

Brief Note

A Context for Jeremiah's Seventy Years

Copyright © 2006 by Frank W. Hardy, Ph.D.

Introduction

In this paper I discuss some chronological questions associated with Jeremiah's prophecy of seventy years. This prophecy is first given in Jer 25 and is later repeated in Jer 29.

8 Therefore the LORD Almighty says this: "Because you have not listened to my words,
9 I will summon all the peoples of the north and my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of
Babylon," declares the LORD, "and I will bring them against this land and its
inhabitants and against all the surrounding nations. I will completely destroy them and
make them an object of horror and scorn, and an everlasting ruin. 10 I will banish
from them the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and bridegroom, the
sound of millstones and the light of the lamp. 11 This whole country will become a
desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years.

12 "But when the seventy years are fulfilled, I will punish the king of Babylon and
his nation, the land of the Babylonians, for their guilt," declares the LORD, "and will
make it desolate forever. (Jer 25:8-12)

10 This is what the LORD says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will
come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. 11 For I
know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to
harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. (Jer 29:10-11)

Chronological Questions

It is surprisingly difficult to show exactly how the seventy years of captivity should be counted. One reason for this is that Jeremiah does not refer to seventy years of captivity. What he says is that Babylon would rule for seventy years, not that Judea would be captive for seventy years. We return to this matter below.

When did Nebuchadnezzar first attack Jerusalem?

The book of Daniel is surrounded by controversy from vs. 1. The very first clause of the book says Nebuchadnezzar came to Jerusalem and besieged it in the third year of Jehoiakim, while Jeremiah says the fourth year of Jehoiakim corresponds to the first year of Nebuchadnezzar. Here are the two verses:

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. (Dan 1:1)

The word came to Jeremiah Concerning all the people of Judah in the fourth year of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, which was the first year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. (Jer 25:1)

So long as we make the assumption that Nebuchadnezzar came to Jerusalem in the first year of his reign, this sounds like a contradiction. So did he come to Jerusalem in the first year of his reign? Actually not. He came to Jerusalem before he became king, and therein lies a story.

In 612 BC the Assyrian empire was falling. That is when the Babylonians, from what is today southern Iraq, conquered the ancient Assyrian capital of Nineveh, in what is today northern Iraq. The same year the Assyrians moved their capital west to Harran. In 610 the Babylonians conquered Harran. The next place the Assyrians went was still further west to Carchemish in northern Syria.

At this time Egypt was an ally of Assyria, so the following year, in 609 BC, an Egyptian army started north along the coast to aid in the Assyrian defense of Carchemish. They were delayed by Josiah of Judea. Josiah was killed and his army defeated by Pharaoh Neco, but the Egyptian army was delayed enough that they were unable to protect the last remnants of Assyrian power from Nebuchadnezzar. In 609 Nebuchadnezzar, still the crown prince, defeated the Assyrians at Carchemish and pushed Egypt out of Syria. At this time he went only as far as Pelusium. He did not come as far south as Jerusalem in 609.

Four years later, in 605, Nebuchadnezzar came to Jerusalem to push Egyptian forces all the way back to their own borders and to impose tribute. While in the vicinity of Jerusalem he received word that his father had died (Ab 8 [=August 15], 605) and that he would need to move quickly in order to secure the throne.

When he received this news Nebuchadnezzar left the army with generals and went to Babylon by the fastest route – directly across the desert – to claim the throne, reaching Babylon Elul 1 (=September 7), 605. The trip had taken about three weeks. He then returned and finished subduing the city of Jerusalem. Assuming that Nebuchadnezzar spent a week in Babylon settings things in order there, and that he took an additional three weeks returning to Jerusalem, he would have gotten back to his army about the first week of October.

The point to notice is that Nebuchadnezzar was not king yet when he came to Jerusalem and besieged it. He came and began the siege in the third year of Jehoiakim,

as Daniel says. When he became king shortly afterward it only makes sense that his first regnal year would follow the events just described and would correspond to the fourth year of Jehoiakim, as Jeremiah says. These facts are summarized in fig. 1 (see p. 4, below). It is certainly the case that Nebuchadnezzar was king of Babylon by the time he returned with his army, with Daniel and his friends, and with many others.

In fig. 1 notice that Jehoiakim becomes king no earlier than September/October 609 and that both Jeremiah and Daniel are using a fall-to-fall (F-F) calendar at this point. Daniel is describing Jehoiakim's reign as Jehoiakim himself would have described it. This should not be surprising since Daniel was still living in Jerusalem when these events occurred. Thus, 609/8 F-F was Jehoiakim's accession year, 608/7 F-F was his first year, 607/6 F-F was his second year, and 606/5 F-F was his third year. Nebuchadnezzar was not yet king of Babylon when he came to Jerusalem shortly before the Day of Atonement 605,¹ but he is the same Nebuchadnezzar who became king shortly afterward so it is not inaccurately to call him "Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon" (Dan 1:1). As we will see, these facts are not unrelated to the question of how to calculate the seventy-year prophecy of Jeremiah.

¹ For an excellent summary of this sequence of events that condenses a lifetime of research into a very confined space, see William H. Shea, *Daniel 1-7: The Abundant Life Bible Amplifier* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1996), p. 39.

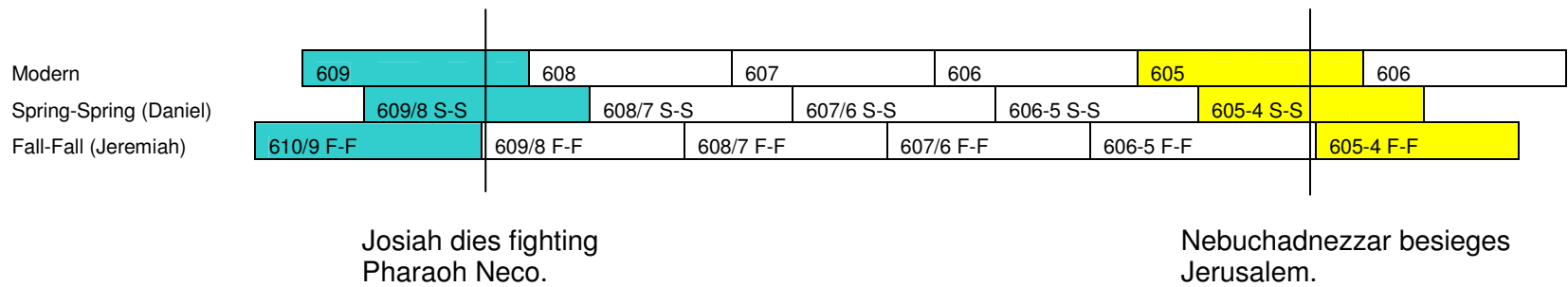


Fig. 1. Chronological facts surrounding Nebuchadnezzar's first siege of Jerusalem.

When did Jeremiah's seventy years prophecy begin?

Babylon besieged Jerusalem three times – in 605, 597, and 586 BC respectively. None of these dates marks the beginning of Jeremiah's seventy years. In fig. 2 (below) I summarize some facts that must be taken into account as we calculate Jeremiah's seventy-year prophecy.

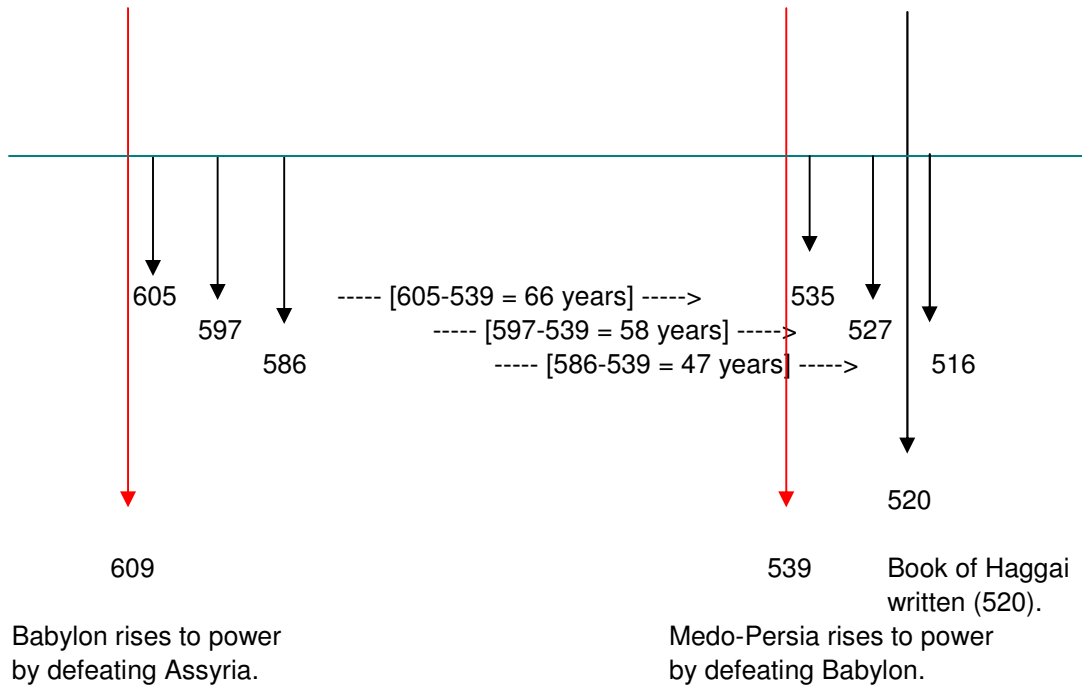


Fig. 2. Chronological facts surrounding Jeremiah's seventy-year prophecy.

Daniel's focus would have been on the first captivity. That's when he went to Babylon. Ezekiel's focus was clearly on the second captivity. That's when he went to Babylon. And for the generations following, the focus would have been on the third and final captivity, since that is when the temple was destroyed and the city burned.

One incorrect way to count the years of Judea's captivity would be to start from a year when Jerusalem was attacked and count forward to the year when Babylon fell in 539 BC, i.e., from 605 to 539 (66 years), from 597 to 539 (58 years), or from 586 to 539 (47 years). The other is to start from a year when Jerusalem was attacked and count forward seventy years without reference to what happened then, i.e., from 605 to 535, or from 597 to 527, or from 586 to 516. Each of these last three periods measure seventy years, and each has a dramatic starting point (a Babylonian siege of Jerusalem), but nothing happened in 535, 527, or 516 to bring these respective periods to a close. (People in Haggai's day did try to count this way, but we'll return to this matter below.)

There is only one correct way to count Jeremiah's seventy years, and Jeremiah himself tells us how to do it. There's no mystery so long as we simply take the text as it reads. On God's behalf Jeremiah tells us: "'But when the seventy years are fulfilled, I will punish the king of Babylon and his nation, the land of the Babylonians, for their guilt,' declares the Lord, 'and will make it desolate forever'" (Jer 25:12). When the seventy years are fulfilled, I will punish the king of Babylon and his nation. Another way to say the same thing would be: When I punish the king of Babylon and his nation, that's when the seventy years are fulfilled, or reach their end. So when did God punish Babylon? In 539 BC. That's when Cyrus captured the city and let the Jewish captives return home (Dan 5; Ezra 1:1-4). The fall of Babylon marks the end of the seventy years. So to find the beginning point of the period, all we need to do is count back seventy years from 539 to 609 BC.

What happened in 609? That's when Babylon defeated an Egyptian garrison at the Battle of Carchemish (see Jer 46:1-12) and imposed Babylonian rule over Syria, even though it had not yet attacked Jerusalem. In 605 crown prince Nebuchadnezzar pushed the Egyptian sphere of influence back still further southward, to its borders, and that is the year when Babylon besieged Jerusalem for the first time.

All of this fits Jeremiah's prophecy perfectly. What Jeremiah said was: "'This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years'" (Jer 25:11). Judea did become a desolate wasteland. That's one point. And many nations did serve the king of Babylon seventy years. That's another point. But these are two separate things. Judea was not a desolate wasteland for seventy years. The prophecy doesn't say it would be. In another passage Jeremiah tells us, "This is what the Lord says: 'When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place'" (Jer 29:10). The seventy years were "for Babylon," not for Judea. God was telling Jeremiah that Babylon would rule for seventy years, and that during those seventy years the surrounding nations would serve Babylon. When seventy years are completed for Babylon in this way, they end. That's what he does say. What he does not say is that Judea would be in captivity throughout the entire period.² In fact they weren't. Babylon rose to power in 609 and Jerusalem did not fall under Babylonian control until 605.

An interesting aside

There is another part to the story. Haggai is the most carefully dated book in the Old Testament. We know exactly when each of its oracles was received. On August 29, 520 (Hag 1:1) Haggai told his people to go get materials and rebuild the ruined temple of the Lord. On September 21, 520 (Hag 1:15) they came and began to work. On October 17, 520 (Hag 2:1) God gave Haggai a promise that the second temple they were building would be filled with more glory than the first. On December 18, 520 He gave Haggai two further messages of encouragement – one for the common people (Hag 2:10), the other for Zerubbabel (Hag 2:20). The whole book was written within a few months' time during the year 520 BC.

Why should these facts have any significance for us? Recall that one incorrect way to count Jeremiah's seventy years was to start with a siege of Jerusalem and to count forward seventy years. Using this method, and some hindsight, the people in Haggai's day counted from the last and largest of these sieges in 586, when the city of Jerusalem was finally destroyed. From this starting point seventy years later bring us to 516 – still four years in the future when Haggai wrote his prophecy. And why should this fact matter? It explains an otherwise puzzling

² Note that in Dan 9, Daniel makes the opposite assumption.

verse: "This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'These people say, "The time has not yet come for the Lord's house to be built.'""

Why would they say it was not yet time? What were they waiting for? They had already returned home from Babylon. Indeed, by the year 520 they were doing rather well – so well that God accuses them of living in "paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin" (Hag 1:3). By this point their captivity was clearly over, but they felt there was something more that required them to wait. A plausible explanation of these facts is that the people of Haggai's day were calculating Jeremiah's seventy years in such a way that the period would come to an end until the year 516. That is seventy years after the final siege of Jerusalem. Actually the time they were counting off had already ended some nineteen years before, but they were still waiting for four more years to go by because they thought Jeremiah's prophecy required it.

Conclusion

If the people in Haggai's day had read Jeremiah more carefully they would not have been waiting for God while God was waiting for them: "This is what the Lord says: 'When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place'" (Jer 29:10). He had done that. They were home. The seventy years were over and had been for almost two decades.

It would not be hard to find modern parallels for the experience of God's people in Haggai's day. We wait for God while He waits for us and the result is that what gets done is more waiting than working. If we should ever find ourselves in this situation let us, at the very least, not blame God for it.