



This is the first of two articles in consecutive issues of *The Watchtower* that discuss scholarly questions surrounding the date of the destruction of ancient Jerusalem. This two-part series presents thoroughly researched and Bible-based answers to questions that have puzzled some readers.

# When Was Ancient Jerusalem Destroyed?

## PART ONE WHY IT MATTERS WHAT THE EVIDENCE SHOWS

*“According to historians and archaeologists, 586 or 587 B.C.E. is generally accepted as the year of Jerusalem’s destruction.\* Why do Jehovah’s Witnesses say that it was 607 B.C.E.? What is your basis for this date?”*

**S**O WROTE one of our readers. But why be interested in the actual date when Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar II razed the city of Jerusalem? First, because the event marked an important turning point in the history of God’s people. One historian said that it led to “a catastrophe, indeed the ultimate catastrophe.” The date marked the end of a temple that had been at the heart of the worship of Almighty God for more than 400 years. “O God,” lamented a Bible psalmist, “they have dishonored your holy temple. They have left Jerusalem in ruins.”—Psalm 79:1, God’s Word Bible.<sup>#</sup>

Second, because knowing the actual year when this “ultimate catastrophe” began and understanding how the restoration of true

worship in Jerusalem fulfilled a precise Bible prophecy will build your confidence in the reliability of God’s Word. So why do Jehovah’s Witnesses hold to a date that differs from widely accepted chronology by 20 years? In short, because of evidence within the Bible itself.

### “Seventy Years” for Whom?

Years before the destruction, the Jewish prophet Jeremiah provided an essential clue to the time frame given in the Bible. He warned “all those living in Jerusalem,” saying: “This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years.” (Jeremiah 25:1, 2, 11, *New International Version*) The prophet later added: “This is what Jehovah has said, ‘In accord with the fulfilling of seventy years at Babylon I shall turn my attention to you people, and I will establish toward you my good word in bringing you back to this place.’ ” (Jeremiah 29:10) What is the significance of the “seventy years”? And how

\* Both years are mentioned in secular sources. For simplicity, we will refer to 587 B.C.E. in this series. B.C.E. means “Before the Common Era.”

<sup>#</sup> Jehovah’s Witnesses produce a reliable Bible translation known as the *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*. However, if you are not one of Jehovah’s Witnesses, you may prefer to use other translations when considering Bible subjects. This article quotes from a number of widely accepted Bible translations.

does this time period help us to determine the date of Jerusalem's destruction?

Instead of saying 70 years "at Babylon," many translations read "for Babylon." (*NIV*) Some historians therefore claim that this 70-year period applies to the Babylonian Empire. According to secular chronology, the Babylonians dominated the land of ancient Judah and Jerusalem for some 70 years, from about 609 B.C.E. until 539 B.C.E. when the capital city of Babylon was captured.

The Bible, however, shows that the 70 years were to be a period of severe punishment from God—aimed specifically at the people of Judah and Jerusalem, who were in a covenant to obey him. (Exodus 19:3-6) When they refused to turn from their bad ways, God said: "I will summon . . . Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon . . . against this land and its inhabitants and against all the surrounding nations." (Jeremiah 25:4, 5, 8, 9, *NIV*) While nearby nations would also suffer Babylon's wrath, the destruction of Jerusalem and the 70-year exile to follow were called by Jeremiah "the punishment of my people," for Jerusalem had "sinned greatly."—Lamentations 1:8; 3:42; 4:6, *NIV*.

So according to the Bible, the 70 years was a period of bitter punishment for Judah, and God used the Babylonians as the instrument for inflicting this severe chastisement. Yet, God told the Jews: "When seventy years are completed, . . . I will . . . bring you back to this place"—the land of Judah and Jerusalem.—Jeremiah 29:10, *NIV*.

### **When Did "the Seventy Years" Start?**

The inspired historian Ezra, who lived after the 70 years of Jeremiah's prophecy were fulfilled, wrote of King Nebuchadnezzar: "He 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 the LORD spoken by Jeremiah."—2 Chronicles 36:20, 21, *NIV*.

Thus, the 70 years were to be a period when the land of Judah and Jerusalem would enjoy "sabbath rests." This meant that the land would not be cultivated—there would be no sowing of seed or pruning of vineyards. (Leviticus 25:1-5, *NIV*) Because of the disobedience of God's people, whose sins may have included a failure to observe all the Sabbath years, the punishment was that their land would remain unworked and deserted for 70 years.—Leviticus 26:27, 32-35, 42, 43.

When did the land of Judah become desolated and unworked? Actually, the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar attacked Jerusalem twice, years apart. When did the 70 years commence? Certainly not following the first time that Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem. Why not? Although at that time Nebuchadnezzar took many captives from Jerusalem to Babylon, he left others behind in the land. He also left the city itself standing. For years after this initial deportation, those left remaining in Judah, "the lowly class of the people," lived off their land. (2 Kings 24:8-17) But then things drastically changed.

A Jewish revolt brought the Babylonians back to Jerusalem. (2 Kings 24:20; 25:8-10) They razed the city, including its sacred temple, and they took many of its inhabitants captive to Babylon. Within two months, "all the people [who had been left behind in the land] from the least to the greatest, together with the army officers, fled to Egypt for fear of the Babylonians." (2 Kings 25:25, 26, *NIV*) Only then, in the seventh Jewish month, Tishri (September/October), of that year could it be said that the land, now

desolate and unworked, began to enjoy its Sabbath rest. To the Jewish refugees in Egypt, God said through Jeremiah: “You have seen all the disaster that I brought upon Jerusalem and upon all the cities of Judah. Behold, this day they are a desolation, and no one dwells in them.” (Jeremiah 44:1, 2, *English Standard Version*) So this event evidently marked the starting point of the 70 years. And what year was that? To answer, we need to see when that period ended.

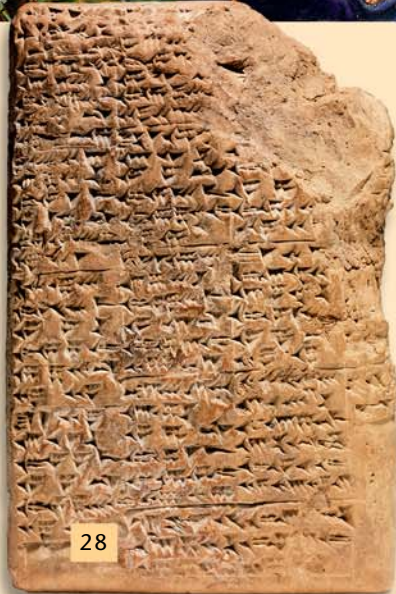
### When Did “the Seventy Years” End?

The prophet Daniel, who lived until “the kingdom of Persia came to power,” was on the scene in Babylon, and he calculated when the 70 years were due to end. He wrote: “I, Daniel, perceived in the books the num-

ber of years that, according to the word of the LORD to Jeremiah the prophet, must pass before the end of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years.”—Daniel 9:1, 2, *ESV*.

Ezra reflected on the prophecies of Jeremiah and linked the end of “the seventy years” to the time when “the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation.” (2 Chronicles 36:21, 22, *NIV*) When were the Jews released? The decree ending their exile was issued in “the first year of Cyrus the king of Persia.” (See the box “A Pivotal Date in History.”) Thus, by the fall of 537 B.C.E., the Jews had returned to Jerusalem to restore true worship.—Ezra 1:1-5; 2:1; 3:1-5.

According to Bible chronology, then, the 70 years was a literal period of time that end-



## A PIVOTAL DATE IN HISTORY

The date 539 B.C.E. when Cyrus II conquered Babylon is calculated using the testimony of:

■ **Ancient historical sources and cuneiform tablets:** Diodorus of Sicily (c. 80-20 B.C.E.) wrote that Cyrus became king of Persia in “the opening year of the Fifty-fifth Olympiad.” (*Historical Library*, Book IX, 21) That year was 560 B.C.E. The Greek historian Herodotus (c. 485-425 B.C.E.) stated that Cyrus was killed “after he had reigned twenty-nine years,” which would put his death during his 30th year, in 530 B.C.E. (*Histories*, Book I, Clio, 214) Cuneiform tablets show that Cyrus ruled Babylon for nine years before his death. Thus, nine years prior to his death in 530 B.C.E. takes us back to 539 B.C.E. as the year Cyrus conquered Babylon.

◀ **Confirmation by a cuneiform tablet:** A Babylonian astronomical clay tablet (BM 33066) confirms the date of Cyrus’ death in 530 B.C.E. Though this tablet contains some errors regarding the astronomical positions, it contains the descriptions of two lunar eclipses that the tablet says occurred in the seventh year of Cambyses II, the son and successor of Cyrus. These are identified with lunar eclipses visible at Babylon on July 16, 523 B.C.E., and on January 10, 522 B.C.E., thus pointing to the spring of 523 B.C.E. as the beginning of Cambyses’ seventh year. That would make his first regnal year 529 B.C.E. So Cyrus’ last year would have been 530 B.C.E., making 539 B.C.E. his first year of ruling Babylon.

Added by JWSTRS editor: BM 33066 is the tablet, and its transcription is called 'Strassmaier No. 400' or 'Strm Kambys 400.'



ed in 537 B.C.E. Counting back 70 years, the start date of the period would be 607 B.C.E.

But if the evidence from the inspired Scriptures clearly points to 607 B.C.E. for Jerusalem’s destruction, why do many authorities hold to the date 587 B.C.E.? They lean on two sources of information—the writings of classical historians and the canon of Ptolemy. Are these sources more reliable than the Scriptures? Let us see.

### Classical Historians—How Accurate?

Historians who lived close to the time when Jerusalem was destroyed give mixed information about the Neo-Babylonian kings.\* (See the box “Neo-Babylonian Kings.”) The time line based on their chronological information disagrees with that of the Bible. But just how reliable are their writings?

One of the historians who lived closest to the Neo-Babylonian period was Berossus, a Babylonian “priest of Bel.” His original work, the *Babyloniaca*, written about 281 B.C.E., has been lost, and only fragments are preserved in the works of other historians. Berossus claimed that he used “books which had been preserved with great care at Babylon.”<sup>1</sup> Was Berossus really an accurate historian? Consider one example.

\* The Neo-Babylonian Empire began with the reign of Nebuchadnezzar’s father, Nabopolassar, and ended with the reign of Nabonidus. This time period is of interest to scholars because it covers most of the 70 years of desolation.

Berossus wrote that Assyrian King Sennacherib followed “the reign of [his] brother”; and “after him his son [Esarhaddon ruled for] 8 years; and thereafter Sammuges [Shamash-shuma-ukin] 21 years.” (III, 2.1, 4) However, Babylonian historical documents written long before Berossus’ time say that Sennacherib followed his *father*, Sargon II, not his brother, to the throne; Esarhaddon ruled for 12 years, not 8; and Shamash-shuma-ukin ruled for 20 years, not 21. Scholar R. J. van der Spek, while acknowledging that Berossus consulted the Babylonian chronicles, wrote: “This did not prevent him from making his own additions and interpretations.”<sup>2</sup>

How do other scholars view Berossus? “In the past Berossus has usually been viewed as a historian,” states S. M. Burstein, who made a thorough study of Berossus’ works. Yet, he concluded: “Considered as such his performance must be pronounced inadequate. Even in its present fragmentary state the *Babyloniaca* contains a number of surprising errors of simple fact . . . In a historian such flaws would be damning, but then Berossus’ purpose was not historical.”<sup>3</sup>

In view of the foregoing, what do you think? Should Berossus’ calculations really be viewed as consistently accurate? And what about the other classical historians who, for the most part, based their chronology on the writings of Berossus? Can their historical conclusions really be called reliable?

Photograph taken by courtesy of the British Museum

## NEO-BABYLONIAN KINGS

If these historians are reliable, why do they disagree?

Kings	BEROSSUS c. 350-270 B.C.E.	POLYHISTOR 105-? B.C.E.	JOSEPHUS 37-?100 C.E.	PTOLEMY c. 100-170 C.E.
Nabopolassar	21	20	—	21
Nebuchadnezzar II	43	43	43	43
Amel-Marduk	2	12	18	2
Neriglissar	4	4	40	4
Labashi-Marduk	9 months	—	9 months	—
Nabonidus	17	17	17	17

Length of king’s reign (in years) according to classical historians



## The Canon of Ptolemy

The Royal Canon of Claudius Ptolemy, a second-century C.E. astronomer, is also used to support the traditional date 587 B.C.E. Ptolemy’s list of kings is considered the backbone of the chronology of ancient history, including the Neo-Babylonian period.

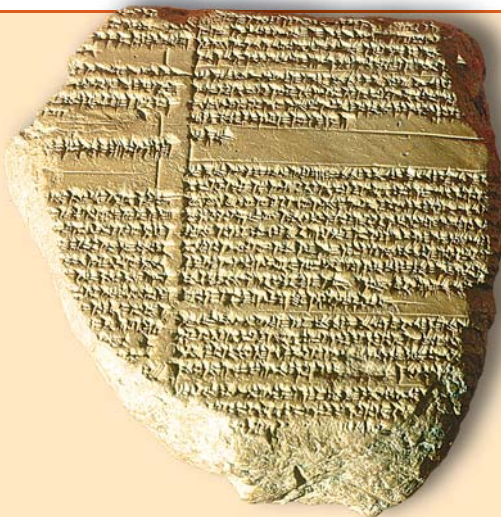
Ptolemy compiled his list some 600 years after the Neo-Babylonian period ended. So how did he determine the date when the first king on his list began to reign? Ptolemy explained that by using astronomical calculations based in part on eclipses, “we have derived to compute back to the beginning of the reign of Nabonassar,” the first king on his list.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Christopher Walker of the British Museum says that Ptolemy’s canon was “an artificial scheme designed to provide astronomers with a consistent chronology” and was “not to provide historians with a precise record of the accession and death of kings.”<sup>5</sup>

“It has long been known that the Canon is astronomically reliable,” writes Leo Depuydt,

one of Ptolemy’s most enthusiastic defenders, “but this does not automatically mean that it is *historically* dependable.” Regarding this list of kings, Professor Depuydt adds: “As regards the earlier rulers [who included the Neo-Babylonian kings], the Canon would need to be compared with the cuneiform record on a reign by reign basis.”<sup>6</sup>

What is this “cuneiform record” that enables us to measure the historical accuracy of Ptolemy’s canon? It includes the Babylonian chronicles, lists of kings, and economic tablets—cuneiform documents written by scribes who lived during, or near, Neo-Babylonian times.<sup>7</sup>

How does Ptolemy’s list compare with that cuneiform record? The box “How Does Ptolemy’s Canon Compare With Ancient Tablets?” (see below) shows a portion of the canon and compares this with an ancient cuneiform document. Notice that Ptolemy lists only four kings between the Babylonian rulers Kandalanu and Nabonidus. However, the



*The Babylonian chronicles are part of the cuneiform record that helps us to measure the accuracy of Ptolemy’s canon*

## HOW DOES PTOLEMY’S CANON COMPARE WITH ANCIENT TABLETS?

Ptolemy omits some kings in his list. Why?

### PTOLEMY’S CANON

Nabonassar  
 Nabu-nadin-zeri (Nadinu)  
 Mukin-zeri and Pul  
 Ululayu (Shalmaneser V)  
 “King of Assyria”  
 Merodach-baladan  
 Sargon II “King of Assyria”  
 First Kingless Period  
 Bel-ibni  
 Ashur-nadin-shumi  
 Nergal-ushezib  
 Mushezib-Marduk  
 Second Kingless Period  
 Esarhaddon “King of Assyria”  
 Shamash-shuma-ukin

**Kandalanu**

Nabopolassar  
 Nebuchadnezzar  
 Amel-Marduk  
 Neriglissar

**Nabonidus**  
 Cyrus  
 Cambyses



### THE URUK KING LIST AS FOUND ON ANCIENT TABLETS

Kandalanu  
 Sin-shumu-lishir  
 Sin-sharra-ishkun  
 Nabopolassar  
 Nebuchadnezzar  
 Amel-Marduk  
 Neriglissar  
 Labashi-Marduk  
 Nabonidus

Uruk King List—a part of the cuneiform record—reveals that *seven* kings ruled in between. Were their reigns brief and negligible? One of them, according to cuneiform economic tablets, ruled for seven years.<sup>8</sup>

There is also strong evidence from cuneiform documents that prior to the reign of Nabopolassar (the first king of the Neo-Babylonian period), another king (Ashur-etel-ilani) ruled for four years in Babylonia. Also, for more than a year, there was no king in the land.<sup>9</sup> Yet, all of this is left out of Ptolemy's canon.

Why did Ptolemy omit some rulers? Evidently, he did not consider them to be legitimate rulers of Babylon.<sup>10</sup> For example, he excluded Labashi-Marduk, a Neo-Babylonian king. But according to cuneiform documents, the kings whom Ptolemy omitted actually ruled over Babylonia.

In general, Ptolemy's canon is regarded as accurate. But in view of its omissions, should it really be used to provide a definite historical chronology?

### The Conclusion Based on This Evidence

To sum up: The Bible clearly states that there was an exile of 70 years. There is strong evidence—and most scholars agree—that the Jewish exiles were back in their homeland by 537 B.C.E. Counting back from that year would place Jerusalem's destruction in 607 B.C.E. Though the classical historians

and the canon of Ptolemy disagree with this date, valid questions can be raised about the accuracy of their writings. Really, those two lines of evidence hardly provide enough proof to overturn the Bible's chronology.

However, further questions remain. Is there really no historical evidence to support the Bible-based date of 607 B.C.E.? What evidence is revealed by datable cuneiform documents, many of which were written by ancient eyewitnesses? We will consider these questions in our next issue.

### A QUICK SUMMARY

- Secular historians usually say that Jerusalem was destroyed in 587 B.C.E.
- Bible chronology strongly indicates that the destruction occurred in 607 B.C.E.
- Secular historians mainly base their conclusions on the writings of classical historians and on the canon of Ptolemy.
- The writings of classical historians contain significant errors and are not always consistent with the records on clay tablets.



### Notes

1. *Babyloniaca (Chaldaeorum Historiae)*, Book One, 1.1.
2. *Studies in Ancient Near Eastern World View and Society*, page 295.
3. *The Babyloniaca of Berossus*, page 8.
4. *Almagest*, III, 7, translated by G. J. Toomer, in *Ptolemy's Almagest*, published 1998, page 166. Ptolemy knew that Babylonian astronomers used mathematical schemes to "compute" the times of past and future eclipses because they discovered that eclipses of the same character reoccur every 18 years.—*Almagest*, IV, 2.
5. *Mesopotamia and Iran in the Persian Period*, pages 17-18.

6. *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*, Volume 47, 1995, pages 106-107.
7. Cuneiform is a form of writing in which a scribe pressed various signs into the surface of a soft clay tablet using a sharp stylus with a wedge-shaped point.
8. Sin-sharra-ishkun ruled for seven years, and 57 economic tablets of this king are dated from his accession year through year seven. See *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*, Volume 35, 1983, pages 54-59.
9. The economic tablet C.B.M. 2152 is dated in the fourth year of Ashur-etel-ilani. (*Legal and Commercial Transactions Dated in the Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian and Persian Periods—Chiefly From Nippur*, by A.T. Clay, 1908, page 74.) Also the Har-

ran Inscriptions of Nabonidus, (H1B), I, line 30, has him listed just before Nabopolassar. (*Anatolian Studies*, Vol. VIII, 1958, pages 35, 47.) For the kingless period, see Chronicle 2, line 14, of *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*, pages 87-88.

10. Some scholars contend that certain kings were omitted by Ptolemy—who supposedly listed only kings of Babylon—because these were called by the title "King of Assyria." However, as you will note in the box on page 30, several kings included in Ptolemy's canon also had the title "King of Assyria." Economic tablets, cuneiform letters, and inscriptions clearly reveal that kings Ashur-etel-ilani, Sin-shumu-lishir, and Sin-sharra-ishkun ruled over Babylonia.