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Seventy Years of Imperial Babylonian Rule

There is a period of time that is often referred to as the “**Babylonian Exile**” or “**Babylonian Captivity**”. This is said with **Y’hudah** being the frame of reference - in other words, the people of **Judah** are the people in exile or captivity. A connection is then often made between this period of exile and the **seventy years** that is prophesied in the TaNaKh. Having made this connection, people often have difficulty in reconciling the apparent prophecy where the exile would actually last for **seventy years**.⁴⁰¹



But no matter which of the three deportations you use (606 BC, 598 BC, or 586 BC), it’s not chronologically possible to establish a **seventy-year** exile for **the Judeans** who were taken into captivity during the reign of **Nebuchadnezzar**. You either get 67, 59 or 47 years. As a result, many people have questioned the accuracy of **Jeremiah’s** prophecy about a **seventy-year** period during which **Babylon** would dominate **Judah** and hold **Jews** as captives in **Babylon**. But these questions are based on a mistaken belief that the captivity *itself* was supposed to last **seventy years**. To more fully understand the prophecy, it is necessary to look at **four scriptures** and examine to whom the prophecy actually refers.

1. Jeremiah 25:8-11 . . . Therefore, here is what the LORD of heaven’s angelic armies says: **Because you haven’t paid attention to what I’ve been saying, I will summon all the peoples of the north and my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon,” declares ADONAI. “And I will bring them against this Land and its inhabitants and against all the surrounding nations. I will completely make them an object of horror and scorn, and an everlasting ruin. I will banish from them the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and groom, the sound of millstones and the light**

of the lamp. This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, **and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years.** It is customary to refer to this period as an exile or **the Babylonian** captivity because much of it includes the time in which **the Jews** were in exile as captives. However, the text says **the Jews** would “serve,” not “be captives” or “go into exile.” **Jeremiah** prophesied that **Judah** and the surrounding nations would *serve* **Babylon** for **seventy years**. But, **he** does not say that the forced deportation of **Jews** from **Judah** would *last* seventy years. **The captivity is something that grew out of Babylon’s domination of Judah and the whole region.** The domination was supposed to span **seventy years**, but **Jeremiah** never said that the captivity *itself* would span **seventy years**.

2. Jeremiah 29:10 . . . 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.”** (Jeremiah 29:10). It seems clear from the context in these two prophecies that the **seventy years** applies to **Babylon** itself, not to the period of time that the people of Judah are to spend in **Babylon**. In **Chapter 25** it says that the nations would **serve Babylon for seventy years**. Once again in **Chapter 29**, **Jeremiah** makes the connection to **Babylon** by saying that **seventy years** are **for Babylon**.

3. Second Chronicles 36:20-23 . . . He [Nebuchadnezzar] carried into exile to Babylon the remnant, who escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and his sons until the kingdom of Persia came to power. **The land enjoyed its Sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed** in fulfillment of the word of ADONAI spoken by Yirmeyahu. In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of ADONAI spoken by Jeremiah, ADONAI moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing: This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: ADONAI, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and He has appointed me to build a Temple for him at Yerushalayim in Judah. Anyone of His people among you - may ADONAI his God be with him, and let him go up. At first glance, this text seems to imply that the desolation of **Tziyon** would last 70 years. Read it again, and you will see that this is in fact not the case. It states that now that **Jerusalem** has been destroyed, **the land** would lay desolate **until the seventy-year** prophecy of **Jeremiah** was fulfilled. **Jerusalem** was destroyed in 586 B.C. **The seventy-year** prophecy ended with **Babylon’s** fall in 539 BC, but **Cyrus king of Persia** did not issue **his** decree until 538 BC. So **Yerushalayim** lay **desolate** from 586 to 538 BC . . . a total of 48 years.

4. Dani’el 9:1-3 . . . In the first year of Darius son of Ahasuerus (a Mede by

descent), who was made ruler over the kingdom [of the Chaldeans'] - in the first year of his reign, I, Dani'el, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of ADONAI given to Jeremiah the prophet, that **the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years**. So I turned to Adonai, God, and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes. At first glance this passage also seems to indicate that Dani'el believed Jerusalem would lay desolate for **70 years**. But if this is the case, why is he so earnest in his prayer to God on behalf of his people. This account comes in **the first year of the reign of the Medes and Persians** in 539/538 B.C. At this point, Yerushalayim had lain desolate for only 48 years, so surely there would be another 22 years to go? No, Daniel seems to understand that the **seventy years** was in fact over and that the exiled people of Judah should return to Jerusalem as God had promised. This can only be the case if Dani'el understood **the seventy years** as referring to the length of time that Babylon would rule, and not to **the desolation of Tziyon**. So like the writer of **Chronicles**, Dani'el understood that after **the City** was destroyed it would lay **desolate** for the remainder of **the seventy-year** period. So Dani'el declared that **the desolation of Jerusalem would last [the] seventy years**. Because **the seventy year** time period was coming to a close, he was asking ADONAI "How much longer do we need to wait?" As it turns out, he had less than a year to wait until Cyrus, king of Persia, gave the decree allowing **the people of Judah** to return to **the holy City of David**, which they did in 536 BC.⁴⁰²

Some skeptics, however, object to the year 536 B.C. as the date of the Jews' return from **the Babylonian** captivity. They do so on the grounds that Cyrus conquered Babylon in 539 BC and that **the Jews** must have returned by at least 538 BC. But this overlooks the cultural practice among **the Babylonians** and **Persians** for dating regnal years of their **kings**. The word regnal comes from the Latin, regnum, meaning *kingdom* or *rule*. In the ancient Near East, the regnal year of a **king** was counted from the New Year's day following **the king's** ascension to the throne. This is different than the practice of western cultures, which skeptics erroneously ignore.

The system of reckoning that prevailed in **Babylon**, Assyria, and **Persia**, may be called the accession-year system. . . . In the accession-year system the portion of a year from the accession of **the king** to the end of the then current calendar year is only **his** 'accession year' (and for chronological purposes remains a part of the last numbered regnal year of **his** predecessor), and **the new king's** regnal year begins only on the first day of the new calendar year after **his** accession.⁴⁰³

Among **the Jews** the practice was not consistent. Sometimes they followed the accession-

year system and sometimes the non-accession system. Likewise, they sometimes followed the calendar year that began with the month of Nisan, and sometimes the calendar that began with the month Tishri.⁴⁰⁴ In part, the method used by Jewish historians depended on the system used by the nation that held political dominance over them at the time. It is very likely that **Ezra**, a prominent citizen of **Persia**, and under orders from **the Persian king**, used the accession-year system of **the Persians**.

Cyrus, king of Persia, conquered **Babylon** on October 16, 539 BC, and thus became **king of the Medo-Persian** Empire. However, the following regnal year was not until March 24, 538 BC. So **his** first regnal year extended from March 24, 538, to March 23, 537 BC. Sometime within that year, **Cyrus** issued the decree for the captive nations to return home (**Second Chronicles 36:22**). It is likely that the decree was issued late in the year, in January or February of 537 BC, because administrative duties would have occupied **him** the months immediately following the conquest of **Babylon**; less important details, like the affairs of foreign captives, would naturally be postponed. Taking into account the slow pace at which government business took place, the amount of time required to summons, assemble, and organize a large company of returnees, and the time for such a large group to travel the long distance from **Babylon** to **Tziyon**, it is reasonable to expect that the convoy did not arrive in **Judah** until some time in 536 BC. Approximately 49,000 returned.⁴⁰⁵

The decline of the Assyrian Kingdom began with the death of King Ashurbanipal who died in 627 BC. Various internal rebellions and civil wars then ensued; the result was a weakening of the country making Assyria vulnerable to outside attacks. This resulted in various captive territories refusing to pay tribute to the Assyrians.

In 612 BC, an alliance between the Meds and the Persians (**Babylonians**) resulted in a campaign that defeated the Assyrians. That same year the city of Nineveh fell and was destroyed. The Assyrians with their ally Egypt retreated to the northern Assyrian city of Harran, with the final defeat coming in 609 BC. **Babylon** was then able to consolidate the previous Assyrian empire under her control. **The Babylonian** empire extended from Persia on the east to the Mediterranean Sea on the west and from Assyria on the north to Egypt on the south. This included the land of **Judah** and **her** capital city of **Jerusalem**. Therefore, **Babylonian** imperial rule of **Judah** began in 609 BC (**to see link click Bm - Jehoahaz Ruled For 3 Months in 609 BC**) with **Nebuchadnezzar's** military dominance of the holy land and ended in 539 BC with the defeat of **Babylon by Cyrus the Great**, for a total of **seventy years**.