

The Date of the Destruction of the First Temple in Ancient Versions and in Early Biblical Interpretation

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The date of the destruction of the first temple is recorded in two contradictory biblical sources: according to 2 Kgs 25:8, the date is the seventh of Ab, while in Jer 52:12 it is the tenth of Ab. In a previous article, we tried to decide between the two versions.¹ Our conclusion was that the date in Jer 52 is to be preferred over the one in Kings. In the present article we will examine and evaluate the testimony of different textual witnesses to Kings and to Jeremiah as well as the early biblical interpretation of this issue.

Ancient Translations

The LXX^B to Kings and Jeremiah accord with the MT in this matter: the passage in Kings is rendered as “the seventh,” while the passage in Jeremiah is rendered as “the tenth”.² A description of the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem is also found in Jer 39:4–13, but this text is missing in the LXX.

The date of “the tenth,” which appears in Jer 52, also appears in the Aramaic Targum and in the Vulgate *ad loc.*³

¹ M. Avioz, “When Was the First Temple Destroyed According to the Bible?,” *Biblica* 84 (2003) 562–565.

² For the LXX to Kings, see A.E. Brooke, N. McKlean, and H. St. J. Thackeray (eds.), *The Old Testament in Greek According to the Text of Codex Vaticanus, II: The Later Historical Books* (Cambridge, 1930). For the LXX to Jeremiah see A. Rahlfs (ed.), *Septuaginta* (Stuttgart, 1935); J. Ziegler, ed., *Ieremias, Baruch, Threni, Epistula Jeremiae* (Göttingen, 1957).

³ See P.-M. Bogaert, “Les trois formes de Jérémie 52 (MT, LXX, VL),” in *Tradition and the Text: Studies offered to Dominique Barthélémy in Celebration of his 70th Birthday* (ed. G.J. Norton and S. Pisano; OBO 109; Göttingen, 1991) 8.

However, we find a different version in the Lucianic recension of Kings (boc2e2), in the Peshitta and in a number of Hebrew medieval MSS of Kings. In these we find the version "the *ninth*."⁴

It seems to us that we cannot infer from this similarity that the Greek and the Syriac translators had a different Hebrew *Vorlage*.⁵ A more probable explanation is that both the Peshitta and the Lucianic recension were influenced by a Jewish tradition preserved by the sages that fixed the date of the fast day commemorating the destruction on the ninth of Ab.⁶

⁴ In Greek: ἐνάτη. For a general discussion of the Lucianic recensions characteristics, see J.D. Shenkel, *Chronology and Recensional Development in the Greek Text of Kings* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968) 8–11; E. Tov, "Lucian and Proto-Lucian: Toward a New Solution of the Problem," in *The Greek and Hebrew Bible: Collected Essays on the Septuagint* (VTSup 72; Leiden, 1999; first published in RB 79 [1972] 101–113) 477–488; S. Olofsson, *The LXX Version: A Guide to the Translation Technique of the Septuagint* (Stockholm, 1990) 59–61, 170–171; B.A. Taylor, *The Lucianic Manuscripts of I Reigns* (2 vols.; HSM 50–51; Atlanta, 1993) vol. 2; G. Galil, "The Chronological Data in the Septuagint to the Book of Kings," *Shnaton* 11 (1997) 56–77 (Heb.). For a critical edition of the Peshitta to Kings, see *The Old Testament in Syriac According to the Peshitta Version, II/4: Kings* (Leiden, 1976). For the medieval Hebrew MSS, see G.B. De Rossi, *Variae lectiones Veteris Testamenti* (4 vols.; Parma 1784–1788; repr. Amsterdam, 1969) 2:261.

⁵ Scholars disagree regarding the question whether the Lucianic text reflects the Old Greek translation or is based upon a different Hebrew *Vorlage*. See the bibliography listed in Tov, "Lucian and Proto-Lucian," 152, n. 13. On the relationship between the Peshitta and the LXX, see J. Cook, "Are the Syriac and Greek Versions of the *אשה זרה* (Prov 1 to 9) Identical? (On the Relationship between the Peshitta and the Septuagint)," *Textus* 17 (1993) 117–132; M.H. Szpek, "On the Influence of the Septuagint on the Peshitta," *CBQ* 60 (1998) 251–266. In Cook's view, the overall influence of the LXX on the Peshitta is minimal. In Zipor's view, we should not assume that the Syriac translator had a copy of the LXX. See M.A. Zipor, *Tradition and Transmission: Studies in Ancient Biblical Translation and Interpretation* (Tel Aviv, 2001) 28–29 (Heb.). Similarly, see G. Greenberg, *Translation Technique in the Peshitta to Jeremiah* (Leiden, 2002) ch. 11.

⁶ See J. Gray, *I & II Kings* (OTL; London, 1964) 698, n. a. On the relationship between the Peshitta and the rabbinic midrashim, see Y. Maori, *The Peshitta Version of the Pentateuch and Early Jewish Exegesis* (Jerusalem, 1995) (Heb.).

A close look at the way the Peshitta translates the dates of the Babylonians' breach into Jerusalem and the date of the destruction calls attention to an interesting phenomenon. In Jer 52:6, MS 9a1 *fam* is identical to the MT "fourth month". In MS 7a1, the *seventh* month is given, but that is improbable, if we assume that the famine in Jerusalem preceded its destruction.

The date of the famine in MT Jer 52:6 is the fourth month, but MT 2 Kgs 25:3 gives only **בתשעה לחדש** without mentioning the exact month. In MS 7a1 of the Peshitta, the statement **בירחא חמישיא** ("in the fifth month") appears, so that the famine, the Babylonian breach into the city of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple occurred on the very same day. This is in opposition to the statement in Jer 52:6, according to which a month passed between the enemy breach into the city and the burning of the Temple.⁷

The translators of the Peshitta therefore changed the date intentionally to one that postdates the seventh of Ab, as in the MT. It would seem that we could expect the date **בעשור** as in Jer 52 and in the Peshitta there, and since this was not done, it would seem that the date **בתשעה** was used to accord with the rabbinic tradition.

We find one more mention of "the ninth." The MT to Jer 39:2, the LXX^B and the Peshitta give the "ninth" (i.e. of Tammuz) as the date of the breach into the city. The MT to Kings and the Peshitta to 2 Kgs 25:3 and to Jer 52:6 all give the ninth of the month as the time of the famine, despite the fact that they refer to different months.

We can therefore conclude: It is doubtful whether the Peshitta's translators had a different version from the MT.⁸ The accord between the Peshitta and

⁷ See D.M. Walter, "The Peshitta of II Kings" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1964) 233. See also D. Barthélemy, *Critique textuelle de l'Ancien Testament* (3 vols.; OBO 50/1; Fribourg-Göttingen, 1982-1992) 1:423. Greenberg, *Translation Technique*, 88-92, argues that there is no proof that the translator of Jeremiah was influenced by the translation of Kings.

⁸ O. Thenius, *Die Bücher der Könige* (KEHAT; Leipzig, 1873) 474 holds that the MT **בחורש העשירי** does not contradict the date found in the Peshitta, which was established by the rabbis, since the ninth of the month after dark is already

the Lucianic recension, which also has the version “on the ninth” does not necessarily mean that this is an ancient reading.⁹ The translators of the Peshitta were either mistakenly influenced by the prevalence of ‘ninth’ in the accounts or may have changed the dates deliberately in order to accord with the rabbinic tradition.¹⁰

The Evidence in the Book of Baruch

We read in Bar 1: 2:

And these are the words of the book which Baruch [...] wrote in Babylon in the fifth year, on the *seventh* day of the month, at the time when the Chaldeans took Jerusalem and burned it with fire.¹¹

Even though there is generally a close relationship between the book of Baruch and the MT of Jeremiah¹² the text here seems identical to that in

considered to be the tenth. This harmonistic claim does not seem to resolve the inconsistency.

⁹ M.J. Mulder, “The Use of The Peshitta in Textual Criticism,” in *La Septuaginta en la investigacion Contemporanea* (ed. N. Fernandez Marcos; IOSCS 5 Congress; Madrid, 1985) 44, 53.

¹⁰ Sincere thanks to Dr. Gillian Greenberg of the Department of Jewish Studies, UCL, London, for sharing her views on this matter with me.

¹¹ The translation is according to R.H. Charles, “2 Baruch, or The Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch,” in *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (2 vols.; ed. R.H. Charles; Oxford, 1913) *ad loc.* Moore suggests to add the words “of the fifth month”, based upon 2 Kings 25:8. He argues that the letter was written in 581 B.C. See C.A. Moore, *Daniel, Esther and Jeremiah: The Additions* (AB; Garden City, NY, 1977) 267, 269. However, the LXX of Baruch does not contain these words, and Tov does not accept this emendation. See E. Tov, *The Book of Baruch (Greek and Hebrew): Texts and Translations* (Missoula, Mont., 1975).

¹² See Tov, *The Book of Baruch*; idem, *The Septuagint Translation of Jeremiah and Baruch: A Discussion of an Early Revision of the LXX of Jeremiah 29–52 and Baruch 1:1–3:8* (Missoula, Mont. 1975) 111–133. In Thackeray’s view, the first half of the book of Baruch was translated by the same Greek translator of Jer 29–51. See H. St. J. Thackeray, *A Grammar of the Old Testament in Greek According to the Septuagint* (Cambridge, 1909) 12–13.

Kings (“on the seventh”), rather than to that in Jer 52. However, it does not appear that the author of Baruch used here a Hebrew text of Jeremiah which is different than that of the MT.

According to Goldstein,¹³ the author of Baruch accepted the version in Kings (the seventh of Ab), knowing that the rabbis had adopted a harmonistic solution, saying that the burning of the Temple began on the seventh of Ab and ended on the tenth of Ab. But this explanation is highly speculative since (a) it depends on the dating of the book of Baruch: if the book is to be dated to the second or first century B.C.E.,¹⁴ such an explanation is irrelevant, and (b) there is the possibility that “the fifth year” relates to Jehoiachin’s exile in 597 B.C.E., and not to the destruction of the temple in 586 B.C.E.¹⁵ According to the following verses, the temple seems to still be functioning (Bar 1:7, 10, 14; 2:16).

*The Evidence of Josephus*¹⁶

Josephus deals with the date of the destruction both in *Antiquities of the Jews* and in *The Jewish War*. According to *Antiquities of the Jews*, X, 146, the Temple was destroyed *on the first day of Ab*. It is difficult to determine what Josephus’ sources for this might have been, or if he had any sources for this claim. It seems that Josephus determined this date based on Ezek 26:1, which states: “In the twelfth year, on the first of the month, the word of the Lord came to me.”¹⁷ In this prophecy, Ezekiel criticizes Tyre for rejoicing at

¹³ J.A. Goldstein, “The Apocryphal Book of Baruch,” *PAAJR* 46–47 (1979–1980) 181, n. 8.

¹⁴ See D. Mendels, “Baruch, Book of,” *ABD* 1: 620.

¹⁵ See the discussion in O.H. Steck, *Das apokryphe Baruchbuch: Studien zu Rezeption und Konzentration “Kanonischer” Überlieferung* (Göttingen, 1993) 18.

¹⁶ For the text of Josephus I rely on: H. St. J. Thackeray, R. Marcus et al., *Josephus* (LCL; Cambridge, Mass, 1926–1965).

¹⁷ The book of Ezekiel is almost never mentioned in *Jewish Antiquities*, and seldom in the other Writings of Josephus. In *Ant.* X, 104–107, Josephus mentions the material from Ezekiel, which is connected to reconstructing the regnal period of Zedekiah of

Jerusalem's destruction, but does not specifically mention the month in which the destruction took place. It seems that Josephus interpreted the "first of the month" in this verse as a reference to the first of Ab in the year 586 BCE.¹⁸

In contrast, in *Jewish War* VI, 250, 268, Josephus determines that the date of the destruction was the "tenth of the month of Ab." He adds: "The tenth of the month Loos [=Ab], the day on which of old it had been burnt by the king of Babylon".¹⁹ This chronological determination was based on his assumption that the Temple was destroyed 470 years, six months and *ten days* after it had been built by Solomon (*Ant.* X, 147).

In Schwartz' view, the many contradictions between *The Jewish War* and the Bible teach that Josephus drew on his memory rather than on any written source.²⁰ Against this, Mason argues that "In any case, since

Judah. It therefore emerges that Josephus also used material from Ezekiel in regard to the date of the destruction.

¹⁸ It appears that this verse refers to some period after the enemy's entry into the city on the ninth of Tammuz, or to the first of Elul, after the city was burned. See M. Greenberg, *The Book of Ezekiel* 21–37 (AB; New York, 1997) 529–530. Greenberg notes the connection between Ezek 26 and Jer 52:5 (ותבא העיר במצור עד עשתי עשרה שנה) (למלך צדקיהו). See further in D.J.A. Clines, "Regnal Year Reckoning in the Last Years of the Kingdom of Judah," in *On the Way to the Postmodern: Old Testament Essays 1967–1998* (2 vols.; JSOTSup 292–293; Sheffield, 1998) 1:395–425. In *y. Ta'an.* 4:6 (68c), one opinion holds that the Temple was destroyed on the first of Ab: מאן דאמר בתשעה לחדש באחד באב חרב הבית, מיום שהובקעה העיר ועד יום שחרב הבית עשרים ואחד יום.

¹⁹ In regard to Josephus' historical accuracy, see H.K. Bond, "New Currents in Josephus Research," *Currents in Research, Biblical Study* 8 (2000) 177–178. Regarding Josephus' description of the First Temple's destruction, see C.T. Begg, *Josephus Story of the Later Monarchy* (*AJ* 9, 1–10, 185) (Leuven, 2000) 586ff.

On the question of the biblical text that Josephus used, see H.W. Attridge, *The Interpretation of Biblical History in the Antiquitates Judaicae of Flavius Josephus* (Missoula, Mont., 1976) 30–33; P. Piovanelli, "Le Texte de Jérémie utilisé par Flavius Josèphe dans le X^e Livre des *Antiquités Judaïques*," *Henoch* 14 (1992) 11–36 (esp. 20–36); Begg, *Josephus Story*, 1–3, 623–626; L.H. Feldman, *Josephus' Interpretation of the Bible* (Berkeley, 1998) 23–36.

²⁰ S. Schwartz, *Josephus and Judaeon Politics* (Leiden, 1990) 25.

Josephus does not set out to discuss the Bible in *Jewish War*, that work presents an inadequate text base for comparison with *Ant[iquities]*.²¹

Rabbinic Interpretation

The rabbis attempted a harmonistic solution to the contradiction:²²

אי אפשר לומר בשבעה, שהרי כבר נאמר בעשור, ואי אפשר לומר בעשור, שהרי כבר נאמר בשבעה. הא כיצד? בשבעה נכנסו נכרים להיכל, ואכלו [ושתו] וקלקלו בו שביעי שמיני, ותשיעי סמוך לחשיכה הציתו בו את האור, והיה דולק והולך כל היום כולו, שנאמר 'אוי לנו כי פנה היום, כי ינטו צללי ערב' (b. *Ta'an*. 29a).

According to this explanation, three days passed between the Babylonians' entry into the Temple and the time they burned it. The rabbis posit that both versions are correct. Most of the medieval and traditional interpreters also take a harmonistic approach similar to this one.²³

²¹ S. Mason, "Review of S. Schwartz...", *Ioudaios Review* 2 (1992) [ftp://ftp.lehigh.edu/pub/listserv/ioudaios-review/2.1992/schwartz.mason.008].

²² The sources in which this solution appears, with certain differences, are: *Seder Olam Rabba*, ch. 27 (C.J. Milikowski, "Seder Olam: A Rabbinic Chronography" [Ph.D. diss., Yale University, New Haven, Conn., 1981] 415); *t. Ta'an*, 3:10 (340 ff.); *y. Ta'an* 4:9 (69b ff.), which parallels *Meg.* 1:6 (70c); and *b. Ta'an* 29a. On the differences among these, see Ch. Milikowsky, "The Date of the Destruction of the First Temple according to 'Seder Olam', the Tosefta, and the Babylonian Talmud: Studies in the Evaluation of a Tradition," *Tarbiz* 64 (1993) 487–500 (Heb.). *b. Roš Haš.* 18b also states that "Both the First and Second Temples were destroyed on the ninth of Ab." In Price's view, the beraita in the Tosefta deals with the destruction of the Second Temple not the of the First. See J.J. Price, *Jerusalem Under Siege: The Collapse of the Jewish State 66–70 C.E.* (Leiden, 1992) 170–171.

²³ On the rabbis' attitude towards chronology, see J. Heinemann, "The Attitude of the Rabbis to Biblical Chronology," in *Studies in the Bible and the Ancient Near East Dedicated to S.E. Loewenstamm* (ed. Y. Avishur and J. Blau; Jerusalem, 1978) 145–152 (Heb.). In *y. Ta'an.*, ch. 4 (68c) we find the following very justified statement: קלקול יש כאן ("There is here an error in numbering"). Among those who followed the rabbinical solution are: Radak, R. Joseph Kara, Malbim, as well as K.F. Keil, *Commentary on the Books of Kings* (ET; Edinburgh, 1867) 179; M. Boleh, *The Book of Jeremiah* (Da'at Mikra; Jerusalem, 1983) 649 (Heb.). See also Y. Schachar, "The Destruction of the Temple in R. Akibah's Concept and the Designation of the Fast Days," *Zion* 68 (2003) 154 (Heb.), who claims that "there is no real inconsistency between the sources." However, a different approach is taken by the Moroccan

However, the London and Vienna manuscripts of the Tosefta on *Ta'an*. 3:10, as well as the printed edition, have the following text: אם נאמ' בתשעה למה נאמר בשבעה בחדש? בחדש, למה נאמר בשבעה בחדש? And in the previous passage in the Tosefta we find: כשחרב בית המקדש בראשונה... ותשעה באב היה וכן בשניה²⁴.

Does this version reflect a Hebrew text that differs from the MT? In Milikowsky's view, we are dealing here with a unique understanding of the narrative in 2 Kgs 25.²⁵ The story does not state in which month the enemy entered the city, and the Tosefta's author therefore connected the fifth month, given in v. 8 as the date on which the Temple was burned, to the mention of the ninth day in regard to the enemy entering the city. We advanced a similar explanation above regarding the Peshitta.

In this context, R. Yohanan's determination is particularly interesting. He states: "Were I a member of that generation, I would have established (the fast day) on the *tenth* day of the month" (*b. Ta'an* 29a). Similarly, "Rabbi Jeremiah taught in the name of R. Hiyya bar Abba: It would have been correct in principle to fast on the tenth day, for on it the Temple was burned" (*y. Meg.* 70c). It seems that these passages base themselves on the idea that much of the conflagration took place on the tenth of Ab, but behind them lies a certain level of uncertainty regarding the date on which the First Temple was destroyed. This uncertainty is demonstrated in the phenomenon of some rabbis fasting on the ninth of Ab and some fasting on the tenth of Ab (*y. Ta'an*. ch. 4; 25b).

commentator R. Raphael Berdugo, who claims that "in the First temple, the fire was set at the Tenth of Ab and in the second—at the ninth." See his *Mesamchei Lev: A Commentary to the Bible* (ed. S. Mashash; Jerusalem 1991) 390.

²⁴ In other passages in rabbinic literature, the date of the First Temple's destruction is also given as the ninth of Ab. See for example, כיון שחרבה ירושלים, בתשעה באב חרבה (Tanhuma-Buber, Numbers, 1).

²⁵ Milikowsky, "The Date of the Destruction," 494.