



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

When Was Ancient Jerusalem Destroyed?

PART ONE WHY IT MATTERS WHAT THE EVIDENCE SHOWS

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

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

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

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

"Seventy Years" for Whom?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

When Did "the Seventy Years" Start?

The inspired historian Ezra, who lived after the 70 years of Jeremiah's prophecy were fulfilled, wrote of King Nebuchadnezzar: "He carried into exile to Babylon the remnant, who escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and his sons until the kingdom of Persia came to power. The land

enjoyed its sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfillment of the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah."—2 Chronicles 36:20, 21, *NIV*.

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

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

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

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

When Did “the Seventy Years” End?

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

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

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

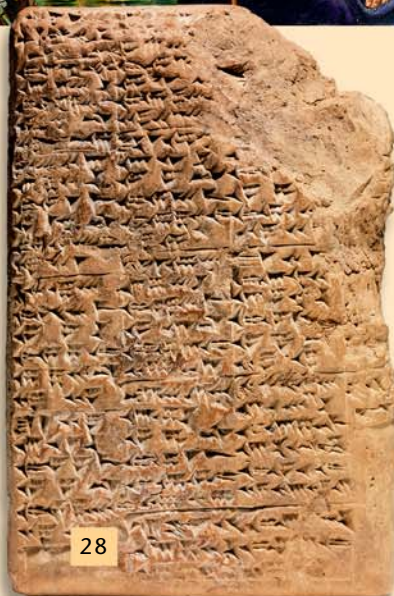
According to Bible chronology, then, the 70 years was a literal period of time that end-

A PIVOTAL DATE IN HISTORY

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

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

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



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

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

Classical Historians—How Accurate?

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

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

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

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

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

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

NEO-BABYLONIAN KINGS

If these historians are reliable, why do they disagree?

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

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

The Canon of Ptolemy

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

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

"It has long been known that the Canon is *astronomically* reliable," writes Leo Depuydt,

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

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

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

HOW DOES PTOLEMY'S CANON COMPARE WITH ANCIENT TABLETS?

Ptolemy omits some kings in his list. Why?

PTOLEMY'S CANON

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

Kandalanu

Nabopolassar
Nebuchadnezzar
Amel-Marduk
Neriglissar

Nabonidus

Cyrus
Cambyses



THE URUK KING LIST AS FOUND ON ANCIENT TABLETS

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Conclusion Based on This Evidence

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

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

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

A QUICK SUMMARY

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



Notes

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

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

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

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



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When Was Ancient Jerusalem Destroyed?

PART TWO WHAT THE CLAY DOCUMENTS REALLY SHOW



PART ONE ESTABLISHED THE FOLLOWING POINTS:

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

When were they released? In “the first [regnal] year of Cyrus king of Persia.” (2 Chronicles 36:21, 22, *New International Version*) Biblical and secular history agree that this exile in Babylon ended after Cyrus conquered Babylon and freed the Jews, who returned to Jerusalem in 537 B.C.E. Since the Bible explicitly says that the exile lasted for 70 years, it must have begun in 607 B.C.E.

However, most scholars date the destruction of Jerusalem at 587 B.C.E. This allows for only a 50-year exile. Why do they conclude that? They base their calculations on ancient cuneiform documents that provide details about Nebuchadnezzar II and his successors.¹ Many of these documents were written by men who lived during or close to the time of Jerusalem’s destruction. But just how sound are the calculations that point to the date 587 B.C.E.? What do these documents *really* show?

To answer those questions, consider three types of documents that scholars often rely on: (1) The Babylonian chronicles, (2) business tablets, and (3) astronomical tablets.

THE Bible says that the Jewish captives were to be exiled in Babylon “until the seventy years were completed in fulfillment of the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah.”

* There are various ways of expressing dates. In this article, B.C.E. means “Before the Common Era.”

† See the article “When Was Ancient Jerusalem Destroyed?—Why It Matters, What the Evidence Shows” in our issue of October 1, 2011.

● The Babylonian chronicles.

What are they? The Babylonian chronicles are a series of tablets recording major events in Babylonian history.²

What have experts said? R. H. Sack, a leading authority on cuneiform documents, states that the chronicles provide an incomplete record of important events.* He wrote that historians must probe “secondary sources . . . in the hope of determining what actually happened.”

What do the documents show? There are gaps in the history recorded in the Babylonian chronicles.³ (See the box below.) Logically, then, the question arises, How reliable are deductions based on such an incomplete record?

● Business tablets.

What are they? Most business tablets from the Neo-Babylonian period are legal receipts.

* **Note:** None of the secular experts quoted in this article hold that Jerusalem was destroyed in 607 B.C.E.

The tablets were dated to the day, month, and year of the reigning king. For example, one tablet states that a transaction took place on “Nisan, the 27th day, the 11th year of Nebuchadrezzar [also known as Nebuchadnezzar II], king of Babylon.”⁴

When the king died or was removed and a new king came to the throne, the remaining months of that regnal year were considered the accession year of the new ruler.⁵ In other words, the transition of one king to the next took place in the same Babylonian calendar year. Accordingly, tablets of the new ruler’s accession year should logically be dated during months after the last month of the former king.

What have experts said? R. H. Sack examined numerous business tablets from the Neo-Babylonian period. In 1972, Sack wrote that new unpublished British Museum texts placed at his disposal “completely upset”

* An accession year was not counted toward the years of a king’s rule; it referred to the remaining months of the year until the new king was officially enthroned.

THE BABYLONIAN CHRONICLES —A HISTORY WITH GAPS

The Babylonian chronicles provide an account for only 35 years of the Neo-Babylonian period, traditionally presumed to span some 88 years.

A YEAR WITHOUT A
CHRONICLE RECORD

A YEAR WITH A
CHRONICLE RECORD

NEO-BABYLONIAN PERIOD

PERSIANS

Nabopolassar

Nebuchadnezzar II

Amel-Marduk

Nabonidus

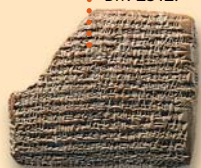
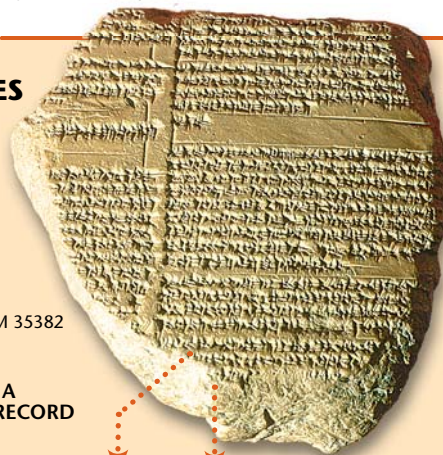
BM 25127

BM 22047

Neriglissar

Labashi-Marduk

BM 25124



previous conclusions regarding the transition of rule from Nebuchadnezzar II to his son Amel-Marduk (also known as Evilmerodach).⁶ How so? Sack knew that tablets showed Nebuchadnezzar II to be still ruling in the sixth month of his last (43rd) year. But these newly deciphered tablets from the accession year of the following king, Amel-Marduk, were dated to the *fourth* and *fifth* months of what had been assumed to be the same year.⁷ Clearly, there was a discrepancy.

What do the documents show? There are further discrepancies in the transition of one king to another. For example, the documents show that Nebuchadnezzar II was still ruling in his tenth month—six months after his successor is assumed to have begun reigning.⁸ A similar discrepancy exists with the transition between Amel-Marduk and his successor, Neriglissar.⁹

Why are these discrepancies significant? As mentioned earlier, gaps in the history documented by the Babylonian chronicles suggest that we may not have a continuous chronological record.¹⁰ Could others have ruled between the reigns of these kings? If so, additional years would have to be added to the Neo-Babylonian period. Therefore, neither the Babylonian chronicles nor the business tablets provide a basis to establish with

certainty that Jerusalem was destroyed in 587 B.C.E.*

● Astronomical tablets.

What are they? Cuneiform tablets that contain descriptions of the positions of the sun, moon, planets, and stars, coupled with such historical information as the regnal year of a particular king. For instance, the astronomical diary shown below records a lunar eclipse that occurred in the first month of the first year of King Mukin-zeri's reign.¹¹

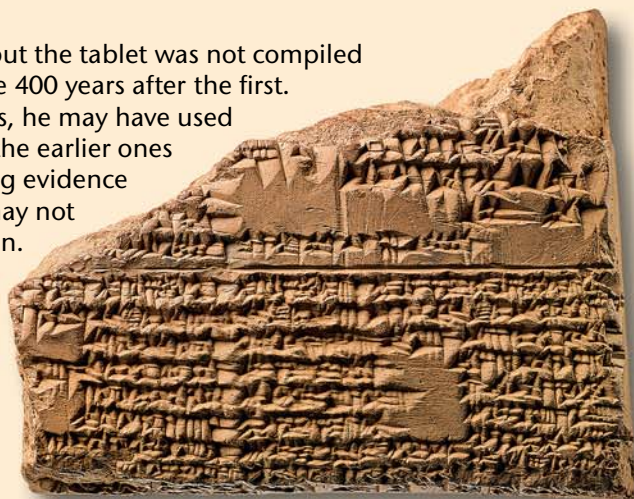
What have experts said? Experts agree that the Babylonians had developed extensive charts and schemes to predict when eclipses would most likely occur.¹²

But could the Babylonians project backward to calculate when eclipses had occurred in the past? "It is possible," states Professor John Steele, "that some of the earliest predictions could have been made by projecting the scheme *backwards* when the text was compiled." (Italics ours.)¹³ Professor David Brown, who believes that the astronomical

* Business tablets exist for all the years traditionally attributed to the Neo-Babylonian kings. When the years that these kings ruled are totaled and a calculation is made back from the last Neo-Babylonian king, Nabonidus, the date reached for the destruction of Jerusalem is 587 B.C.E. However, this method of dating works only if each king followed the other in the same year, without any breaks in between.

ASTRONOMICAL DIARY BM 32238

This tablet contains a record of lunar eclipses, but the tablet was not compiled until after the last eclipse, which occurred some 400 years after the first. Since the scribe did not observe all those events, he may have used mathematical calculations to determine when the earlier ones took place. Unless there is additional supporting evidence confirming his conclusions, such calculations may not be a source of reliable chronological information.



charts included predictions made shortly before the recorded events, acknowledges that it is conceivable that some of these were “retrocalculations undertaken by scribes in the 4th and later centuries BC.”¹⁴ If these are retrocalculations, could they really be considered absolutely reliable unless corroborated by other evidence?

Even if an eclipse did occur on a certain date, does this mean that the *historical* information the writer of the tablet assigns to that date is accurate? Not necessarily. Scholar R. J. van der Spek explains: “The compilers were astrologers, not historians.” He describes sections of the tablets that contain historical records as “more or less casual,” and he warns that such historical information must “be used with caution.”¹⁵

What do the documents show? Consider the example of VAT 4956. The opening line of this tablet reads: “Year 37 of Nebukadnezzar, king of Babylon.”¹⁶ Thereafter, it contains detailed descriptions of the position of the moon and planets in relation to different stars and constellations. Also included is one lunar eclipse. Scholars say that all these positions occurred in 568/567 B.C.E., which would make the 18th year of Nebuchadnezzar II, when he destroyed Jerusalem, 587 B.C.E. But do these astronomical ref-

erences irrefutably point *only* to the year 568/567 B.C.E.?

The tablet mentions a lunar eclipse that was calculated as occurring on the 15th day of the third Babylonian month, Simanu. It is a fact that a lunar eclipse occurred on July 4 (Julian calendar) of this month during 568 B.C.E. However, there was also an eclipse *20 years earlier*, on July 15, 588 B.C.E.¹⁷

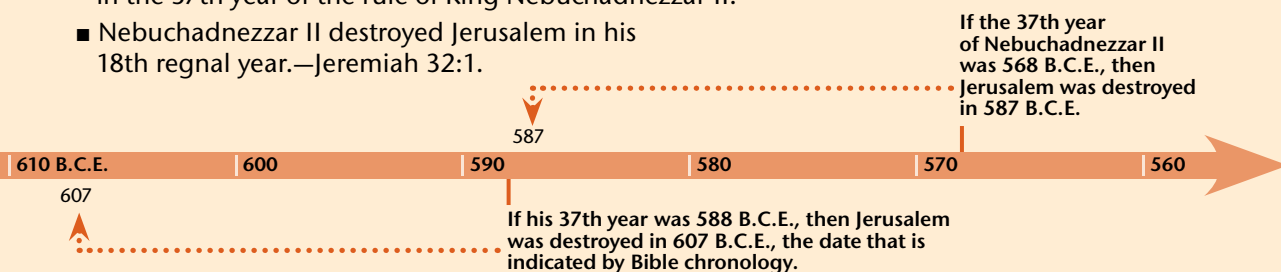
If 588 B.C.E. marked the 37th year of Nebuchadnezzar II, then his 18th year would be 607 B.C.E.—the very year indicated by the Bible’s chronology for the destruction of Jerusalem! (See the time line below.) But does VAT 4956 provide further corroborating evidence for the year 607 B.C.E.?

In addition to the aforementioned eclipse, there are 13 sets of lunar observations on the tablet and 15 planetary observations. These describe the position of the moon or planets in relation to certain stars or constellations.¹⁸ There are also eight time intervals between the risings and settings of the sun and the moon.^{18a}

Because of the superior reliability of the lunar positions, researchers have carefully analyzed these 13 sets of lunar positions on VAT 4956. They analyzed the data with the aid of a computer program capable of showing the location of celestial bodies on a

VAT 4956 POINTS TO WHICH YEAR FOR JERUSALEM’S DESTRUCTION —587 B.C.E. OR 607 B.C.E.?

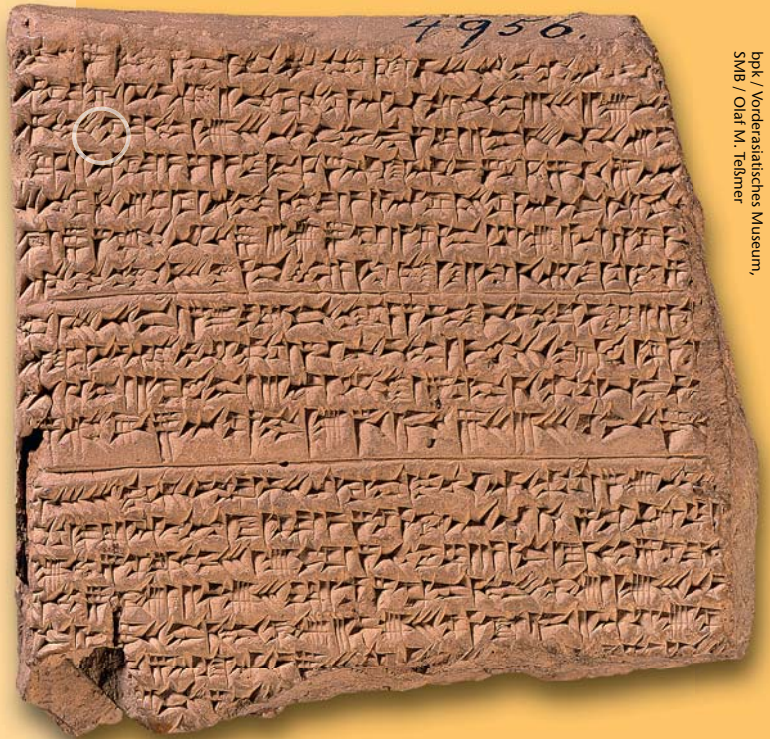
- The tablet describes astronomical events that occurred in the 37th year of the rule of King Nebuchadnezzar II.
- Nebuchadnezzar II destroyed Jerusalem in his 18th regnal year.—Jeremiah 32:1.



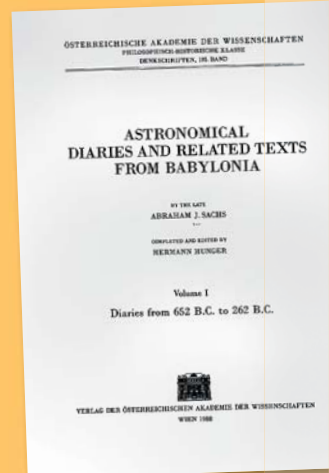
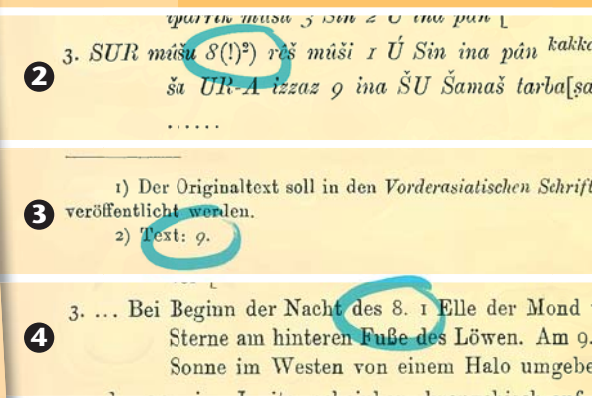
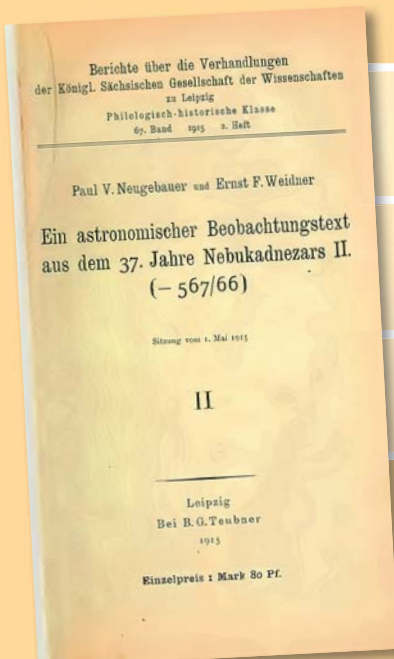
- VAT 4956 points more convincingly to 607 B.C.E.

WHAT DOES VAT 4956 REALLY SAY?

Why an issue? The third line on this tablet reads that on the “night of the 9th” during the first month (Nisanu/Nisan), the “moon stood 1 cubit in front of β Virginis.” However, Neugebauer and Weidner wrote in 1915 regarding the year 568 B.C.E. (which would point to 587 B.C.E. for Jerusalem’s destruction) that “the moon stood 1 cubit before this star on 8 Nisan, and *not on 9 Nisan.*” (Italics ours.) However, there was an exact match of the moon’s position for 588 B.C.E. on Nisan 9, which points to the date 607 B.C.E.



bpk / Vorderasiatisches Museum,
SMB / Olaf M. Telmer



Should it be the 9th day or the 8th day?

- (1) As shown in the accompanying photograph, the Akkadian symbol for the number 9 is clearly seen.
- (2) In their transliteration of this cuneiform text, Neugebauer and Weidner changed the "9" to an "8."
- (3) Only the footnote indicates that there was a "9" in the original text.
- (4) Even in their German translation, they put "8."
- (5) In 1988, Sachs and Hunger published the text as it actually reads, with a "9."
- (6) Yet, they preserve the alteration in their English translation, calling the "9th" an "error for: 8th."

VAT 4956

Copy: E.F. Weidner, AfO 16 Tf. XVII

Photo: Pl. 1 and 3

Transcription, translation, and commentary: P.V. Neugebauer and E.F. Weidner, *Texte aus dem 37. Jahre Nebukadnezars II. (-567/66) (= der Wiss., Phil.-hist. Kl. Bd. 67/2, 1915).*

Obv.:

1 MU-37 ^{1d}AG-NIG-DU-ŠEŠ LUGAL TIN-TIR^{ki}
[...]

2 ^dSAG-UŠ *ina* IGI SIM 2 *ina* Še-rì TIR-AN *ina*
[...]

5 3 ŠUR GE₆ 9 SAG GE₆ 1 KÜŠ *sin ina* IGI ^{mul}-GÌ
TÜR [... 11]

6 3 in the west. Night of the 3rd, the moon was 2
it rained'. Night of the 9th (error for: 8th), begi
1 cubit in front of β Virginis. The 9th, the sun in
[... The 11th]

4 or 19th. Jupiter's astronomical rising. On the 14th

certain date in the past.¹⁹ What did their analysis reveal? While not all of these sets of lunar positions match the year 568/567 B.C.E., *all 13 sets* match calculated positions for 20 years earlier, for the year 588/587 B.C.E.

One of the places where the lunar observations fit 588 B.C.E. even better than 568 B.C.E. is shown in the tablet reproduced on these pages. On line 3 of that tablet, we read that the moon was in a certain position on the "night of the 9th [of Nisanu]." However, the scholars who first dated the event to 568 B.C.E. (astronomical -567) acknowledged that in 568 B.C.E., the moon was in that position on "the 8th of Nisanu and not on the 9th." To support dating the tablet to 568 B.C.E., they postulated that the scribe erroneously wrote "9" instead of "8."²⁰ But the lunar position in line 3 finds an *exact match* on Nisanu 9 of 588 B.C.E.²¹

Clearly, much of the astronomical data in VAT 4956 fits the year 588 B.C.E. as the 37th year of Nebuchadnezzar II. This, therefore, supports the date of 607 B.C.E. for Jerusalem's destruction—just as the Bible indicates.

Why Trust the Bible?

At present, the majority of secular historians believe that Jerusalem was destroyed in 587 B.C.E. However, the Bible writers Jeremiah and Daniel clearly state that the Jews were in exile for 70 years, not 50 years. (Jeremiah 25:1, 2, 11; 29:10; Daniel 9:2) Those statements strongly indicate that Jerusalem was destroyed in 607 B.C.E. As the above evidence shows, that conclusion has some secular support.

Secular experts have repeatedly questioned the Bible's accuracy. Yet, when more evidence is uncovered, the Bible record has time and again been vindicated.* Those who trust the Bible have good reason to do so. They base their opinion on proof that the Bible is historically, scientifically, and prophetically accurate. That evidence leads them to believe the Bible's claim that it is the inspired Word of God. (2 Timothy 3:16) Why not investigate the evidence for yourself? You may well come to the same conclusion.

* For specific examples, see chapters 4 and 5 of the book *The Bible—God's Word or Man's?* published by Jehovah's Witnesses.

Notes for "When Was Ancient Jerusalem Destroyed?—Part Two"

1. Cuneiform is a wedge-shaped form of writing. It was produced by a scribe pressing various signs into the surface of a soft clay tablet, using a sharp stylus with a wedge-shaped point.

2. *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*, by A. K. Grayson, published 1975, 2000 reprint, page 8.

3. The Neo-Babylonian period began during the seventh century B.C.E., when the Chaldean dynasty of kings ruled the Babylonian Empire. The first ruler was Nabopolassar, the father of Nebuchadnezzar II. The period ended when the last king, Nabonidus, was overthrown by Persian King Cyrus in 539 B.C.E.

4. *Neo-Babylonian Business and Administrative Documents*, by Ellen Whitley Moore, published 1935, page 33.

5. *Archimedes, Volume 4, New Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology*, "Observations and Predictions of Eclipse Times by Early Astronomers," by John M. Steele, published 2000, page 36.

6. *Amel-Marduk 562-560 B.C.—A Study Based on Cuneiform, Old Testament, Greek, Latin and Rabbinical Sources. With Plates*, by Ronald H. Sack, published 1972, page 3.

7. The tablets BM 80920 and BM 58872 are dated in Evil-merodach's fourth and fifth months of his accession year. These were published by Sack in *Amel-Marduk 562-560 B.C.—A Study Based on Cuneiform, Old Testament, Greek, Latin and Rabbinical Sources. With Plates*, pages 3, 90, 106.

8. The tablet in the British Museum (BM 55806) is dated to the tenth month, 43rd year.

9. Tablets BM 75106 and BM 61325 are dated in the seventh and tenth months of what is considered the last (second) year of the ruling king Evil-merodach. However, the tablet BM 75489 is dated in the second month of the accession year of Neriglissar, his successor.—*Catalogue of the Babylonian Tablets in the British Museum*, Volume VIII, (Tablets From Sippar 3) by Erle Leichty, J. J. Finkelstein, and C.B.F. Walker, published 1988, pages 25, 35.

Catalogue of the Babylonian Tablets in the British Museum, Volume VII, (Tablets From Sippar 2) by Erle Leichty and A. K. Grayson, published 1987, page 36.

Neriglissar—King of Babylon, by Ronald H. Sack, published 1994, page 232. The month on the tablet is Ajaru (second month).

10. Consider the example of Neriglissar. A royal inscription regarding him states that he was "the son of Bêl-shum-ishkun," the "king of Babylon." (Italics ours.) Another inscription calls Bêl-shum-ishkun the "wise prince." The original word rendered "prince," *rubû*, is a title also meaning "king, ruler." Since there

is an obvious discrepancy between the reign of Neriglissar and his predecessor, Amel-Marduk, could this "king of Babylon," Bêl-shum-ishkun, have ruled for a time between the two? Professor R. P. Dougherty acknowledged that "the evidence of Neriglissar's noble ancestry cannot be disregarded."—*Nabonidus and Belshazzar—A Study of the Closing Events of the Neo-Babylonian Empire*, by Raymond P. Dougherty, published 1929, page 61.

11. *Astronomical Diaries and Related Texts From Babylonia*, Volume V, edited by Hermann Hunger, published 2001, pages 2-3.

12. *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*, Volume 2, No. 4, 1948, "A Classification of the Babylonian Astronomical Tablets of the Seleucid Period," by A. Sachs, pages 282-283.

13. *Astronomical Diaries and Related Texts From Babylonia*, Volume V, page 391.

14. *Mesopotamian Planetary Astronomy—Astrology*, by David Brown, published 2000, pages 164, 201-202.

15. *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, L N° 1/2, Januari-Maart, 1993, "The Astronomical Diaries as a Source for Achaemenid and Seleucid History," by R. J. van der Spek, pages 94, 102.

16. *Astronomical Diaries and Related Texts From Babylonia*, Volume I, by Abraham J. Sachs, completed and edited by Hermann Hunger, published 1988, page 47.

17. *Babylonian Eclipse Observations From 750 BC to 1 BC*, by Peter J. Huber and Salvo De Meis, published 2004, page 186. According to VAT 4956, this eclipse occurred on the 15th of the third Babylonian month, which suggests that the month of Simanu began 15 days earlier. If the eclipse fell on July 15, 588 B.C.E. according to our Julian calendar, then the first day of Simanu would be June 30/July 1, 588 B.C.E. Therefore, the first Babylonian month (Nisanu) would have started the new year two months earlier, on May 2/3. While normally the year of this eclipse would have begun on April 3/4, VAT 4956 states on line 6 that an extra month (intercalary) was added after the twelfth (last) month (Addaru) of the preceding year. (The tablet reads: "8th of month XII₂.") Therefore, this made the new year actually not start until May 2/3. Thus, the date of this eclipse in 588 B.C.E. well fits the data on the tablet.

18. According to *Berichte über die Verhandlungen der Königl. Sächsischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig* (Reports Regarding the Discussions of the Royal Saxonian Society of Sciences at Leipzig); Volume 67; May 1, 1915; in the article "Ein astronomischer Beobachtungstext aus dem 37. Jahre Nebukadnezars II" (An Astronomical Observer's Text of the 37th Year Nebuchadnezzar II), by Paul V. Neugebauer and Ernst F. Weidner, pages 67-76, there are 13 sets of obser-

vations of the moon wherein it is described in relationship with a certain star or constellation. They also list 15 sets of planetary observations. (Pages 72-76) Though the cuneiform sign for the moon is clear and unambiguous, some of the signs for the names of the planets and their positions are unclear. (*Mesopotamian Planetary Astronomy—Astrology*, by David Brown, published 2000, pages 53-57) Because of this, the planetary observations are open to speculation and to several different interpretations. Since the moon can easily be tracked, the positions of those other celestial bodies mentioned on VAT 4956 and connected to the moon can be identified and their positions dated with a good measure of certainty.

18a. These time intervals ("lunar thirds") are the measurement of time from, for example, sunset to moonset on the first day of the month and during two other periods later in the month. Scholars have tied these time measurements to calendar dates. ("The Earliest Datable Observation of the Aurora Borealis," by F. R. Stephenson and David M. Willis, in *Under One Sky—Astronomy and Mathematics in the Ancient Near East*, edited by John M. Steele and Annette Imhausen, published 2002, pages 420-428) For ancient observers to measure this period required some sort of clock. Such measurements were not reliable. (*Archimedes, Volume 4, New Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology*, "Observations and Predictions of Eclipse Times by Early Astronomers," by John M. Steele, published 2000, pages 65-66) On the other hand, calculating the position of the moon in relation to other celestial bodies was done with greater certainty.

19. This analysis was made with the astronomy software entitled TheSky6®. In addition, the analysis was augmented by the comprehensive freeware program Cartes du Ciel/Sky Charts (CDC) and a date converter provided by the U.S. Naval Observatory. Because the cuneiform signs for many of the planetary positions are open to speculation and to several interpretations, these positions were not used in this survey to pinpoint the year intended by this astronomical diary.

20. *Berichte über die Verhandlungen der Königl. Sächsischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig* (Reports Regarding the Discussions of the Royal Saxonian Society of Sciences at Leipzig); Volume 67; May 1, 1915; "Ein astronomischer Beobachtungstext aus dem 37. Jahre Nebukadnezars II, (-567/66)" (An Astronomical Observer's Text of the 37th Year Nebuchadnezzar II), by Paul V. Neugebauer and Ernst F. Weidner, page 41.

21. VAT 4956 reads on line three: "The moon stood 1 cubit [or 2 degrees] in front of β Virginis." The previously mentioned analysis concluded that on Nisanu 9, the moon was $2^{\circ}04'$ in front of and 0° below the star β Virginis. It was considered an exact match.