

Preliminary Discussion

The Sabbath and Jubilee Years in Leviticus, 25:1–13

And Yahweh spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai saying, Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, Without a doubt you shall come into the land which I am giving to you and the land shall have a sabbath,¹ a sabbath for Yahweh. Six years you shall sow your field and six years you shall prune your vineyard and shall gather the produce. And in the seventh year a sabbath *sabbathon*² shall be for the land, a sabbath for Yahweh. Your field you shall not sow and your vineyard you shall not prune. That which grows of itself of your harvest you shall not harvest and the grapes of your unkept vine you shall not gather. A year of sabbathon it shall be for the land. And the sabbath of the land shall be to you for food, to you and to your male servant and your female servant, and to your hired one and to your tenant, those living among you, and to your cattle and to the beast which is on your land, shall all the produce of it be for food.

And you shall count seven sabbaths of years, seven years seven times, and shall be to you the days of the seven sabbaths of years, forty-nine years. And you shall let sound a ram's horn, a signal in the seventh moon, on the tenth of the moon. On the Day of Atonement the ram's horn shall sound in all your land. And you shall make sacred this year, the fiftieth year, and you shall proclaim liberty in the land to all its dwellers. A Jubilee it shall be for you. And you shall return a male to his possession; and each to his family you shall return him. A Jubilee it is, the fiftieth year. A year it is for you, not shall you sow it and not shall you harvest that which grows of itself and not gather the unkept vine, for a Jubilee it shall be. Sacred it shall be to you. Out of the field you shall eat its store in the year of this Jubilee. You shall return each one to his possession.

¹ The Hebrew word שבת (*sabbath*) means, “ceased... intermission... cessation” (HEL, p. 260), “to repose... rest, interruption, cessation... intermission” (SEC, Heb. #7673–7676). The primary meaning of “sabbath” is to “cease” or “rest” from some action or work.

² The Hebrew word שבתון (*sabbathon*) derives from the term שבת (*sabbath*), i.e. to “cease” from some action or work, and means, “a time of rest” (HEL, p. 260), “a sabbatism or special holiday” (SEC, Heb. #7677). A sabbathon is defined in Scriptures as “a sacred sabbath for Yahweh” (Exod., 16:23).

CHART A

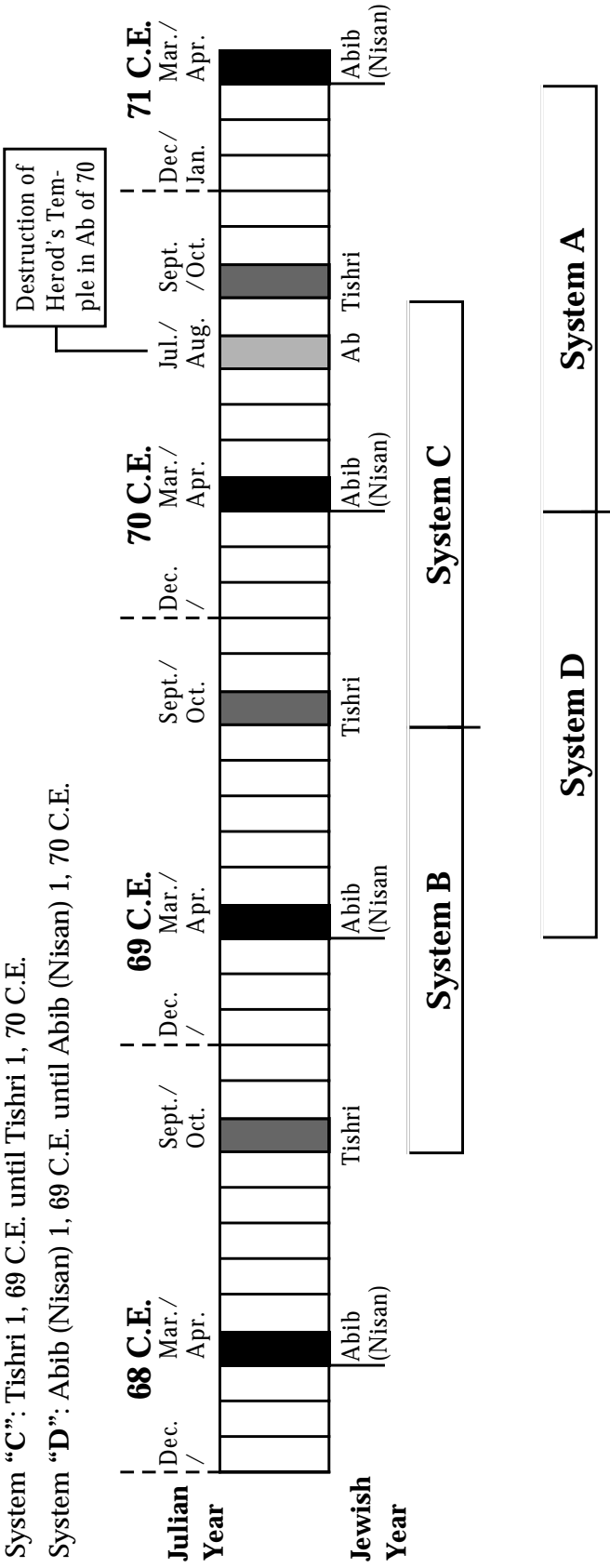
The Four Sabbath Cycle Theories: Their Proposed Sabbath Year at the Time of the Destruction of the Second (Herod's) Temple

System "A": Abib (Mar./Apr.) 1, 70 C.E. until Abib (Nisan) 1, 71 C.E.

System "B": Tishri (Sept./Oct.) 1, 68 C.E. until Tishri 1, 69 C.E.

System "C": Tishri 1, 69 C.E. until Tishri 1, 70 C.E.

System "D": Abib (Nisan) 1, 69 C.E. until Abib (Nisan) 1, 70 C.E.



Introduction

This study presents the evidence from ancient biblical and secular sources for the dating of the sabbath year and Jubilee cycle.

There has been a long standing debate over exactly which sabbath and Jubilee cycle system represents the one actually practiced by the ancient Israelites. To the novice this dispute may at first glance seem trivial. Nevertheless, there are two reasons that its solution is extremely valuable. First, this cycle is an essential tool for any reconstruction of the chronological framework of ancient Israelite history. The strong foundation it provides, in turn, acts as a guide for other contemporary dynasties and events.¹

Second, once the correct cycle is ascertained, it allows us to “clock in” and discover which years are presently sabbaths and Jubilees. This possibility holds great significance for students of biblical eschatology. The book of Hebrews, for example, notes that, “The Law,” of which the sabbath and Jubilee years are a part, is “a shadow of the coming good things.”² The sabbath day, to demonstrate, was reckoned as a type of the great sabbatism and rest into which the people of Yahweh will one day enter.³

Likewise, the prophetic character of the Jubilee year is strongly attested to. The ancient book of Jubilees, for instance, notes that the sabbath and Jubilee cycle would continue “until the sanctuary of the sovereign (Yahweh) is created in Jerusalem upon Mount Zion.”⁴ The text of 11Q Melchizedek, found in the caves at Qumran, explains the Jubilee statutes of Leviticus, 25, by stating:

1. [saying to Zion] ‘your eloahim⁵ reigns.’ . . . [
2. [] . . . and where it says, ‘In [this] year of Jubilee you shall return, each man to his possession.’
3. [and where it says, ‘Let] every holder of a debt [let drop] what he loans [to his neighbor. Let him not exact payment from his neighbor nor from his brother, for there is proclaimed a] remission
4. [of el.’ Its interpretation concerns the e]nd of days as regards ‘those taken captive’ who [. . . etc].⁶

¹ See our forthcoming books entitled *Israelite Chronology* and *Old World Chronologies*.

² Heb., 10:1. Also cf. Luke, 4:16–22, quoting Isa., 61:1–9, in reference to Lev., 25:f, where liberty is to be proclaimed to all the inhabitants of the land during the Jubilee year.

³ Heb., 3:7–4:13; esp. v. 4:9, were the Greek term σαββατισμός (sabbatismos), meaning, “a sabbatism” (SEC, Gk. #4520, derived from 4521, σάββατον), i.e. “a keeping of sabbath, a sabbath rest” (ILT, Lex., p. 88), is used.

⁴ Jub., 1:29.

⁵ The generic term אֱלֹהִים (eloah), its plural form אֱלֹהִים (eloahi) and collective noun form אֱלֹהִים (eloahim), and the title אֵל (el) are indiscriminately translated into English by the single word God. Each term actually has its own unique meaning (see SNY, pp. 5–14). To avoid any confusion, we shall continue throughout our study with the proper transliterations.

⁶ MTCE, p. 67.

“Those taken captive” is a reference to the future captivity of the Israelites among the nations during the end of days. The prophets foretold that out of this captivity a remnant of Israel and Judah would return to the Promised Land and eternally dwell with Yahweh.⁷ This return was symbolized by the Israelites regaining their liberty during the Jubilee year. The coming of the messiah during the end of days, at which time he will save Israel and Judah from their captivity and return them to their homeland, was, by extension, understood as occurring in one of these future Jubilee years.⁸

In either case, whether for an accurate Israelite chronology or for eschatological purposes, a precise knowledge of this ancient cycle is required. Therefore, we must take the utmost care in uncovering the true and original sabbath year and Jubilee cycle.

There are four possible sabbath cycle systems we must consider.⁹ For simplification purposes, this study shall utilize the following labels for these four systems. Our “key” or “example” date will be the sabbath year in each system which is either on or nearest to the year that Jerusalem and Herod’s Temple (the second Temple) were destroyed (the summer of 70 C.E.).¹⁰

System “A”: Abib (March/April)¹¹ 1, 70 C.E. until Abib 1, 71 C.E. The month of Abib was also called Nisan. System “A” is advocated by this study.

System “B”: Tishri (Sept./Oct.)¹² 1, 68 C.E. until Tishri 1, 69 C.E. The Zuckermann-Schürer system.

System “C”: Tishri 1, 69 C.E. until Tishri 1, 70 C.E. The Marcus-Wacholder theory.

System “D”: Abib 1, 69 C.E. until Abib 1, 70 C.E. A possibility based upon the evidence of an Abib 1 beginning for the year coupled with the claim of Rabbi Jose and other Talmudic writers that the year before the fall of Jerusalem was a sabbath year.

Today the most popular of these theories is system “B.” This system has been advocated since the time of the *Mishnah* (formed at the end of the second century C.E.). It only differs from system “D” in that system “D” would start the sabbath year in the spring rather than in the fall. System “C” has also been advocated since the *Gemara* portion of written Talmudic times,¹³ but it has

⁷ E.g. Lev., 16:14–45; Deut., 29:10–30:20; Jer., 30:10–31:34; Ezek., 37:1–28; Hosea, 1:1–3:5; Amos, 9:11–15; etc., cf. Acts, 1:1–7; Hebs., 8:8–13.

⁸ See the study in HUCA, 46, pp. 201–218.

⁹ See Chart A.

¹⁰ In our study the abbreviations C.E. (Common Era) and B.C.E. (Before Common Era), the scholarly, religiously neutral designations, shall be utilized rather than the corresponding A.D. and B.C.

¹¹ See Chart G. The Hebrew month generally begins during the latter part of the first or the early part of the second Gregorian (Julian, Roman) month-name mentioned as its equivalent.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ For the purposes of our study, Talmudic times, which essentially represent Pharisaic traditions and interpretations of Scriptural laws, can be divided into three phases. First is the halakoth or oral laws period (mid-second century B.C.E. until the end of the second century C.E.). Second is the period when these oral laws were codified in written form. This event took place in about 200 C.E. with the composition of the *Mishnah*. It continued until about 500 C.E. with the *Gemara*, comments by the Rabbis on the *Mishnah*. The post-*Gemara* era is also called the post-Talmudic period. It represents the third phase of Talmudic times. Jewish scholars during this phase advocated the earlier codified Talmudic laws and traditions.

been the lesser sister to system “B.” It has again gained some popularity in recent years due to the work of Ralph Marcus and Zion Wacholder. System “A,” on the other hand, is the conclusion based upon the in-depth research into the ancient evidence provided in this study. In reality, system “A” has merely allowed the evidence to present its own case.

It is the contention of this study that the Jews who supported system “B,” beginning in the late second century C.E., lost touch with the accurate chronology and the true sabbath year and Jubilee cycle. They, in turn, incorrectly calculated the sabbath year for more ancient times so as to make it fall one year prior to the destruction of Jerusalem rather than during that event. System “D” is merely a modified form of “B.” System “D” takes notice of the fact that the earlier Israelites actually began their sabbath year in the spring and not with the fall (the Jewish reckoning of fall as the official beginning of the sabbath year taking place at a relatively late date). System “C” takes into account that the year Jerusalem fell (70 C.E.) was a sabbath year but it errs in that it continues the late and, what we shall prove to be, false practice of reckoning the beginning of a sabbath year from the fall.

All three systems (“B,” “C,” and “D”) are faced with important obstacles. Advocates of these various theories have often been forced to harshly criticize ancient records, like those from Josephus and the Maccabean books, because the historical data is inconsistent with present theory. Robert North, for example, takes Josephus to task by challenging his historical year as exhibiting “internal inconsistencies which invalidate their use for chronology.” North concludes, “It should be abundantly clear that the sabbath year dates of Josephus are either palpably incommensurate, or else insolubly obscure.”¹⁴

This study disagrees. It is not Josephus or any other pre-second century C.E. ancient report that is the source for the confusion. Indeed, we find them all remarkably accurate. Rather, it is the attempt to force these early records to conform with one of the three erroneous sabbath cycle theories now prevalent which has created an illusion of historical error.

System “A,” on the other hand, does not start from the premise of an existing theory which is built upon the interpretation of one or two dates or upon a late tradition, as the three other systems do. Instead, it allows the evidence to build its own structure. The results of this method reveal that the ancient sources are in perfect harmony and reflect an entirely different sabbath cycle than heretofore presented. As is to be expected, the fact that system “A” is a new and radical departure from the three established theories demands that it must submit in every detail to very close scrutiny. Yet, there is no doubt in this researcher’s mind that system “A” not only survives meticulous scrutiny but its solution is compelling.

As part of our **Preliminary Discussion** we shall review some major flaws in the system “B” chronology. These observations will be followed by some initial comments with regard to the question about which month served as the beginning of the ancient sabbath year during the post-exile period. These two chapters will set the stage for other numerous proofs presented throughout which shall conclusively show that the first day of the Hebrew month of Abib (later called Nisan) was the true New Year date for the Jews up and until the time of the Bar Kochba revolt (133–135 C.E.). The month of Abib, which

¹⁴ Bib., 34, pp. 503, 511.

began with the new moon whose cycle contained the first full moon after the spring equinox,¹⁵ therefore, finds its start sometime during the Gregorian (Roman or Julian) month-names of either March or April.

With this preliminary discussion accomplished, we shall begin a detailed look at the evidence for the sabbath and Jubilee years. This study has divided this examination into five Sections, each representing the evidence for a specific historical period:

In **Section I** of our text the records for a sabbath year and a Jubilee year which occurred during the pre-exile period (before 587 B.C.E.)¹⁶ shall be thoroughly discussed. It shall be demonstrated that a sabbath year and a Jubilee year were observed in the fifteenth and sixteenth year of the reign of King Hezekiah of Judah (701/700 and 700/699 B.C.E., spring reckoning). The complexities of this evidence demand a full investigation of the conflict between the Assyrian king Sennacherib and the Judahite king Hezekiah, as well as the important involvement of the Kushite king Tirhakah. The results of this study will in turn lay the groundwork for what will prove to be the true and correct sabbath and Jubilee cycle, which for our study has been dubbed system "A." This conclusion will be amply supported by the remainder of our work.

In **Section II** we shall examine the records of the Jewish post-exile period (538–40 B.C.E.). These documents will reveal the observance of a sabbath year in the eighth year of the Persian king Artaxerxes I; in the 150th Seleucid year; in the 178th Seleucid year; and, finally, in the year following the fifth consulship of Gaius Julius Caesar.

Section III will delve into the evidence for two sabbath years observed during the reign of King Herod of Judaea (40–4 B.C.E.). In these chapters we shall provide an in-depth examination of which year and season Herod conquered Jerusalem. This conquest is very important for our study since a sabbath year occurred around that time. Systems "B," "C," and "D" all make their interpretations of this sabbath year the heart of their arguments. The evidence from Herod's thirteenth through seventeenth years adds further definition as to which of the four possible sabbath cycle systems can plausibly work.

Section IV will deal with the evidence for the sabbath years in the post-Herod period, extending up until the end of the First Revolt and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. This investigation will include the proof that there could not have been a sabbath year in 40/41 C.E.—which will verify that system "B" (Zuckermann's view) and system "D" are inaccurate. We shall also show proof of a sabbath year in the second year of Emperor Nero (56/57 C.E., Abib reckoning) and shall demonstrate that a sabbath year could not have occurred in the winter of 68/69 C.E. (which again disproves systems "B" and "D"). These records will reveal that the year Jerusalem fell to the Romans (i.e. 70/71 C.E., spring reckoning) was a sabbath year.

Section V shall analyze the evidence for the sabbath year of 133/134 C.E., during the Bar Kochba revolt, and the references to an upcoming sabbath year in 140/141 C.E. The sabbath year of 133/134 C.E. was the last official sabbath year observed by the Judaeian state. With the traumatic defeat of the Jews by the Romans in the summer of 135 C.E., the practice of observing the sabbath years by the Judaeian state was thereafter suppressed. It was abolished altogether as a requirement for Judaism by its leaders during the third century C.E.

¹⁵ See Chap. XXVIII, pp. 341–344.

¹⁶ See above n. 10.