallel in II Kings 19:29. The prophet Isaiah gave this message to King Hezekiah: *And this shall be the sign unto thee: ye shall eat this year that which groweth of itself, and in the second year that which springeth of the same; and in the third year sow ye, and reap, and plant vineyards, and eat the fruit thereof.* At first reading, this looks like two Sabbatical years in succession, or possibly a Sabbatical year followed by a Jubilee year. But, both these interpretations are ruled out by a consideration of the Hebrew words used for the food that is allowed in these verses. For the present year, the people were to eat *that which groweth of itself*, which translates the single Hebrew word *safiah*. But in Leviticus 25:5 the eating of *safiah* is expressly forbidden for a Sabbatical year. Therefore, the first year of Isaiah's prophecy cannot be a Sabbatical year.

The reason that the people had to eat the *safiah* of the land that year was that the Assyrians had destroyed the harvest or consumed it for themselves, and the destruction of the Assyrian host came after the normal time for planting in late November or early December. Since the Assyrians hastily left after the slaying of the 185,000, the only reason for disallowing sowing and reaping in the following year was that it was going to be a Sabbatical year. Isaiah said that in this second year of the prophecy the people could eat *that which springeth of the same*, which translates the Hebrew word “*shahis*,” found only here and in the parallel passage in II Kings. The *shahis*, then, must correspond to the *sabbath-produce of the land* [*shabat ha-aretz*] that according to Leviticus 25:6 could be eaten in a Sabbatical year. With this interpretation, the prophecy of Isaiah shows

that Sennacherib's invasion ended in the late fall or early winter of one year, and a Sabbatical year was to begin in the autumn of the next year.

This necessarily brings up the controversy over whether there were one or two invasions of Sennacherib, a matter that has been debated ever since the middle of the 19th century, when George Rawlinson proposed that the Scriptures imply two invasions. The start of one invasion can be definitely dated from Assyrian records to the spring of 701 BCE. If this was the only invasion, then the interpretation of Isaiah 37:30 just given means that the siege of Jerusalem lasted until late fall or early winter of that year. The following year, the "second year" of Isaiah's prophecy, would then have to be a Sabbatical year. This year began in Tishri of 700 BCE, which is 16 Sabbatical cycles before the established Sabbatical year of 588/87, so this interpretation is in harmony with the suggested table of pre-exilic Sabbatical years.

Most advocates of the two-invasion theory assume that in the year 701, Hezekiah bought time with the tribute mentioned in II Kings 18:15, after which he prepared for a second invasion which came some years later. These extensive preparations are described in II Chronicles 32:2–8. The date for this second invasion is most reasonably assigned to 688 or 687 BCE.¹¹ The calendar of Sabbatical years shows that a Sabbatical year began in Tishri of 686. In order to be consistent with Isaiah's prophecy, this would require that the Assyrian siege ended in late 687, with the invasion beginning in the spring of that year. The result of all these considerations is that the proposed calendar of Sabbatical years allows a reasonable interpretation to be given to Isaiah's prophecy, an interpretation which is consistent with either the one-invasion theory or the two-invasion theory, with certain consequences about the timing of events whichever theory is adopted.

In summary, the remarks in the *Seder Olam* that both Temples were destroyed in the latter part of a Sabbatical year can be used to support Wacholder's calendar of post-exilic *shemitot*. They also support the idea that Sabbatical years were known before the exile, although the counting of them was disrupted by the exile. The First Temple was destroyed in the latter part of the year that began in the fall of 588 BCE. That year was a Sabbatical year, and from this fixed point a calendar of pre-exilic Sabbatical years can be constructed that is in harmony

with other probable references to Sabbatical years that have been cited from the Scriptures.

NOTES

1. This was done in an attempt by Rabbi Yose to adapt the 70 heptads of years in Daniel 9:24 to this period, although the 70 heptads are said to start with a commandment to restore and rebuild Jerusalem, not with the destruction of the city.
2. "Dissertation V, Upon the Chronology of Josephus," *Josephus: Complete Works*, tr. Wm. Whiston (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1964) p. 703.
3. Cyrus Gordon, "Sabbatical Cycle or Seasonal Pattern?" *Orientalia* 22 (1953) p. 81. On the same page, Gordon wrote the following in refutation of the idea that the laws of the Sabbatical and Jubilee years were exilic or post-exilic in origin, as maintained by the Documentary Hypothesis: "The view that the Sabbatical and Jubilee Cycles are late and artificial legislation can no longer be maintained. Jeremiah (34: 12–16) attests the attempted revival of Sabbatical obligations that had fallen into disuse. It is interesting to note that the snags this attempted pre-Exilic revival encountered did not include the determining of when the Sabbatical Year fell. This means the Sabbatical Cycle had all along been in use as a means of reckoning time, even though its obligations had been neglected because they called for material sacrifices on the part of the people."
4. Nahum Sarna, "Zedekiah's Emancipation of Slaves and the Sabbatical Year," *Orient and Occident: Essays presented to Cyrus H. Gordon on the Occasion of his Sixty-fifth Birthday*, ed. Harry Hoffner, Jr. (Neukirchen: Verlag Butzon & Bercker Kevelaer, 1973) pp. 144–45.
5. When years are measured from some notable event such as the beginning of a reign or the beginning of captivity, the beginning year is reckoned as if it started on the New Year's day before the event. For the demonstration that the Judean regnal year began in Tishri, see Edwin Richard Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan/Kregel, 1981) pp. 51–53, and D.J.A. Clines, "The Evidence for an Autumnal New Year in Pre-Exilic Israel Reconsidered" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93/1 (1974) pp. 22–26.
6. Months were always numbered from Nisan, even though the civil year in Judah began in Tishri. The use of a number instead of the month name in Scripture may have come about because Babylonian month names were adopted after the time of Solomon, and at least one such name, Tammuz, referred to a heathen deity.
7. "Non-accession" reckoning means that the year in which a king died and his son succeeded him on the throne was counted as "year one" of the son's reign, even though it generally was not a full year. Under accession reckoning, "year one" of the son's reign did not start until the first New Year's Day that the son was on the throne. The SO and the Talmud assumed non-accession reckoning for Judean kings, but it has been adequately demonstrated that this was not always the case throughout the monarchic period (Thiele, pp. 56–60, 77–78), so that it is necessary to consider carefully each time-period to see if accession or non-accession reckoning was assigned to the king's reign. The decision of which method to use may have depended on the whim of the king, and any approach that assumes *a priori* that one or the other method was always used is bound to end up conflicting with the biblical data. This is a point of considerable importance, because the assumption that the reign of Zedekiah was measured by accession reckoning is probably the main reason that many have placed the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE instead of the correct 587 BCE. For

a recent study that examines all texts in the four books of Scripture that give chronological data for this event and shows that they all point to 587 and not to 586, see Rodger Young, "When Did Jerusalem Fall?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47/1 (Spring 2004) pp. 21–38.

8. Sarna's primary argument to arrive at this result is somewhat different. He derived the *terminus ad quem* (latest possible date) for the release of the slaves by saying that Ezekiel 30:20 – 21, which speaks of the arm of pharaoh being broken, must have signaled the end of the Egyptian invasion that caused the Babylonian army to withdraw temporarily from Jerusalem. The Ezekiel prophecy was dated to the first month of the 11th year of captivity, i.e. Nisan of 587. Sarna said that the rescission of the emancipation covenant must have occurred in the preceding fall, Tishri of 588.

9. Translation is from Heinrich Guggenheimer, *Seder Olam – The Rabbinic View of Biblical Chronology* (Northvale NJ and Jerusalem, 1998, Jason Aronson, Inc.) p. 257. *Arakin* 32b echoes this passage. Nehemiah 10:32 (10:31 in English Bible) mentions the observance of the Sabbatical years as one of the obligations in the renewed covenant.

10. Thiele, pp. 180–81. Thiele's dates for Josiah were verified when Wiseman published the Babylonian Chronicle, which showed that Josiah died in Sivan or Tammuz of 609 BCE. Thus Josiah's 31st and last year began in Tishri of 610 by Judean court reckoning, and his 18th year began in Tishri of 623.

11. William Shea, "The New Tirhaka Text and Sennacherib's Second Palestinian Campaign," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 35/2 (1997) pp. 181–87. Jeremy Goldberg provides a variation of the two-campaign theory by placing the first campaign under Sargon in 712 BCE, with the second campaign that of Sennacherib in 701 (Jeremy Goldberg, "Two Assyrian Campaigns against Hezekiah and Later Eighth Century Biblical Chronology" *Biblica* 80 (1999) pp. 360–90). Goldberg's resultant chronology runs into difficulty with the dates involved, which Goldberg attempts to resolve by introducing interregna for the kings of Israel.