

THE SABBATH AND JUBILEE CYCLE

Volume One

PART TWO: APPENDICES, BIBLIOGRAPHY, AND INDICES

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*Obtain the truth and do not sell wisdom, instruction,
and understanding. (Proverbs, 23:23)*

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Appendix A

The Month Sennacherib Arrived

Rabbi Yose (Jose) ben Halafta, the author of the *Seder Olam* (composed in about 160 C.E.) provides us with an interesting piece of evidence regarding the approximate date that the Assyrian forces under Sennacherib arrived in the Syro-Phoenician region before they attacked Judah. According to rabbinic writers, Sennacherib's army was destroyed on the day of *Phasekh* (Passover), i.e., on the 14th of *Abib* (the 1st month), only 2 weeks into the new year.¹ Rabbi Yose adds that, "because (the Assyrians) came up (against Jerusalem) in the time before Passover, they were not able to plant and so they ate what grows of itself."² Two issues are at work in Yose's comment. First, underlying his words is the faulty chronology of the rabbinic Jews, which caused them to err regarding which years during the days of Hezekiah were Sabbath years. Second, Yose reveals the time of the year in which Sennacherib's army appeared in Syro-Phoenicia, for which cause the Judahites fled for safety into their cities.

To begin with, the rabbinic chronology is built upon a faulty construct, one which was developed by the rabbis during the 2nd century C.E. As pointed out in Chapter I, the period between the building of the Second Temple and its destruction in 70 C.E. was misdated by the rabbis by some 168 years.³ This distortion, in turn, caused the rabbis to misdate the events during the reign of Hezekiah by decades—the things occurring in 701 B.C.E. being reduced by approximately 166 actual years.⁴ As a result, these rabbinic Jews incorrectly calculated that the year (i.e., using a *Tishri* 1st rabbinic reckoning) in which Sennacherib appeared in the area of Syria was not a Sabbath year. Rabbi Yose declares that the destruction of the Assyrian army took place in "the 11th year of a Jubilee cycle, in the 4th year of a Sabbatical cycle."⁵ Accordingly, Yose and his Jewish contemporaries were unable to connect the scriptural comment,

¹ E.g., *Exod. Rab.*, 18:5a; *Song Rab.*, 1:12:3.

² *S.O.*, 23.

³ *Chap. I*, pp. 14–17.

⁴ The rabbis dated the building of the Second Temple to 351 B.C.E. (i.e., 420 years before the destruction of the Second Temple). To this date, they added 70 years for the Jewish captivity in Babylonia, beginning with the destruction of the First Temple (i.e., in 421 B.C.E.). The First Temple was actually destroyed in 587 B.C.E., some 166 years earlier. The time from the destruction of the Assyrian army at Jerusalem in 701 B.C.E. until the destruction of the First Temple in 587 B.C.E. was 114 years. Therefore, counting back from the false date of 421 B.C.E. by 114 years brings us to 535 B.C.E. for the destruction of the Assyrian army, a difference of 166 years to the actual date in 701 B.C.E.

⁵ *S.O.*, 23; cf. *SORV*, pp. 266f, n. 11.

“eat this year of that which is sown/grows of itself,”⁶ with a Sabbath year. They merely assumed that the months just prior to the Passover at question were not part of a Sabbath year and, as a result, sought to explain the sign from Yahweh by means of an alternate, although rather strained, interpretation.

Setting aside for the moment the obvious chronological error made by the rabbis regarding the Sabbath years, we nevertheless find a useful comment in the Seder Olam regarding the arrival of Sennacherib’s forces. It provides us with a piece of evidence that reveals the month in which Sennacherib’s Assyrian army first appeared in the region of Syro-Phoenicia. By Yose making the claim that the people of Judah “were not able to plant” because of the presence of Sennacherib’s army reveals the Jewish belief that Sennacherib and his army arrived in Syria in about mid-November.⁷ To demonstrate, for the Jews during the period of Josephus (1st century C.E.) and the Seder Olam (c.160 C.E.), wheat was first sown at the beginning of the rainy season, which marked the beginning of winter.⁸ The Seder Olam and the Jewish priest Josephus both tell us, for example, that the rainy season, and thus the planting season, commenced in the month of Marheshuan (Oct./Nov.) at which time occurred the setting of the constellation of Pleiades. More precisely, this setting is dated during this general period to November 10th/11th.⁹

This evidence demonstrates the belief found among the Jews of the mid-2nd century C.E. that Sennacherib arrived in the area of Syria in the month of Marheshuan (Oct./Nov.). The arrival of the Assyrian army caused the Judahites to flee to their fortified cities for safety. Falsely calculating that this year was not a Sabbath year, the rabbis extrapolated that the Judahites would not have been able to plant their fields. Unfortunately, Rabbi Yose superimposed the timing of the planting season that was practiced during his own day upon this historical event, falsely believing that neither Sennacherib’s invasion nor his demise belonged to a Sabbath year.

⁶ 2 Kings, 19:29; Isa., 37:30; cf. Targ. Jon., 2 Kings, 19:29, and Isa., 37:30.

⁷ Planting time in Judaea began at mid-November and continued until mid-January. Late planting occurred in February and March (HBC, pp. 33f).

⁸ For Josephus and many others during his day, there were only three seasons of the year: spring, summer, and winter. For the concept of only three seasons of the year, which was held by Josephus and other Jews of his period, see Chap. XXI, pp. 293–296.

⁹ The rains of winter during the first century C.E. and the years thereafter arrived around Nov. 11th, at the setting of Pleiades, see Jos., *Antiq.*, 13:8:2; S.O., 4; Pliny, 2:47 §125; Nov. 10 in Pliny, 18:60 §225, but cf. 11:15 §42.