

When Did Jerusalem Fall?

607, 587, and the Date on Which 1914 Depends

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I. One Nail

Every distinctive Watchtower date hangs from a single nail. The year 1914—when Christ is said to have been enthroned invisibly as heavenly King—is not observed from anything that happened in 1914. It is calculated: 2,520 years, counted forward from the destruction of Jerusalem, which the Society dates to 607 B.C.E. From 1914 hangs 1919, when Christ is said to have inspected the religions of the world and appointed the Watchtower organization over all his belongings; and from 1919 hangs the Governing Body's claim to speak for God today. The chain is explicit in the Society's own publications, and it is honest about its own structure: pull the nail of 607, and everything above it comes down.

Here is the difficulty. Virtually every historian and archaeologist of the ancient Near East dates Jerusalem's destruction to 587 or 586 B.C.E.—twenty years later than the Society's date. This is not a fashionable guess but the verdict of a converging mass of evidence: king

lists, royal chronicles, tens of thousands of dated commercial documents, and astronomical observations that anyone with the right software can check against the sky. The Watchtower knows this, concedes it in print, and holds 607 anyway. This essay examines whether that position can be held honestly—and what follows if it cannot.

II. The Watchtower's Case, Fairly Stated

The Society's fullest public defense is a two-part study, "When Was Ancient Jerusalem Destroyed?", in the October and November 2011 issues of *The Watchtower*. It deserves to be summarized fairly, because it is franker than most readers expect. It concedes the state of scholarship plainly: "At present, the majority of secular historians believe that Jerusalem was destroyed in 587 B.C.E."¹

The affirmative case runs as follows. Jeremiah prophesied that "this whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years" (Jer. 25:11, as the article renders it). The Watchtower reads those seventy years as a full desolation of Judah, running from Jerusalem's destruction to the exiles' return. The return can be dated: Babylon fell to Cyrus in 539 B.C.E., and "by the fall of 537 B.C.E., the Jews had returned to Jerusalem to restore true worship." Seventy years back from 537 is 607. The arithmetic, on this reading, is the Bible's own; only the anchor at 537 is taken from history.²

Against the secular chronology, the study argues that the classical historians contain "surprising errors of simple fact"; that Ptolemy's canon of kings was "an artificial scheme" built for astronomers and "omitted some rulers"; and that the dated business tablets prove only that documents were written in a given king's years—the reconstruction chaining the reigns together "works only if each king followed the other in the same year, without any breaks in between." Gaps between reigns, or rulers the record overlooked, would open exactly the twenty years the Bible's seventy require.³ Finally, the study re-examines the astronomical tablet VAT 4956—of which more below—and reports that its lunar observations fit 588/587 B.C.E. rather than the scholars' 568/567, which would put Jerusalem's destruction in 607 after all.⁴

Underneath the technical argument stands a principle the Society states without embarrassment in its own reference work: "it is only when the secular chronology harmonizes with the Biblical record that a person may rightly feel a measure of confidence in such ancient secular dating."⁵ The Bible—as the Society reads it—is the measuring rod, and the tablets are measured by it. Keep that principle in view; the whole question turns on it.

III. Where Every Date Actually Comes From

Begin with a fact so obvious it is easily missed: the Bible contains no B.C.E. dates. Scripture dates events by regnal years—“in the fifth month, on the seventh day of the month—which was the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar” (2 Kings 25:8)—and regnal years attach to our numbered timeline only through records outside Scripture. Whoever prints a year with “B.C.E.” after it is using secular chronology. The question is never whether to use it; it is whether to use it consistently.

The Watchtower’s system hangs on 539 B.C.E. for the fall of Babylon, from which it reaches its 537 for the return and counts its seventy years. And 539 is not in the Bible. *Insight on the Scriptures* derives it from precisely the sources the 2011 articles teach readers to distrust: “The date of 539 B.C.E. for the fall of Babylon can be arrived at not only by Ptolemy’s canon but by other sources as well”—the classical historians and the cuneiform tablets among them.⁶ But Ptolemy’s canon, the historians, and the tablet record are one chronology, not two. The same king list that yields 539 for Babylon’s fall yields 587 for Jerusalem’s. The Society climbs the ladder to reach its anchor date, then saws off the rungs beneath the date it cannot afford. Its own stated principle—secular dates count “only when” they harmonize with its reading of Scripture—concedes that the selection is doctrinal, not historical.

IV. The Witnesses to the Reigns

What, then, is the record being set aside? The Neo-Babylonian period is among the best documented stretches of ancient history, and its witnesses are independent of one another—which matters, because independent witnesses cannot share a conspiracy or an error.

The Babylonian Chronicle series records the reigns year by year from the fall of Assyria through the fall of Babylon. The Uruk king list and the royal inscriptions give the same sequence and the same lengths. Berossus, a Babylonian priest writing in Greek, transmits the same reigns. Ptolemy’s canon—compiled for astronomers, which is exactly why it had to be right—agrees. The funerary stele of Adad-guppi, the mother of King Nabonidus, counts out her one hundred and four years of life reign by reign, from Ashurbanipal of Assyria to her son’s day, leaving no gap into which twenty hidden years could fall. And beneath all of these lies the commercial archive: tens of thousands of dated business tablets—loans, sales, marriage contracts, receipts—running month by month through every year of every reign from Nabopolassar to Cyrus, with no break anywhere.⁷

Consider what the Watchtower’s twenty missing years would require. Every one of these independent records would have to be wrong, in the same direction, by the same amount. The scribes of a commercial civilization would have to have dated no loan, no sale, and no

receipt for two entire decades. The mother of the last king would have to have misremembered a fifth of her own life. And the error would have to have escaped the notice of the very astronomers whose calendar depended on getting the reigns right. There is no ancient evidence for such a gap—none is cited in the 2011 articles, which argue only that a gap is not impossible. But chronology is not built from what is not impossible; it is built from what the records say. And they all say the same thing.

V. The Sky Does Not Move

The decisive witness is astronomy, because the sky can be recomputed by anyone, in any century, without trusting a single scribe. The tablet VAT 4956, now in Berlin, is an astronomical diary whose first line reads “Year 37 of Nebukadnezar, king of Babylon.” It records some thirty positions through that year—of the moon, and of the planets Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn—each fixed against named stars. A configuration of that size repeats, as a whole, only at intervals of many centuries. Computed against the sky, the observations fit the year 568/567 B.C.E., which fixes Nebuchadnezzar’s eighteenth year—the year Jerusalem burned—at 587.⁸

The 2011 study reached its alternative date of 588 by a remarkable route: it set the planetary observations aside as ambiguous and re-analyzed the thirteen lunar positions alone. In an astronomical diary, the planetary data are precisely what make the date unmistakable—the moon returns to similar positions on short cycles, while the slow outer planets do not. Discarding the planets from an astronomical text is discarding the fingerprint and keeping the smudge.⁹ And the method proves too much. The Society’s own anchor chronology rests on astronomical tablets of exactly this class. A tablet is treated as decisive when it supports 539 and as ambiguous when it supports 587. That is not a chronology; it is a verdict in search of evidence.

VI. The Seventy Years of Jeremiah

But does the Bible itself demand the Watchtower’s reading? Look at what Jeremiah actually says. “These nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation” (Jer. 25:11–12, RSV). The seventy years belong to Babylon’s supremacy over “these nations”—plural, the whole region, not Judah alone—and they end when Babylon’s king is punished. That happened in 539, when Cyrus took the city. The seventy years therefore close at Babylon’s fall, not at the exiles’ return two years later; and they open with Babylon’s rise to mastery of the region some seventy years earlier, as Assyria collapsed—not with Jerusalem’s destruction, which came midway through the period. Judah served Babylon for decades before the city fell, as the deportations of Daniel’s day and Jehoiachin’s show.¹⁰

Jeremiah 29:10 states the ownership of the years in a single Hebrew phrase: the seventy years are *le-Babel*, “for Babylon”—Babylon’s allotted span. “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfil to you my promise and bring you back to this place” (RSV). The New World Translation renders the phrase “at Babylon”—“when 70 years at Babylon are fulfilled”—turning Babylon’s term of empire into the exiles’ term of residence, and thereby building the 607 arithmetic into the verse itself. It is a small preposition carrying a very large load; the reader may weigh it alongside the pattern documented in this site’s study of that translation.¹¹ It is worth adding that Zechariah, prophesying decades after the return, still speaks of the seventy years as a known, completed period of indignation (Zech. 1:12; 7:5)—language that fits a public span of imperial history, not a private count that had to be reverse-engineered.

VII. The Seven Times of Daniel 4

The bridge from 607 to 1914 is the “seven times” of Daniel 4, and the bridge must carry 2,520 years of traffic. Read the chapter and watch how much of the load the text itself refuses. Nebuchadnezzar dreams of a great tree, cut down and banded, until “seven times” pass over it. Daniel interprets the dream on the spot, and names its subject without ambiguity: “it is you, O king” (Dan. 4:22, RSV). The sentence falls on Nebuchadnezzar—“seven times shall pass over you” (4:25)—it is fulfilled on Nebuchadnezzar within the chapter, and the chapter ends with the king restored and praising heaven. The narrative is complete, its interpretation is inspired and internal, and it says nothing of Jerusalem’s fall, nothing of a second and greater fulfillment, and nothing of the twentieth century.¹²

To reach 1914, every step must be supplied from outside the text: the “times” must become years of 360 prophetic days; the days must be converted back into years by a rule stated in Numbers and Ezekiel for their own occasions and nowhere stated in Daniel; the count must begin at an event—Jerusalem’s destruction—that the chapter never mentions; and it must end at an enthronement that, by the Society’s own teaching, no one on earth could observe. Four interpretive moves, none of them in the text, each of them load-bearing. A calculation is only as strong as its weakest supplied premise; this one supplies them all.¹³

VIII. From 606 to 607: The Date That Moved

The system’s own history tells the rest. Charles Taze Russell, following Nelson Barbour, dated Jerusalem’s destruction to 606 B.C.E. and counted 2,520 years to 1914. The arithmetic contains an error visible to any schoolchild with a timeline: there is no year zero, so 2,520 years from 606 B.C.E. end in 1915, not 1914. For half a century the Society published 606 anyway. When the problem was finally addressed—in *The Truth Shall Make You Free* (1943), with the fuller adjustment following—it was not the conclusion

that moved. The starting date slid back a year, to 607, and 1914 stayed exactly where it was.¹⁴

Sit with that for a moment, because it is the most revealing fact in the whole file. A date derived from evidence moves when the evidence moves. A date that holds still while its own foundation is relocated beneath it was never a conclusion at all—it was the premise, and the “evidence” was scaffolding erected afterward to hold it up. By 1943 the year 1914 could not be surrendered: it had become the anchor of Christ’s presence, of the last days, and of the organization’s own authority. So the seventh century B.C.E. was adjusted to protect the twentieth century C.E. That is the method this site’s pages document from many angles, here caught in the act with arithmetic.

IX. What Hangs on the Nail

It remains only to say what follows. If Jerusalem fell in 587, the seventy years cannot run from 607 to 537; the seven times cannot end in 1914; Christ’s invisible enthronement loses its date; the inspection of 1918 and the appointment of 1919 lose the timetable that placed them; and the Governing Body’s claim to be the faithful and discreet slave, appointed over the belongings in that year, loses the event it appeals to. This is not a critic’s construction; it is the Society’s own architecture, read in reverse. The appointment claim is examined on its own terms elsewhere on this site; what this essay adds is that the floor under it is not level ground but a single date—and the date is wrong.¹⁵

A closing word to the reader who is a Witness. Nothing in this essay asked you to trust a church, a critic, or an apostate. The witnesses here are tablets you can see published, a sky you can recompute, a Hebrew preposition you can check in any interlinear, and the Society’s own publications quoted at their strongest. The organization itself teaches that a person should be willing to examine his beliefs against the evidence. Few beliefs offer so clean a test as a date. Check it—slowly, from the sources, with the seriousness the question deserves. If the nail holds, you will have lost nothing. If it does not, it is better to learn so from the tablets and the text than to build another century on it.

Endnotes

1. “When Was Ancient Jerusalem Destroyed?—Part One,” *The Watchtower*, October 1, 2011, pp. 26–31; “Part Two,” November 1, 2011, pp. 22–28. The concession quoted is from Part Two. Both articles are on the Society’s online library (wol.jw.org).
2. Part One, on Jeremiah 25:11 (quoted as rendered there), the fall of Babylon in 539, the return “by the fall of 537 B.C.E.,” and the count back to 607.

3. Part One (classical historians; Ptolemy's canon); Part Two (the business tablets and the continuity requirement). The phrases in quotation marks are the articles' own.
4. Part Two, on VAT 4956.
5. *Insight on the Scriptures* (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 1988), vol. 1, "Chronology."
6. Ibid., in the same entry, on the establishment of 539 B.C.E.
7. The witnesses are assembled source by source in Carl Olof Jonsson, *The Gentile Times Reconsidered* (4th ed.), chs. 3–4: the Babylonian Chronicle series, the Uruk king list, Berossus, Ptolemy's canon, the Adad-guppi stele from Harran, and the continuous dated business archive.
8. VAT 4956 is published in A. Sachs and H. Hunger, *Astronomical Diaries and Related Texts from Babylonia*, vol. 1 (Vienna, 1988), no. -567.
9. *The Watchtower*, November 1, 2011, states that the planetary observations were set aside as ambiguous and the analysis rested on the thirteen lunar positions.
10. Jeremiah 25:11–12, RSV. On Judah's servitude before the destruction: the deportation of Daniel and his companions (Dan. 1:1–4) and of Jehoiachin with the craftsmen (2 Kings 24:12–16) both preceded the city's fall by years.
11. Jeremiah 29:10: RSV "for Babylon" (Hebrew *le-Babel*); New World Translation "at Babylon." See the essay accompanying "The New World Translation" on this site for the wider pattern.
12. Daniel 4:20–37, RSV.
13. The 360-day "prophetic year" and the day-for-a-year conversion rest on Numbers 14:34 and Ezekiel 4:6, where the rule is stated explicitly by the text for that occasion; Daniel 4 states no such rule. The Society's derivation is set out in *What Does the Bible Really Teach?* (2005), Appendix, "1914—A Significant Year in Bible Prophecy."
14. Russell's 606 runs from *The Time Is at Hand* (1889) through five decades of the Society's literature; the re-anchoring appears in *The Truth Shall Make You Free* (1943), ch. 11. The documentary history is traced in Jonsson, *The Gentile Times Reconsidered*, ch. 1.
15. The 1919 appointment is tested against the Society's own publications in the essay accompanying "By What Authority?" on this site.

For Further Reading

The Gentile Times Reconsidered, by Carl Olof Jonsson—the standard source-by-source examination of 607, 587, and the 2,520-year calculation.

The Mesopotamian Chronicles—the Babylonian chronicle texts themselves, translated. Free online at <https://www.livius.org/sources/about/mesopotamian-chronicles/>.

Are We In the Last Days?—what 1914 is claimed to have begun. Free online at https://richwhiting.com/warp/last_days/last_days.php.

By What Authority?—the 1919 appointment that stands on 1914. Free online at <https://richwhiting.com/warp/authority/authority.php>.

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“For thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfil to you my promise and bring you back to this place.” — Jeremiah 29:10

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.*

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author’s articulation of *the assessment of the Watchtower’s chronology of 607 B.C.E. and 1914*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church’s teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author’s alone.