

## The Talmud's Two Jubilees and Their Relevance to the Date of the Exodus

The Babylonian Talmud mentions two, and only two, occasions for the observance of a Jubilee. The question of whether there actually were Jubilees at the times specified, or whether these passages reflect a later projection of ideas back into a previous age, is a matter of some importance. It bears on the question of when Leviticus was written, because many scholars date the composition of Leviticus, particularly of the so-called "H" or Holiness Code that established the Jubilee and Sabbatical years (Lev 17–26), to exilic or post-exilic times. An exilic or post-exilic date for the Holiness Code would be difficult to maintain if it could be shown that Sabbatical years or Jubilee years were observed before the exile, since the observation of such rituals in the ancient Near East always presupposes their written codification.

One way to evaluate whether the two Jubilees mentioned in the Talmud were genuine historical events is to examine the dates assigned to them. The two passages are in *b. Arak.* 12a, mentioning a Jubilee in the time of Ezekiel, and in *b. Meg.* 14b, mentioning a Jubilee in the time of Josiah. The *'Arakin* passage is as follows: "Is it not written: *In the five and twentieth year of our captivity, in the beginning of the year, in the tenth day of the month, in the fourteenth year after that the city was smitten.* Now which is the year the beginning of which falls on the tenth of Tishri? Say: This is the jubilee year."<sup>1</sup> The argument the Talmud presents here is that the verse quoted (Ezek 40:1) gave the day as both "the beginning of the year" (Rosh HaShanah or New Year's Day) and also as the tenth of the month. Only in a Jubilee year did Rosh HaShanah move from its customary place on the first of Tishri to the tenth of the month. Consequently this verse associates Ezekiel's vision with the beginning of a Jubilee year. The reason for the shift of nine days in the observance of the New Year is explained in tractate *b. Rosh Hash.* 8b: "AND FOR JUBILEE YEARS. [Is the New Year for] Jubilees on the first of Tishri? Surely [the New Year for] Jubilees is on the tenth of Tishri, as it is written . . ." The tractate then begins a citation from Lev 25:9, 10, which says, "You shall then sound a ram's horn abroad on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the day of atonement you shall sound a horn all through your land. You shall thus consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim a release through the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, and each of you shall return to his own property, and each of you shall return to his family" (NASB). Since the Jubilee year was to begin on the Day of Atonement (the tenth of Tishri), this explains why the Talmud says that the only time that Rosh HaShanah was at the same time as the Day of Atonement was in a Jubilee year. Therefore the text of Ezek 40:1 indicates that the date of Ezekiel's vision marked the beginning of a Jubilee.

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Babylonian Talmud* (London: Soncino, 1948).

Ezekiel gives two methods of dating his vision in the text cited. The first is that it was in the twenty-fifth year of the captivity (or exile) that he shared with Jehoiachin. The Babylonian Chronicle says that Jehoiachin was captured on Adar 2 of 597 BC, so that his first year of captivity was in the Judean regnal year that began in Tishri of 598 BC.<sup>2</sup> His twenty-fifth year of captivity was therefore the year beginning in Tishri of 574 BC.<sup>3</sup> Ezekiel also dates his vision to fourteen years after the fall of the city. The Hebrew preposition in this phrase is אַחֲרַיִם, “after,” which implies that a full fourteen years had elapsed since the city fell to Nebuchadnezzar, as can be shown by the use of this preposition in the genealogies of Gen 5 and elsewhere in Scripture. The capture took place in the month of Tammuz in the summer of 587 BC, which was in the year that began in Tishri (the fall) of 588 BC by Judean court reckoning. Fourteen years later was the year beginning in Tishri of 574 BC, in agreement with Ezekiel’s other date-formula. It is of some interest that Ezekiel’s two date-formulas cannot be reconciled if we assume that Ezekiel used Nisan years, or if we assume that the city fell in 586 BC. Both these possibilities are ruled out by Ezekiel’s double method of dating.<sup>4</sup>

The other Talmudic passage indicating a Jubilee is in *b. Meg.* 14b, where there is a discussion of whether Jeremiah was present when Huldah the prophetess was consulted by the representatives of King Josiah (2 Kgs 22:14). The *Megillah* passage is as follows: “R. Johanan said: Jeremiah was not there, as he had gone to bring back the ten tribes. Whence do we know that they returned?—Because it is written, *For the seller shall not return to that which is sold*. Now is it possible that after the Jubilee had ceased the prophet should prophesy that it will cease? The fact is that it teaches that Jeremiah brought them back.” The modern footnote explaining this passage reads “So that in that year they commenced counting years again for the Jubilee.” The reasoning behind this seems altogether obtuse to a modern reader, but the idea is that Jeremiah was not there because he was bringing back the ten tribes from captivity, and when they came back the counting for the Jubilees started over again, since according to rabbinic thinking the Jubilee could not be celebrated unless all twelve tribes were in the land. The text “For the seller shall not return to that which is sold,” from Ezek 7:13, was cited because it

<sup>2</sup> For evidence that Judah measured its regnal years from Tishri, see Edwin Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1981), 51–53, or D. J. A. Clines, “The Evidence for an Autumnal New Year in Pre-Exilic Israel Reconsidered,” *JBL* 93 (1974): 22–26.

<sup>3</sup> The Hebrew preposition “of” in the phrase “of our captivity” is לְ, which must be taken in the sense given here. It never means “after.” By a similar usage in English, when we speak of our first year of college we mean the time before we had been there a full year.

<sup>4</sup> See the discussion of all date-formulas associated with the end of the Judean monarchy in Rodger Young, “When Did Jerusalem Fall?” *JETS* 47 (2004): 21–38 (online: <http://etsjets.org/jets/journal/jets.html>). Even the expedient of saying that Jehoiachin’s exile began one month later than when he was taken captive, in Nisan instead of Adar, will not allow Ezekiel’s two date-formulas to agree with a 586 date for the fall of the city. Ezekiel, as a priest, would have been quite careful about the designation of dates. We do a disservice to him and to the other writers of Scripture when we assume that their methods of reckoning time were not exact, and when we impose our ideas of how they should have counted years on the texts instead of making it our first priority to find out what system they were using.

was assumed to pertain to a time a few years later, and it was further assumed that the reference is to one of the characteristics of a Jubilee year, namely the returning of individuals to their ancestral property. Rabbi Johanan was arguing that the Jubilees must have been reestablished under Jeremiah, because otherwise Ezekiel, some time later, would not have said that they would cease at a future time.

The idea that Jeremiah brought back the ten tribes is of course utterly fantastic. This notion was introduced to explain how a Jubilee could have been observed in that year. Since apparently a Jubilee was observed at that time, and since it was assumed that all twelve tribes had to be in the land in order for there to be a Jubilee, therefore the ten tribes must have gotten back into the land somehow. The *Megillah* passage said that this “teaches that Jeremiah brought them back”—in other words, Jeremiah’s bringing them back was inferred from the observation that all twelve tribes must have been in the land, which in turn was inferred from the observation that a Jubilee was observed in the year that Josiah asked advice of the prophetess Huldah. The whole chain of reasoning is patently fallacious, but that does not mean that the premise it started from, and which it was trying to explain, was fallacious. That initial premise was that a Jubilee was observed at the time specified. The consultation with Huldah took place in the eighteenth year of Josiah (2 Kgs 22:3), which gives the year for the assumed Jubilee.<sup>5</sup>

The faulty reasoning in *b. Meg.* 14b might tempt us to discard altogether its assumption of a Jubilee in Josiah’s eighteenth year, even though the Jubilee was the starting place for the faulty reasoning rather than the conclusion of that reasoning. But there are two additional arguments that support the passage’s starting premise that there was a Jubilee at that time. The first argument is that evidence for such a Jubilee is found in a source older than the Talmud. The second argument is mathematical.

The source older than the Talmud is the Seder ‘Olam, a rabbinic work of the second century AD, attributed by the Talmud (*b. Nid.* 46b, *b. Yebam.* 82b) to Rabbi Yose ben Halaphta, a disciple of the famous Rabbi Akiba. It is widely recognized that the Seder ‘Olam forms the basis of the chronological reckonings of both the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds. Many of its chronological statements were incorporated in the *Mishnah*, which is a body of learning that was memorized by rabbinic scholars after the destruction of the Second Temple in an attempt to preserve the nation’s traditions. Between AD 100 and AD 500 rabbinic scholars contributed comments, called *Gemara*, to explain the Mishnah. These two sources, the Mishnah and the Gemara, were combined to form the Talmud, of which there are two forms, the Jerusalem Talmud, completed about AD 400, and the Babylonian Talmud, completed about AD 500. The Babylonian Talmud is the more frequently quoted of these, and a reference to just “the Talmud” can be taken as referring to that source.

---

<sup>5</sup> The *Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York and London: Funk and Wagnalls, 1909, 10:607) simplifies and summarizes the discussion of this passage in the Talmud by saying that “[t]he sixteenth jubilee occurred in the eighteenth year of Josiah . . .” This is consistent with the modern footnote in the Talmud that states that counting for the Jubilee began again at that time.

Anyone reading either of the Talmuds soon recognizes that their general pattern of presentation is to cite a Scriptural text or a passage from the Mishnah, and then to present, in the Gemara, the statements of various rabbis who attempt to explain or draw conclusions from the passage cited. Usually the diverse opinions and disagreements are presented with no firm conclusion drawn to resolve the issues discussed. As can be seen from the quoted *Megillah* passage, these explanations of the selection from the Scripture or the Mishnah can be highly imaginative. How could anyone believe that Jeremiah, whose life-story was to be rebuffed by kings, priests, and fellow-villagers, and whose advice was soundly rejected by all these at each of several crisis points, was somehow a great leader of men who rallied the ten tribes in their diaspora and triumphantly brought them back into the land?

The fancifulness of such a Gemara should not obscure the fact that what the Gemara was trying to explain may have been not at all fanciful. As a generalization, it could be said that the source that any Gemara was attempting to explain was considered as authoritative, while the various opinions in the Gemara itself were acknowledged as speculative. Applying this understanding to the *Megillah* passage, the points that were accepted as authoritative were the two Scriptural references cited and the idea that there was a Jubilee in Josiah's eighteenth year. The premise of a Jubilee in Josiah's eighteenth year apparently arose from the fact that it is mentioned in the Seder 'Olam, and the Talmud generally accepts quotations from the Seder 'Olam as authoritative. Chapter 24 of the Seder 'Olam cites 2 Kgs 22:3 referring to the eighteenth year of Josiah and then says, "In that year, the book of the Torah was found in the Temple and that year was also the beginning of a Jubilee. In that year had Josiah made repairs to the Temple."<sup>6</sup> This explains why the *Megillah* passage presupposed that there was a Jubilee at that time: it was trying to reconcile this passage in the Seder 'Olam with the rabbinic idea that a Jubilee could not have been celebrated at the time unless all twelve tribes were in the land. The 'Arakin passage about a Jubilee shows the source of these traditions quite plainly, because the discussion there is preceded by three quotations from Chapter 11 of the Seder 'Olam.

Before proceeding with the second argument (the mathematical argument) for the historicity of a Jubilee in Josiah's eighteenth year, it will be useful to introduce a convenient way of displaying dates in the Hebrew calendrical system. In order to

---

<sup>6</sup> The most recent translation of the Seder 'Olam into English is that of Heinrich Guggenheimer, *Seder Olam—the Rabbinic View of Biblical Chronology* (Northvale N.J. and Jerusalem: Jason Aronson, 1998). This phrase about the Jubilee is not in Guggenheimer's translation, apparently because it was omitted in some non-European manuscripts. It appears in other translations, and Guggenheimer accepts that the statement about the Jubilee must have been in the original text of the Seder 'Olam when he says on p. 224: "Since Josiah had the Temple renovated in the Jubilee year . . ." The reason for the omission in some manuscripts may have been because it is not possible to reconcile a Jubilee at that time with the time of the following Jubilee using Rabbi Yose's non-accession counting. As will be demonstrated shortly, the impossibility of such reconciliation is an argument in favor of a real Jubilee in the eighteenth year of Josiah, not a hypothesized Jubilee based on a calculation scheme.

express the Judean regnal year, which began in the fall month of Tishri, we shall write the BC year in which it began followed by a small “t,” for Tishri. Sabbatical and Jubilee years may be written in this fashion, since according to the Talmud (*b. Rosh Hash. 1a*) Sabbatical and Jubilee years also began in Tishri. A year beginning in Nisan will be expressed by the BC year followed by a small “n,” for Nisan.<sup>7</sup> With this notation, we can say that Josiah came to the throne in 641t (a date that was established by Edwin Thiele<sup>8</sup>), and his thirty-one year reign ended in 610t. His eighteenth year, the year that the Talmud gives for a Jubilee, was therefore  $641t - 18 = 623t$ . This is exactly forty-nine years before the date of the other Jubilee mentioned in the Talmud, which was 574t in the notation that has been introduced here.

There is rather weighty evidence from ancient records that the Jubilee cycle was forty-nine years in length, not fifty years as assumed by most modern commentators. The Talmud has repeated debates on this issue, with the name of Rabbi Judah associated with the argument for a forty-nine year cycle (*b. 'Arak. 3c, b. Rosh Hash. 9a*). Post-Talmudic commentators such as Maimonides and Rashi generally settled on a fifty-year cycle. Sources earlier than the Talmud, however, very strongly indicate that the cycle was forty-nine years. These sources include the *Book of Jubilees* (second century BC) and the fragments from Qumran known as *11QMelchizedek* or *11QMelch* (probably early first century AD).<sup>9</sup> The *Book of Jubilees* everywhere assumes that the Jubilee cycle was forty-nine years, and the work would have had no credibility with its intended audience if people in the second century BC thought that the Jubilee cycle was fifty years. In *11QMelch*, the seventy “sevens” of Daniel 9:24 are interpreted as seventy weeks of years, and these 490 years are then characterized as ten Jubilee periods. Further historical evidence comes from the practice of the Samaritan community, which observed a forty-nine year cycle.<sup>10</sup> The well-known animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans makes this an important independent piece of evidence, because the Samaritans would not be likely to have been influenced by any late Jewish writings or practices concerning the Jubilees, but very probably preserved the original tradition in this matter.

There are other reasons that favor a forty-nine year cycle. The ancient sources that deal with the Jubilees (the Scriptures, the Babylonian Talmud, and the Seder 'Olam) always assumed that the Jubilee cycles and the Sabbatical cycles would be in phase, which could not have been the case for a cycle length of fifty years unless an extra year were inserted in the Sabbatical cycles every time a Jubilee occurred, and there is no mention

---

<sup>7</sup> The religious year began in Nisan (Exod 12:2), as did the regnal years of Babylon, Assyria, and the northern kingdom of Israel. I have elsewhere called this way of expressing dates the “Nisan/Tishri” notation. Notice that with this system, 623n represents a twelve-month period that is six months earlier than the twelve-month period represented by 623t.

<sup>8</sup> Thiele, *Mysterious Numbers*, 180–81.

<sup>9</sup> Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (rev. ed.; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1998), 128.

<sup>10</sup> A. Neubauer, *Chronique Samaritaine* (1873), 3, 8 ff., cited in *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972), 14 col. 579.

in these writings of any such extra year. Also, despite some misunderstandings in this regard, there is no mention anywhere in Scripture of two voluntary fallow years in succession, which would be required if the Jubilee year were a separate fiftieth year following the seventh Sabbatical cycle.<sup>11</sup> All these problems are resolved by assuming that the cycle length was forty-nine years, so that the forty-ninth year was both a Sabbatical year and a Jubilee. Lev 25:9 says that the Jubilee year was to be announced, and presumably began, in the seventh month of the forty-ninth year of the Jubilee cycle. The seventh month is reckoned according to the religious calendar that began in Nisan in the spring. According to this way of expressing things, the Jubilee really began in year forty-nine-and-one-half of the cycle. Such terminology is of course foreign to the Scripture; it is simply called the fiftieth year. The Talmud (*b. Rosh Hash.* 1a) says that Sabbatical and Jubilee years both began in Tishri, and so the seventh Sabbatical year and the Jubilee year began at the same time, on the Day of Atonement of the forty-ninth year of the cycle.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Some authors cite Lev 25:21, 22 as evidence for a Sabbatical year followed by a Jubilee year. But these two verses are only speaking of the Sabbatical cycle. The “eighth year” here is the first year of the next Sabbatical cycle, just as the “ninth” year is the second year of that cycle. The eighth year could not be a Jubilee because planting is mentioned for that year, whereas planting and reaping are forbidden for a Jubilee year (Lev 25:11). Others have imagined that Isa 37:30 and its parallel in 2 Kgs 19:29 refer to a Sabbatical year followed by a Jubilee year, since the prophecy speaks of two years in succession in which there would be no harvest. But the first year could not be a Sabbatical year, because in it the people were allowed to eat “what grows of itself,” for which the Hebrew word is **חִפְיָו**. In Lev 25:5 the reaping of the **חִפְיָו** is forbidden during a Sabbatical year. Whatever the exact meaning is for this word, its use in Isaiah’s prophecy and its prohibition in Lev 25:5 means that the first year of the Isaiah and Second Kings passages could not have been a Sabbatical year. This rules out the possibility that the passage is dealing with a Sabbatical year followed by a year of Jubilee. The proper understanding of the passage is that the harvest of the first year had been destroyed by the Assyrians, and the defeat of the Assyrian army came too late in the year to allow sowing that year. The destruction of the Assyrian host came the night after the giving of the prophecy (2 Kgs 19:35), so the reason that sowing and reaping were forbidden for the next year must have been because that year, the second year of the prophecy, was going to be a Sabbatical year. Isa 37:30 says that in the second year the people could eat the **חִפְיָו**, a word that only appears here and in the parallel passage in Second Kings, and which seems to correspond to the **שְׂבַת הָאָרֶץ**, the “sabbath products of the land,” that were allowed to be eaten in a Sabbatical year in Lev 25:6.

<sup>12</sup> A recent study dedicated to the biblical Jubilee also comes to the conclusion that the Jubilee year was identical to the seventh sabbatical year. See Jean-François Lefebvre, *Le Jubilé Biblique: Lv 25 — Exégèse et Théologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), pp. 154–66. Lefebvre arrives at this conclusion primarily by a careful examination of the text of Lev 25 and passages related to it in the Pentateuch, with only a slight consideration of the practical issues involved and no consideration at all of the arguments from history that have been employed in the present paper. In a carefully reasoned argument, Lefebvre contradicts other recent studies by showing the unity of the sabbatical and Jubilee legislation. His reasoning, however, for assigning the sabbatical and Jubilee legislation to the Persian period (pp. 331–32) could with equal or better logic date the legislation to the period when Israel was about to take possession of the land of Canaan. The strength of Lefebvre’s work is his literary analysis and his extensive exploration of the theological import of these laws. One weakness is exemplified in his statement that “No trace of the observance of the jubilee is detectable either in the Bible or in extra-biblical literature” (p. 333).

The mathematical argument to support the authenticity of the two Talmudic dates for a Jubilee is based on the observation that the dates for the two Jubilees mentioned were exactly forty-nine years apart, in agreement with these various arguments that establish a forty-nine year cycle. The calculation methods of the authors of the Talmud, however, were inadequate to determine that the eighteenth year of Josiah was exactly forty-nine years before the vision of Ezek 40:1. Talmudic reckoning of regnal years was by the non-accession method, which means that the last year of a king's life was counted twice, once for him and once for his successor, so that one year needs to be subtracted from the Scriptural years of reign when adding reign lengths to determine elapsed time. This method of calculation was taken over from the Seder 'Olam, where the non-accession method of counting is made explicit in Chapters 4 and 12. Furthermore, the 850 years that Seder 'Olam assigns to Israel's time in the land (Chapter 11) can only be reconciled when non-accession counting is used for all Judean regnal years. This 850-year figure is accepted in the Talmud (*b. Git* 88a, *b. Sanh.* 38a) without question, again showing the great authority that the Talmud gave to the Seder 'Olam in chronological matters.

Using the non-accession years of the Seder 'Olam and the Talmud, the time between the eighteenth year of Josiah and Ezekiel's vision would be thirteen years remaining until the thirty-first year of Josiah, then zero years for Jehoahaz's three months,<sup>13</sup> ten years for Jehoiakim, zero years for Jehoiachin, ten years for Zedekiah, and then fourteen years to Ezekiel's vision. The total is  $13 + 10 + 10 + 14 = 47$  years between the two times that the Talmud gives for Jubilees, rather than the correct figure of forty-nine years that can be established by modern scholarship, as anchored to fixed dates from the Babylonian Chronicle. The evidence therefore is that the Talmud and the Seder 'Olam did not establish the date of the Jubilee in the days of Josiah by calculation. The only alternative that suggests itself and which explains why the time between the two Jubilees is exactly correct is that the dates of these two Jubilees were from observation—that is the remembrance of historical events. The years came out correctly because the priests were actually counting Sabbatical and Jubilee years during these times.

This does not mean that the people in general were practicing the stipulations of the Jubilee and Sabbatical years, as spelled out in Chapters 25 and 27 of Leviticus. It only implies that the Levitical priests (Ezekiel was one of them, as was Jeremiah) were faithful in carrying out their obligation to keep track of the Sabbatical and Jubilee cycles over the years, whether or not the people chose to obey the commands associated with those years. As in other Near Eastern societies, it was the duty of the priests to preserve all calendrical cycles. As long as the priests did this, the system of Sabbatical and

---

<sup>13</sup> That zero years are assigned to both Jehoahaz and Jehoiachin is evident from the 850-year summation for Israel's time in the land, which was derived by the adding of Judean reign lengths to the 439 years from the start of the conquest to the fourth year of Solomon (see 1 Kgs 6:1 [Hebrew] and Josh 5:6). The Seder 'Olam implicitly assumed that the reigns of Jehoahaz and Jehoiachin did not cross a New-Year boundary to begin a new regnal year, which would have been necessary if Judean court scribes were to assign a reign of one year.

Jubilee years was a marvelous device for measuring the years over a long period of time. The interlocking nature of the two cycles, with seven Sabbatical cycles making up one Jubilee cycle, was a means of insuring accuracy throughout the centuries of Israel's existence in the land. A lapse of even one year would have been ruled out by the shortness of the Sabbatical cycle, and the larger Jubilee cycle would have preserved the correct span of time for long-term measurements. If the priests kept track of the years in this way, then the system would have exceeded in accuracy even the *limmu*-lists of the Assyrians that are usually regarded as the backbone of ancient Near Eastern chronology. This is perhaps how one of the judges, Jephthah, knew that it was 300 years from the conquest of the trans-Jordan region to his own day (Judg 11:26). It may also explain how the author of 1 Kgs 6:1 knew that 479 years had passed from the Exodus to the laying of the foundation of Solomon's Temple, so that he could date that latter event in the 480th year of the Exodus era.

Evidence that the Sabbatical/Jubilee system functioned in this way—as a calendrical system for keeping track of the years—is found in the Babylonian Talmud. Tractate *b. Sanh.* 40a,b says that in the time of the judges the courts made a formal record of an event (a crime, a contract, etc.) by asking in which Septennate (Sabbatical cycle) of a Jubilee and in which year of the Septennate an event occurred. This is followed by a discussion of whether it was necessary to ask in which Jubilee the event happened, with the conclusion that such a question would not be necessary because a court trial would only be concerned with recent events, not those that took place in past Jubilee cycles. According to the Talmud, then, the Jubilee and Sabbatical cycles provided an exact method of keeping track of the years for legal purposes. Notice that there is no consideration given here to the possibility that the Septennates could be out of phase with the Jubilee cycles, as might be expected if the cycle length were fifty years.

The system of dating described in *b. Sanh.* 40a,b is used in the apocalyptic *Book of Jubilees*, usually dated to the second century BC. In *Jubilees*, Adam's death is said to have occurred in the sixth year of the seventh Sabbatical period of the nineteenth Jubilee. This is certainly an imaginative projection of the system back in time, since Jubilees were not instituted until Israel entered Canaan. It shows, however, that this concept of dating was known in the second century BC. A better example, one that indicates a real usage as contrasted with the artificial schemata of *Jubilees*, is taken from the practice of the Samaritan community. In the fourteenth century AD, an editor of the Samaritans' *Tolidah* wrote on his copy of the text that he finished his work in the sixty-first Jubilee cycle since the entry into Canaan, in the fourth year of the fifth Sabbatical of that cycle.<sup>14</sup> These examples show that there is nothing at all improbable in the Talmud's remark that this kind of reckoning was done in the days of the judges.

---

<sup>14</sup> *Encyclopedia Judaica*, article "Samaritans," 14, col. 751. When I inquired of the present-day Samaritans if they still observe the Jubilee, a member of the community replied that the calculation of the Jubilee was lost some hundreds of years ago, but that today the priests are making an effort to return to the year when the calculation was stopped and to start counting again. Another person closely associated with the community affirmed that the counting would be according to a forty-nine year cycle.

But did it continue later? Are there any evidences that the priests were marking the Sabbatical and Jubilee cycles continuously from the time of the judges down to the Jubilees in the days of Josiah and Ezekiel? There are indeed such evidences, arising from considerations that are quite independent of those already discussed. The first consideration has to do with the recognition of a Sabbatical year in the days of Zedekiah. The relevant passage is Jer 34:8–22, where King Zedekiah proclaimed a release of all Hebrew indentured servants. Although the original intent of the law for Hebrew servants was that the servant was to go free at the end of six years of service, irrespective of when those years started (Deut 15:12), in later years it became customary to associate the time of release with a Sabbatical year, consistent with the Sabbatical year being called a year of release (*shemittah*) in Deut 31:10.<sup>15</sup> In agreement with this is the observation that Zedekiah released all the slaves at the same time. Therefore in the eighteenth century, William Whiston asserted that Zedekiah's emancipation would have taken place at the beginning of a Sabbatical year,<sup>16</sup> an idea that resurfaced in the twentieth century in the writings of Cyrus Gordon.<sup>17</sup> Pursuing this idea, Nahum Sarna used the chronological notes of Jer 34, coupled with a passage in Ezekiel (Ezek 30:20–21), to date the release to Tishri in the year 588 BC.<sup>18</sup> The consequence is that Zedekiah recognized 588t as a Sabbatical year. This has an immediate correlation with the Jubilees observed in 623t and 574t; since each Jubilee year was also a Sabbatical year, the year fourteen years prior to 574t must also have been a Sabbatical year.<sup>19</sup> The consequence is that a Sabbatical year in 588t is consistent

---

<sup>15</sup> The release was from the payment of debt-installments.

<sup>16</sup> Wm. Whiston in *Josephus, Complete Works* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1964), Dissertation V, paragraph 46 (p. 703). The original edition was published in 1737.

<sup>17</sup> Cyrus Gordon, "Sabbatical Cycle or Seasonal Pattern?" *Or* 22 (1953): 81.

<sup>18</sup> Nahum Sarna, "Zedekiah's Emancipation of Slaves and the Sabbatical Year" in *Orient and Occident: Essays presented to Cyrus H. Gordon on the Occasion of his Sixty-fifth Birthday* (ed. H. Hoffner, Jr.; Neukirchen: Butzon & Bercker Kevelaer, 1973), 144–45. Although Sarna followed the chronologies of Thiele and Malamat that gave 586 for the fall of Jerusalem, he correctly determined from Ezek 30:20–21 that the Egyptian relief force had been rebuffed before Nisan of 587, which was his pivotal date in placing the manumission in the previous fall.

<sup>19</sup> From these considerations, it is obvious that a complete list of pre-exilic Sabbatical years may be constructed, similar to the lists of post-exilic Sabbatical years given by such scholars as Zuckermann and Wacholder. The Talmud (*b. 'Arak.* 32b) and Seder 'Olam Ch. 30 state that the counting of Sabbatical years began anew after the exile, in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah (Neh 9:38, 10:28, 29), so there is no reason to expect that the cycle of post-exilic years would be in agreement with pre-exilic Sabbatical years when compared to any modern (absolute) calendar. The Seder 'Olam mentions pre-exilic Sabbatical years in several passages, but an adequate treatment of Sabbatical and Jubilee years in the Seder 'Olam has yet to be published. For now, it could be mentioned that when the Seder 'Olam uses the 850 years that it calculated for Israel's time in the land, its computations of the times for Sabbatical years and Jubilee years are in error, but this 850-year figure and calculations from it are abandoned for the last two Jubilees—those in 623t and 574t. The reason for the abandonment of the calculation scheme is that the dates for these two Jubilees were not subject to calculation or speculation because they were based on historical remembrance of Jubilees. Rabbi Yose could not move the times for these last two Jubilees even though their dates conflicted with the calculation scheme he had used earlier in the Seder 'Olam. The ones who set these times were Israel's priests, not the author of Seder 'Olam.

with the idea that a Jubilee was observed in 574t, and therefore we have another confirmation that the priests were keeping track of the Sabbatical and Jubilee years at the end of the Judean monarchy.<sup>20</sup>

Evidence that the priests were marking the Sabbatical and Jubilee cycles long before this, starting from the time of Israel's entry in the land under Joshua and then continuing down to the days of Josiah, Zedekiah, and Ezekiel, is found in an incidental reference in Seder 'Olam Chapter 11. In this passage, Rabbi Yose cites Ezek 40:1, and then says that the vision referred to in this verse was "at the beginning of a Jubilee."<sup>21</sup> It is further stated that the Jubilee completed seventeen Jubilee periods. Its numbering as the seventeenth Jubilee is repeated in the Talmud (*b. 'Arak. 12b*). Could this also be a remembered tradition, just as it was argued above that the times of the Jubilees in the days of Josiah and Ezekiel were based on remembrance, not on a later calculation? In Lev 25:8, Israel was commanded to count the Sabbatical cycles, and if the Sabbatical and Jubilee cycles were being used for calendrical purposes as indicated earlier, then the Jubilee cycles would also have been counted. It should not be considered as anything remarkable that the priests would have known which Jubilee they were observing.

An easy way to check whether the reported Jubilee number is reasonable is to do the arithmetic. If the seventeenth Jubilee was due in 574t, then the first Jubilee, sixteen cycles earlier, was due in  $574t + (16 \times 49) = 1358t$ . The year starting in Nisan of 1358 BC was therefore the forty-ninth year of the first Jubilee cycle, in accordance with Lev 25:8–10. The first year of that cycle, forty-eight years earlier, was the year that began in Nisan of 1406 BC. The reference to the seventeenth Jubilee in the Seder 'Olam and the Talmud therefore allows us to place the entry into the promised land in Nisan of 1406 BC. The Exodus, forty years earlier, took place in Nisan of 1446 BC. This is in exact agreement with the date that many writers have already inferred for the Exodus, based on the statement in 1 Kgs 6:1 that Temple construction began in the 480th year of the

---

<sup>20</sup> Gordon, "Sabbatical Cycle" 81, wrote, "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. Accordingly, the construction of an Anno Mundi chronology in terms of Jubilees and Sabbatical Cycles in the *Book of Jubilees* is not a late invention out of thin air, but rather a logical conclusion of institutions harking back to a pre-Israelite past."

<sup>21</sup> Guggenheimer somewhat inappropriately translates בתחלת היובל in the Seder 'Olam passage as "[a]t the beginning of a Jubilee period" instead of the simpler and more accurate "at the beginning of a Jubilee." It is of some interest that the part of Ezek 40:1 that says it was Rosh HaShanah and also the tenth of the month is not included in the citation in the Seder 'Olam passage (only the beginning of the verse is given—the reader was expected to supply the rest of the verse by memory), and no argument is given to say that this implies a Jubilee year, as is done in the Talmud. Rabbi Yose simply writes, apparently based on historical remembrance, that the vision was "at the beginning of a Jubilee."

Exodus era, which was also Solomon's fourth year, and also based on Edwin Thiele's date of 931n for the death of Solomon and the beginning of the divided monarchies.<sup>22</sup> The correspondence between these two ways of determining the date for the entrance into Canaan is not a rabbit out of a hat—that is, a sudden wild idea produced to support a far-fetched theory. Thiele's date for the beginning of the divided monarchy has stood the test of time and scholarly scrutiny since it was first published over fifty years ago,<sup>23</sup> and when we measure from Solomon's death before the seventh month (Tishri) of that year, then the information contained in 1 Kgs 6:1 yields the same date for the entry into Canaan as that given by calculating from the Jubilee cycles. How can this be explained except by accepting the basic hypothesis that 623t really was a Jubilee year, the sixteenth, and 574t really was the time of the seventeenth Jubilee? In other words, that these were real events—real at least in the sense that the priests knew to announce the Jubilees at those times, whether or not the people chose to obey their stipulations. Certainly no writer before the time of Thiele could firmly establish 1446 as the date of the Exodus, because the crucial date for the beginning of the divided monarchies was not properly derived until Thiele's work in the middle of the twentieth century. This includes the writers of the Seder 'Olam and the Talmuds; their calculation methods are not capable of coming up with this date. The only alternative seems to be that we have here a direct evidence that counting for the Sabbatical and Jubilee cycles started in 1406 BC, and that Israel's priests were faithful over the years in proclaiming the Sabbatical and Jubilee years, blowing the *shofar* every forty-nine years to a largely unheeding people, until that tragic day fourteen years after the destruction of the city when it was time once again for a Jubilee but it could not be observed because the people were captives in a foreign land.

---

<sup>22</sup> See Rodger Young, "When Did Solomon Die?" *JETS* 46 (2003): 589–603 (online: <http://etsjets.org/jets/journal/jets.html>) for a slight disagreement with the way these figures are usually handled. In that study, it is shown that placing Solomon's death before Tishri of 931n, rather than in the latter half of that year as assumed by Thiele, resolved problems that Thiele's chronology encountered with the reigns of Jehoshaphat, Ahaziah, and Athaliah. Another correction is that the Hebrew expression for the passage of time in 1 Kgs 6:1 means that 479 years had passed, not 480, since the time of the Exodus. These two corrections combine to agree with the date of 1446 BC calculated by most writers who assume the validity of 1 Kgs 6:1. Those who approach the Scriptures with the viewpoint that they are not reliable in historical and chronological matters interpret the 480 years of 1 Kgs 6:1 as a stylized number that was artificially constructed to represent a certain number of generations. The impartial reader should be able to judge for himself or herself whether such a viewpoint can explain the phenomena presented in the present article.

<sup>23</sup> Among the many scholars who have accepted Thiele's date of 931n for the beginning of the divided monarchies are T. C. Mitchell, "Israel and Judah until the Revolt of Jehu (931–841 B.C.)," in *Cambridge Ancient History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982) III, Part 1, 445–46; John H. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, editors, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1983), 632; Leslie McFall, "A Translation Guide to the Chronological Data in Kings and Chronicles," *BSac* 148 (1991): 12; Gershom Galil, *The Chronology of the Kings of Israel and Judah* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 14; Finegan, *Handbook*, 246, 249; Kenneth Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 83.

A logical consequence of this is that since the counting for the Sabbatical and Jubilee cycles started in 1406 BC, then the laws establishing the counting were in existence in written form at that time, consistent with the practice of all surrounding nations to codify in writing all such matters of ritual and legal practice. One explanation that is not possible is the contention that the Sabbatical and Jubilee cycles were established in either the exilic or post-exilic period and those who originated the legislation then claimed that it came from the time of Moses. Such an exilic or post-exilic deception is ruled out because of 1) the incidental way in which the text of Ezek 40:1 is phrased—it does not state directly that a Jubilee was due at that time, but the date-formula used shows that it was a Jubilee year; 2) the evidence for a pre-exilic Sabbatical year in the time of Zedekiah; 3) the fact that the date for Zedekiah's Sabbatical year fits the pre-exilic calendar as derived from the Jubilee cycles; 4) the remembrance of another Jubilee in the time of Josiah, forty-nine years before Ezekiel's Jubilee, whereas later writers could not have calculated this time correctly; 5) the "coincidence" that the times for the Jubilees in the days of Josiah and Ezekiel would make 1406 BC, the year of entry into Canaan based on 1 Kgs 6:1, to be the first year of a Jubilee cycle; and 6) the extreme coincidence that 1406 would have marked the beginning of the very first cycle when we take into account the tradition that Ezekiel's Jubilee was the seventeenth Jubilee. These last two considerations are also incompatible with any theory that dates the establishment of the laws of the Sabbatical and Jubilee years as late as the early monarchic period, or even as late as the latter part of the time of the judges. Alternative explanations are invited, but at the present time there is only one theory that explains all these phenomena, and it is that the Book of Leviticus was in Israel's possession in 1406 BC.

### CONCLUSION

Evidence has been presented to show that the chronological calculations of the Talmud were incapable of correctly determining the dates of the Talmud's two Jubilees, so that these dates must have been based on historical remembrance, not on calculation. That a Jubilee was due in 574 BC can also be inferred from a close look at the text of Ezek 40:1 even without reference to the Talmud, but the Talmud is helpful in explaining why the Hebrew text of this verse implies a Jubilee at that time. The Talmud's other Jubilee, in Josiah's eighteenth year, can be dated to forty-nine years before Ezekiel's Jubilee, consistent with evidence from antiquity and with several other considerations that show that the Jubilee cycle was forty-nine years, not fifty years as assumed by modern commentators who never faced the practical issues involved in carrying out the commands that instituted the Sabbatical and Jubilee cycles. Ezekiel's Jubilee is called the seventeenth Jubilee in the Talmud and the Seder 'Olam, which would mean that counting for the Sabbatical and Jubilee years began at the entry of Israel into Canaan in 1406 BC, with the Exodus in 1446 BC. This is in exact agreement with the date of the Exodus derived from Thiele's date for the beginning of the divided monarchies and the chronological note in 1 Kgs 6:1. It is difficult to imagine how this remarkable agreement for the year of the Exodus as derived by two independent means of calculation can be explained by theories that place Israel's entry into Canaan at any

time other than 1406 BC, or that deny that Israel, at that time, had in its possession the legislation of the Book of Leviticus that established the Sabbatical and Jubilee cycles. Thus the Talmud's two Jubilees are compatible with a careful exegesis of Ezek 40:1, and dates that can be calculated for these two Jubilees provide a verification that the 480 years of 1 Kgs 6:1 and the date of the Exodus that can be determined from this number are historically authentic figures. The elegance of the system of Sabbatical and Jubilee cycles in providing a long-term calendar for Israel and thereby supplying this verification should be manifest to anyone except to those who have a fixed commitment to the subjective source-analyses of the higher critical schools, since such theorizings start from the *a priori* presupposition that the Book of Leviticus could not have been written as early as 1406 BC.