בס"ד

One of the least inspiring aspects of the historian’s job is researching dates — chronology. But that is also one of the areas in which mistakes are so common that sometimes people don’t even bother to point them out. Today I'd like to look into one such date: The date of the destruction of the First Temple.

The problem comes up for the first time in the Bible itself. The last chapter of the book of Kings gives a detailed description of the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem. The siege ends with the conquest of Jerusalem and the burning of the Temple:

2 Kgs 25:8-9

(ח) וּבַחֹדֶשׁ הַחֲמִישִׁי בְּשִׁבְעָה לַחֹדֶשׁ הִיא שְׁנַת תְּשַׁע עֶשְׂרֵה שָׁנָה לַמֶּלֶךְ נְבֻכַדְנֶאצַּר מֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל בָּא נְבוּזַרְאֲדָן רַב טַבָּחִים עֶבֶד מֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל יְרוּשָׁלִָם: (ט) וַיִּשְׂרֹף אֶת בֵּית ה' וְאֶת בֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ וְאֵת כָּל בָּתֵי יְרוּשָׁלִַם וְאֶת כָּל בֵּית גָּדוֹל שָׂרַף בָּאֵשׁ:

By contrast, in the last chapter of Jeremiah (which is almost identical to the last chapter of Kings) we read:

Jer 52:12-13

(יב) וּבַחֹדֶשׁ הַחֲמִישִׁי בֶּעָשׂוֹר לַחֹדֶשׁ הִיא שְׁנַת תְּשַׁע עֶשְׂרֵה שָׁנָה לַמֶּלֶךְ נְבוּכַדְרֶאצַּר מֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל בָּא נְבוּזַרְאֲדָן רַב טַבָּחִים עָמַד לִפְנֵי מֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל בִּירוּשָׁלִָם: (יג) וַיִּשְׂרֹף אֶת בֵּית ה' וְאֶת בֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ וְאֵת כָּל בָּתֵּי יְרוּשָׁלִַם וְאֶת כָּל בֵּית הַגָּדוֹל שָׂרַף בָּאֵשׁ:

So, on which date was the First Temple destroyed — the 7th of Av or the 10th of Av? On its own, this question may not have much import, but the way that the rabbinic tradition and Josephus have dealt with this question makes it extremely important. First off, the question has practical implications: What should be the date of the fast day that commemorates the destruction? The Mishnah set the fast day on the *9th* of Av. חמשה דברים אירעו את אבותינו בי"ז בתמוז וחמשה בט' באב...'

Josephus, by contrast, in *The Jewish War*, sticks to the biblical date: מלח' ו 251' For Josephus, the date of the destruction of the Second Temple, like that of the First Temple according to Jeremiah, is the *10th* of Av. In a moment, I will deal with the question of when the Second Temple was actually destroyed — was it on the 9th, in accordance with rabbinic tradition, or on the 10th, as Josephus writes? In any case, from the *Jewish War* it seems obvious that Josephus has adopted the date from Jeremiah. But did he really?

In *The Antiquities of the Jews*, Josephus bases his story of the destruction of the First Temple on the concluding chapters of the books of Kings and Jeremiah. He notes that the city was captured on the 9th of Tammuz. He dates the burning of the sanctuary to the 1st of Av. But with regard to the destruction, he says this:

קדמ' ח 148-146

All the totals conclude with “six months and ten days.” All through the works of Josephus, and particularly in the *Antiquities*, the months are counted starting with Nisan, as Josephus himself says specifically at the beginning of the *Antiquities*. But if that’s true, then the destruction must have taken place on the 10th of Tishrei! We can find proof that Josephus is counting the months starting with Nisan in the events that he cites. The exodus from Egypt took place in Nisan (the 1st month); the Flood, by contrast — according to Josephus — took place in Marheshvan (the 8th month). Even so, he still says that both events occurred so many years plus “six months and ten days” before the destruction. So he must be counting, in each case, from the same month, the month of Nisan. Where did Josephus get the idea that the destruction took place on the 10th of Tishrei, in direct contradiction to what he says in *The Jewish War* and, of course, to what the Bible and rabbinic literature say?

Careful study of rabbinic traditions about the date of the destruction can perhaps clarify somewhat Josephus’s sources. One of the most familiar traditions with regard to the date of the destruction in rabbinic literature reads as follows:

סדר עולם ל

Elsewhere, I have shown that the date of the 9th of Av was not an original part of this tradition. With that in mind, the original text of *Seder Olam* tells us that the destruction took place במוצאי שבת ובמוצאי שביעית , “immediately after the Sabbath” and “immediately after the sabbatical year.” “Immediately after the Sabbath” tells us the day of the week. “Immediately after the sabbatical year” ordinarily indicates the 8th year of the sabbatical cycle. As you know, Judaism has a 7-year cycle in which tilling the soil is forbidden every seventh year. The following year, the first year of the new 7-year cycle, is also called מוצאי שביעית, literally “the departure of the seventh,” which is the expression we find in *Seder Olam*. Thus the normal way to understand this phrase would be as “the 8th year.” But I would like to suggest an alternative, more limited meaning for the term “the departure of the seventh.”

Let’s turn, for this purpose, to the discussion about this tradition in the Babylonian Talmud (tractate Arakhin 12a):

''בראשונה במוצאי שביעית מי משכחת לה? והכתיב: בעשרים וחמש שנה לגלותנו בראש השנה בעשור לחדש בארבע עשרה שנה אחר אשר הוכתה העיר, איזו היא שנה שראש השנה בעשור לחדש? הוי אומר: זה יובל".

The Talmud questions the tradition that says the destruction took place “immediately after the sabbatical year,” and cites Ezekiel 40:1. בעשרים וחמש שנה לגלותנו בראש השנה בעשור לחדש בארבע עשרה שנה אחר אשר הוכתה העיר According to that verse, this prophecy occurred 14 years after the destruction of the First Temple. The specific calendar date is Rosh Hashanah, on the *10th* day of the month. The Talmud asks: When can Rosh Hashanah be on the 10th day of the month? Answer: In the Jubilee year, the 50th year after seven sabbatical cycles. In that year, they mark “Rosh Hashanah” — the beginning of the year — on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the 10th of Tishrei.

Now if this prophecy occurred in the 50th year, the Jubilee year, then the destruction must have occurred in the 36th year of the cycle, since the prophecy was uttered 14 years after the destruction. The 36th year was indeed “immediately after the sabbatical year,” since the previous year, the 35th year, was a sabbatical year.

So we have found a connection between the destruction and the date suggested by Josephus, the 10th of Tishrei. Of course, the simple meaning of the Ezekiel verse is just that the prophecy took place 14 years after the destruction, not that the prophecy given on the 10th of Tishrei was given 14 years *to the day* after the destruction (which would mean that the destruction, too, took place on the 10th of Tishrei). Nonetheless, in tractate Arakhin 12b, the Talmud cites another tradition that also connects the sabbatical cycle to the destruction:

דתניא: שבעה עשר יובלות מנו ישראל משנכנסו לארץ ועד שיצאו.

ואי אתה יכול לומר משעה שנכנסו מנו, שאם אתה אומר כן נמצא בית חרב בתחילת יובל, ואי אתה מוצא בארבע עשרה שנה אחר אשר הוכתה העיר, אלא צא מהם שבע שכיבשו ושבע שחילקו ואתה מוצא בארבע עשרה שנה אחר אשר הוכתה העיר.

The first sentence here is apparently a Tannaitic source, or in any case a source that stands on its own. According to this sentence, Israel counted 17 jubilees, that is, 850 years, from their entry into the promised land to the exile, which also marks the destruction of the Temple. Here, in contrast to the other sources, there is an explicit assertion that the destruction took place in a jubilee year. And, indeed, the Gemara immediately responds by marshaling another text in order to refute this possibility, which fails to jibe with what the Ezekiel verse says. It is precisely the Gemara’s sensitivity on this point that reveals the possibilities of this tradition. Even if the Temple was destroyed in a jubilee year, there is certainly nothing that requires us to say that it was destroyed on Rosh Hashanah, which occurs in a jubilee year on the 10th of Tishrei — but the tradition’s focus on the jubilee year makes that interpretation perfectly possible. Admittedly, were it not for Josephus, it is almost certain that we would reject this interpretation. But since Josephus states that the First Temple was destroyed on the 10th of Tishrei, we must take seriously the possibility that his statement is based some tradition like this.

I’m guessing that at this point you have lots of questions. The process that I’ve suggested is highly speculative. First, there is the connection between Rosh Hashanah and the 10th of Tishrei; then, the connection between the jubilee cycle and the Destruction; and I’ve put all this together to explain some very obscure words in Josephus. It is certainly possible that what Josephus says is based on a completely different tradition that we no longer possess. Bosse, in his study of Josephus’s chronology, showed that the length of time to the destruction of the First Temple from the year it was built, from the exodus, from the Flood, and from Adam are all counted on the Sothic cycle, connected with the star Sirius, which is the basis of the Egyptian calendar. It may even be that the addition of “six months and ten days” to each of those time periods is connected with some tradition that is now lost to us. To me, the most important question is not what tradition underlies the words of Josephus, but how it could be that Josephus, when he dates the destruction of the First Temple in the *Antiquities*, ignores explicit biblical verses that he himself had made use of some years before in *The Jewish War*.

In order to understand the tension between the Bible and the tradition, we must return to the question of the date of the *second* destruction. We’ll start with Josephus. As we saw, Josephus argues that the second destruction took place on the 10th of Av, through divine providence that arranged for this second destruction to match the date on which the First Temple was destroyed. I have discussed what Josephus says at greater length elsewhere, arguing that Josephus pushed the date of the destruction forward by one day — instead of the 9th of Av, he put it on the 10th. The evidence for this is found in Josephus’s own book. Let me present it briefly.

According to Josephus, the Romans had already reached the sanctuary itself on the 8th, by which time they had almost broken through its gates. The actual breach would have been expected to take place the next day, on the 9th, but on that date Titus convened a council of war for the specific purpose of discussing the ultimate fate of the Temple. The slightest familiarity with Roman military doctrine and with siege warfare in general is enough to cast great doubt on this point. The Roman army aspired to avoid siege warfare as much as they could, and to the extent that it was forced upon them, they tried to limit it as much as possible. It is extremely difficult to believe that Titus would interrupt the siege just when it was about to conclude, thereby giving the Jewish fighters a chance to rest and gather their strength. What is even more surprising is that, according to Josephus, the Jewish fighters also participated in the ceasefire! In total contrast to their standard conduct — attacking the Romans without cease — they too agreed to take a timeout to give the Romans the opportunity to discuss the fate of the Temple! When one checks the order of events given by Sulpicius Severus and Orosius, it is evident that the council was convened only after the conquest of Jerusalem, in the middle of the month of Elul, about a month after the capture of the Temple. It was only then, calmly and after the military operation was over, that it made sense to discuss what should be done with the buildings in the city, among them the Temple.

Josephus pushed the date of the destruction of the Second Temple forward to the 10th of Av in order to link the destruction of the First Temple to that of the Second Temple. In this way, he indicates, quite explicitly, that just as God had destroyed the First Temple for the sins of the people, so too the Second Temple was destroyed by God on account of the sins of the people. Throughout his book, Josephus describes the sins of the rebels as leading inevitably to the destruction, and now he employs chronology to prove that God Himself was behind the destruction. Slightly changing the depiction of historical reality for the sake of teaching a moral of one kind or another was not unusual for the historians of antiquity — and perhaps not in our own time, either. For our purposes, the important point is to recognize Josephus’s readiness to deviate from the facts in a way apparently calculated to advance an ethical point.

The mishnah that deals with the dates of the destructions follows the same procedure, but in the opposite direction. The Mishnah states that both temples were destroyed on the 9th of Av. Yet, as we saw, apparently only the Second Temple was really destroyed on the 9th. The First Temple (according to the Bible) was destroyed either on the 7th or on the 10th. This time, it’s the Mishnah that has bent the biblical text for its own purposes. Why did the Mishnah stick to the 9th and not use the biblical date? The answer, it seems, lies in the power of ritual. According to most scholars, the fast of the 9th of Av was created in the wake of the second destruction. So it was only natural to set it on the 9th and not on any other date. Yet the proximity of that date to the date of the first destruction, which Josephus also felt, and the desire to link the two events, caused the Mishnah to “bend” the biblical date of the first destruction and to give preference to the date of the second destruction. The reason for this was that the fast of the 9th of Av was already well established, and the Mishnah could not change its date. So instead the Mishnah “changed” the date of the first destruction. Like Josephus, the Mishnah did not consider it particularly important to retain the precise dates of the “historical truth.” Unlike Josephus, however, the Mishnah chose to subordinate the Bible to its own purposes.

Now we can return to the date of the first destruction in Josephus’s *Antiquities of the Jews*. One interesting phenomenon that has often been pointed out is that the *Antiquities* is a much more “Pharisaic” book than *The Jewish War*. Josephus’s connection to the Pharisees is found in his autobiography, *The Life of Josephus*, where he recounts: חיי יוסף 10 Apparently, with his dissociation from priestly circles after the destruction, he felt more and more connected to the world of the Pharisees. One of the most interesting expressions of “Pharisaism” in Josephus is his frequent use of Pharisaic traditions — meaning both halakhic and aggadic traditions — in the *Antiquities*; such traditions eventually became part of rabbinic literature. For example, it is only in the *Antiquities* that Josephus uses the rabbinic tradition of the *bat kol*, the heavenly voice that John Hyrcanus heard in the Holy of Holies. Another example is the famous story of the rift between Alexander Jannaeus and the Pharisees, which is not found at all in *The Jewish War*, but is in the *Antiquities*. I am not judging here whether Josephus deliberately omitted “Pharisaisms” when he wrote *The Jewish War*, or whether he learned these traditions only long after he reached Rome, at which point he inserted them into his great work. The important point is that in the *Antiquities* there is a distinct tendency to rely on Pharisaic traditions, or at least to give greater weight to such traditions than he had done in his earlier works.

It is quite possible that this phenomenon also appears in connection with the date of the first destruction in *The Antiquities of the Jews*. Josephus certainly was familiar with and remembered the Bible, yet when he came to write the history of the First Temple he had additional traditions, perhaps including the tradition that the First Temple had been destroyed in a jubilee year, and perhaps a more explicit tradition that fixed the date of the destruction on the 10th of Tishrei. Matching his approach elsewhere in the book, Josephus chose to transmit this tradition to us even though it required “overlooking” the Bible. In a broader view, we can say that Josephus took the same path which the Mishnah would one day take. That is, he subordinated the Bible to the traditions he had at his disposal. In this way, to be sure, he displayed a distinctly Pharisaic approach, with ancestral traditions at its center. In other words, the path from the Bible to the Mishnah runs through Josephus.