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 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


However, we find a different version in the Lucianic recension of Kings (boce2), in the Peshitta and in a number of Hebrew medieval MSS of Kings. In these we find the version “the ninth.”

It seems to us that we cannot infer from this similarity that the Greek and the Syriac translators had a different Hebrew Vorlage. 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.


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 תֵּיתִים (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.

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 without mentioning the exact month. In MS 7a1 of the Peshitta, the statement (‘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.

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 as in Jer 52 and in the Peshitta there, and since this was not done, it would seem that the date was used to accord with the rabbinic tradition.

We find one more mention of “the ninth.” The MT to Jer 39:2, the LXX 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. 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 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. 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.

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.

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

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


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


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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, 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., 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. According to the following verses, the temple seems to still be functioning (Bar 1:7, 10, 14; 2:16).

The Evidence of Josephus

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.” In this prophecy, Ezekiel criticizes Tyre for rejoicing at ...

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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.  

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”. 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. 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 (תַּלְמוּדת הָיִרְמָא דֶּרֶךְ שָׁמַיִם). 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: אֶלְמַעַד אֲדֹמֶר-brand אֲדֹמֶר מֶה שְׁחִיטוּת הָיִרְמָא דֶּרֶךְ שָׁמַיִם. 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: אֶלְמַעַד אֲדֹמֶר-brand אֲדֹמֶר מֶה שְׁחִיטוּת הָיִרְמָא דֶּרֶךְ שָׁמַיִם.


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

Rabbinic Interpretation

The rabbis attempted a harmonistic solution to the contradiction:22

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


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 4:68c* we find the following very justified statement: קִלֵּי לַקֵּץ שָׁמַר (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: "ומדה, למחר, ולא כומרי. ... ומשנה בא ביביה ומשנה ביביה." And in the previous passage in the Tosefta we find: "וכשחרב בית המקדש ברושאנו... ומשנה בא ביביה."24

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 *Mesamehei 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, *כין שחרת ביביה ומשנה בא ביביה* (*Tanhuma-Buber, Numbers, 1*).