

“These nations will be enslaved to the king of Babylon for seventy years. But when the seventy years are over, I shall punish the king of Babylon and that nation, Yahweh declares”—Jeremiah 25:11,12 NJB



“For Yahweh says this: When the seventy years granted to Babylon are over, I shall intervene on your behalf and fulfill my promise to you and bring you back to this place”—Jeremiah 29:10 NJB

Was the Babylonian captivity a literal seventy years?

The prophetic expression describing the time of Judah’s captivity as “seventy years” (Jeremiah 25:11,12; 29:10) has prompted speculation throughout the history of Biblical interpretation. The “seventy years” that Jeremiah predicted involved Judah and other nations being “enslaved to the king of Babylon,” and Judah being ‘brought back to its homeland’ after the “seventy years” were complete.

- Jehovah’s Witnesses assert that the Babylonian exile was a literal 70 years, during which time the land of Judah was completely desolate, beginning about three months after the Temple and Jerusalem were destroyed. They use 537 BCE as the date of the return from exile and captivity, which has historical, archaeological and astronomical evidence to support it. But, with no proof whatsoever, they claim the destruction of Jerusalem happened, and Judah and the exile began in the year 607 BCE. Why? Because, for over a hundred years, they have used the 607 date as a springboard to arrive at their end of the world date setting, including their important 1914 date,

through patching together a series of complicated calculations derived from various unrelated scriptures. These calculations, up until 1928, even included various measurements from inside the Great Pyramid of Egypt to arrive at 1914. They have so much invested in their 1914 date that they can't seem to bring themselves to abandon their foundational 607 BCE date, in spite of overwhelming contrary evidence. They assert that the Jews returned to their homeland in 537 BCE, and add the 70 years for the exile to arrive at 607 BCE for the start, as mentioned above.

- Notice in the primary scripture prophecy, [Jeremiah 25:11](#), that the “seventy years” are years of servitude to “the king of Babylon and that nation.”
- The numeric systems of the ancient Near East were predominantly hexagesimal (based upon ascending groups of six), and the maximum number that could be easily calculated was 60. It is possible that the number 70 may have been used to symbolically represent a numeric value of staggering proportions or perhaps the number of years representing a generation ([Psalm 90:10](#); [Isaiah 23:15](#)). The number 70 may have been used in the same way in [Jeremiah 25](#), as in [Isaiah's](#) announcement that Tyre would be desolate for 70 years ([Isaiah 23:15,17](#)), and a similar usage may be reflected in the Black Stone of Esarhaddon, in which Marduk decreed displeasure against Babylon for 70 years.
- The original context of the prophetic word was the fourth year of Jehoiakim of Judah and the first of Nebuchadnezzar (605 BCE.). “Until this very day” ([Jeremiah 25:3](#)) Jeremiah anticipated a period of devastation and judgment during which Judah would serve Babylon. Upon the completion of this interval, the prophet predicted that divine judgment would be brought upon Babylon (vv. 12-13) and Judah and that Jerusalem would be restored ([Jeremiah 29:10-14](#)).

When Did the “Seventy Years” Begin and End?

The “Seventy Years” began when King Jehoiakim began to serve Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians when Judah became one of its vassal states in 605 B.C.E. **“In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to**

Jerusalem and laid siege to it. And the Lord handed delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand. . . Then the king ordered Ashkenazi, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility" (Daniel 1:1-3 NIV). Daniel, using the accession year dating system employed by the Babylonians, indicates that Judah came under the control of Babylon in the 3rd year of Jehoiakim's reign, that is, 605 BCE. This deportation of some from Judah was the beginning of the Babylonian captivity.

"In his days Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon has come up, and Jehoiakim is a servant to him [for] three years; and he turns and rebels against him, and YHWH sends against him the troops of the Chaldeans, and the troops of Aram, and the troops of Moab, and the troops of the sons of Ammon, and He sends them against Judah to destroy it, according to the word of YHWH that He spoke by the hand of His servants of the prophets" (2 Kings 24:1,2 LSV). The other nations mentioned were also under the control of Babylon at the time. Thus, the servitude of Judah and the other nations began during the reign of king Jehoiakim.

Further evidence of this is in Jeremiah: **"In the fifth month of that same year, the fourth year, early in the reign of Zedekiah . . . the prophet Hannah . . . said . . . 'This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel says: 'I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon'" (Jeremiah 28:1,2 NIV).** Even though the prophecy was false, the point is that Judah was at that time already under 'the yoke of Babylon,' and therefore in servitude to Babylon, in Zedekiah's 4th year, 593 BCE.

The land, however, was not entirely without any inhabitants during the "seventy years," because the scriptures show otherwise. For example, **"in the twenty-third year of Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuzaradan, captain of the guard, deported seven hundred forty-five Judahites" (Jeremiah 52:30 NAB).** This 23rd year of Nebuchadnezzar was 582/581 BCE, The deportation of "Judahites" that year proves that there were at least several hundred people still living in Judah about five years after the destruction of Jerusalem.

Almost 70 years later than the 4th year of Jehoiakim, which was 605 BCE, Babylon was captured by the Persians, bringing about the end of Babylonian sovereignty over Judah, and initiating the process of the return from exile under Cyrus the Great (539/538 BCE.). The return was finished by 537/536 BCE.

The interpretation of Jeremiah's 70 years of captivity as the approximate period between 605 and 537/536 B.C.E. is more explicitly stated in later Biblical texts, and is proven historically, archaeologically, and astronomically. According to 2 Chronicles 36:20-21, divine judgment was executed against Judah by the Babylonian king: **"Those who had escaped the sword he deported to Babylon, where they were enslaved by him and his descendants until the rise of the king of Persia, to fulfill Yahweh's prophecy through Jeremiah: Until the country has paid off its Sabbaths, it will lie fallow for all the days of its desolation — until the seventy years are complete" (NJB)**. Both situations, that is, the Jews being enslaved to the King of Babylon, and the land lying desolate, are included in "the seventy years." Both the Chronicler (2 Chronicles 36:22 NIV) and Ezra (Ezra 1:1) interpreted the edict of Cyrus, which authorized the return of the exiles and the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 1:2-4; 6:1 -12), as the fulfillment of the prophetic word of Jeremiah.

"In the first year of Darius son of Ahasuerus, of then seed of the Medes, who has been made king over the kingdom of the Chaldeans, in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, have understood by the scrolls the number of years (in that a word of YHWH has been to Jeremiah the prophet), concerning the fulfilling of the desolations of Jerusalem—seventy years" (Daniel 9:2 LSV). Daniel understood that Jeremiah had prophesied that the desolation of Jerusalem would last for seventy years, and that these seventy years were now, in 539/538 BCE, almost over.

The scriptures tell us that the Babylonian captivity began in 605 BCE, and ended about 538-536 BCE, for a period of approximately 70 years. The "Seventy Years" is a round number, rather than necessarily being a literal 70 years.

A different calculation of the “seventy years,” and thus a different 70 year period, appears to underlie [Zechariah 1:12](#) and [Zechariah 7:5](#). Let’s look at them:

“On the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month (the month of Shebat), in the second year of Darius . . . The angel of Yahweh then spoke and said, ‘Yahweh Sabaoth, how long will you wait before taking pity on Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, on which you have inflicted your anger for the past seventy years’ (Zechariah 1:7,12 NJB). *“This event occurred on February 15, 519 B. C.” (NLT footnote). “Since these seventy years would have been almost over at this point, this symbolic number would have provided motivation for rebuilding the Temple as a sign of the end of the seventy years of the exile” (NAB footnote).*

“In the fourth year of Darius, the word of Yahweh was addressed to Zechariah on the fourth day of the ninth month, the month of Chislev. ‘Say to all the people of the country and to the priests, “Why have you been fasting and mourning in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, have you really been fasting for my sake?”’ (Zechariah 7:1,5 NJB). *“This event occurred on December 7, 518 B. C.” (NLT footnote).*

In these scriptures, “seventy years” denotes the interval between the siege and physical destruction of the temple (circa 589 - 586 BCE) to the time of the rebuilding of the temple (begun in 520 BCE) and its dedication (516 B.C.E.), thus being another period of about 70 years. Thus, the “seventy years” in Zechariah do not cover the period of the captivity, which ended about 537 BCE.

ONE SOURCE: NIV Archaeological Study Bible