

**SHIVAT TZION:
INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS OF THE RETURN TO ZION
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Shiur #02: The Missing Years

Before jumping into the book of *Ezra*, we must first review the controversy concerning the chronology of the kings of Persia. This question, which carries substantial historical and religious implications, bears directly on our understanding of *Ezra-Nechemia* in particular and *Shivat Tzion* generally. Although a comprehensive study of the subject is well beyond the scope of our discussion,¹ a basic summary of the debate is in order.

The Historians and the Rabbis

Let us begin by framing the controversy. As we discussed last week, some fifty years after the Temple's destruction the Babylonian empire fell into the hands of Cyrus the Great, making way for the rise of the Persian Empire. The historical dispute centers on the duration of Persian rule.

Modern scholarship, which bases itself on Greek works written during the Persian period and the astronomical tables of the Egyptian scholar Ptolemy, and more recently has found additional support in Persian cuneiform inscriptions, assumes that the Persian empire spanned approximately 206 years and included the following kings: Cyrus, Cambyses II, Darius I, Xerxes I (likely the Achashverosh of *Esther*), Artaxerxes I, Xerxes II, Darius II, Artaxerxes II, Artaxerxes III, and Darius III. According to this widely accepted view, the First Temple was destroyed in 587 or 586 BCE, with the new Temple completed in 517 or 516. The Second Temple, which was destroyed in 68 or 70 CE, stood for approximately 585 years.

By contrast, the rabbis present a dramatically different portrait of the Persian era. On their reckoning, the Second Temple stood for just 420 years (*Arakhin* 12b), not 585. This position is reflected in a Talmudic passage (*Avoda Zara* 8b-9a) which asserts that the Jews of the Second Temple period were governed by four kingdoms: the Persians for 34 years, the Greeks for 180, the Hasmoneans for 103 and the Romans for an additional 103. After accounting for the eighteen years between Cyrus' ascension to the throne and the Temple's completion, the rabbinic assign a mere 52 years to Persian rule, a far cry from the scholarly consensus of 206.

¹ For a comprehensive survey of rabbinic responses to the contradiction see Mitchell First, *Jewish History in Conflict*, 1997.

If the scholars rely on Babylonian and Persian texts as evidence, what is the basis for the rabbinic chronology? Key to their reconstruction is the obscure verse in *Daniel* we examined in our previous class, which refers to seventy periods of “*shavuim*.” *Chazal* (the sages of the Talmudic period) apparently understood this verse as denoting “seventy periods of seven years” (9:24). Moreover, elsewhere *Daniel* (11:2) seems to explicitly allow for only three or four Persian kings.² Thus, according to *Seder Olam Rabba*, a highly influential second-century rabbinic chronology, Daniel teaches that 490 years will elapse from the destruction of the First Temple to that of the Second. There were seventy years between the two Temples, leaving 420 years for the duration of the Second.³ Given that the Second Temple was destroyed in approximately 70 CE, this would place the destruction of the First Temple at 420 BCE and the construction of the latter at 350 BCE.

The rabbinic view raised a number of acute difficulties, including the biblical references to a variety of Jewish leaders and Persian monarchs who seemed to live in periods spanning more than 52 years. To resolve these dilemmas, in numerous instances the Talmud conflates seemingly distinct personalities. Malakhi was Ezra or Mordekhai (*Megilla* 15b). Zerubavel, a leader of the first wave of *aliya*, was Nechemia (*Sanhedrin* 38a). Cyrus, Artaxerxes and Darius were one and the same (*Rosh Hashana* 3b). While this pattern follows the larger midrashic tendency to conflate various biblical personalities, in regard to *Shivat Tzion* the trend is especially pronounced.

Ramifications of the Dispute

The chronological dispute has major implications. While the conventional rabbinic chronology places the current Jewish date at 5777, according to the scholarly consensus we find ourselves in approximately 5944. There are considerable ramifications for dating the *shemitta* and *yovel* cycles, the *molad* we announce when declaring the new month on *Shabbat Mevarekhim*, and the *birkat ha-chama* blessing, recited upon the sun every twenty-eighth year from the fourth day of creation.

The differing chronologies, moreover, carry major consequences for the dating of Purim. Having so dramatically shortened the Persian empire’s span, the rabbis place the Purim story *before* the Second Temple was built. According to modern scholarly consensus, however, Purim did not take place until some *fifty years after* the Second Temple was completed. As Rabbis Yoel Bin-Nun⁴ and Menachem Leibtag⁵ have suggested, this difference might have profound implications for the meaning of Esther. If the narrative unfolded decades after the Temple had been rebuilt, we might be more

² The rabbis interpreted the verse as a reference to three Persian kings and Darius the Mede. See Rashi s.v. *hinei*.

³ The number 420 also leads the rabbis to a particular interpretation of the verse in Chagai, “The glory of this latter house shall be greater than that of the former” (2:9). According to rabbinic tradition (*Arakhin* 12b), this refers to the longevity of the Second Temple, which stood for 420 years, as opposed to the First, which stood for only 410.

⁴ <http://etzion.org.il/vbm/english/purim/pur-ybn.htm>.

⁵ <http://tanach.org/special/purim/purims1.htm>.

likely to view the Megilla as a satire castigating the Jews of Shushan for remaining in the Persian capital instead of returning to their own capital Jerusalem.

An additional ramification relates to a point we mentioned earlier: a number of *aggadot* may only be understood against the backdrop of the rabbinic chronology. For example, the rabbis assert that Vashti was the daughter of Belshatzar and granddaughter of Nevuchadnetzar (*Esther Rabba* 18:1). This is only plausible if the Purim story took place prior to Cyrus' reign. Similarly, the rabbinic contention that Darius was Esther's son (*Vayikra Rabba* 13:5; see *Esther Rabba* 8:3) only works if we follow the rabbinic view.⁶ According to this chronology, it turns out that Artaxerxes, the king for whom Nechemia served as cup-bearer, was apparently a Jewish king.

Traditional Responses

How is a traditional Jew to deal with the contradiction? Is it possible to maintain the rabbinic view in light of the scholarly consensus? Five major approaches present themselves.

Approach 1 – Some simply reject secular scholarship in favor of the rabbinic view. This position, adopted by thinkers such as R. Saadia Gaon (*Emunot Ve-de'ot* 8) and Maharal (*Be'er Ha-gola* 6), maintains that a traditional Jew has no choice but to reject the secular dating. R. Saadia Gaon (ibid.) goes so far as to claim that Christians manipulated the historical data in order to support their assumptions about the time of Jesus' second coming. While these two thinkers pre-dated the discovery of much of the evidence in support of the scholarly consensus, many later traditional thinkers clung to this position. R. Yaakov Emden (18th century Germany), for instance, argued that the scholarly view outright contradicts the above-cited verse in *Daniel* (11:2):

May God save us from the view of those outsiders, who please themselves in the children of strangers, who add many to the number of Persian kings and increase their years greatly. They do not know their way in Jewish learning because they will necessarily be forced to contradict the biblical verses as well... (*Mitpachat Sefarim*, pp. 83-84)⁷

A more recent exemplar of this traditionalist position is R. Avraham Karelitz, who put it this way: "The years of the Second Temple are certain on the basis of the rabbis... one must distance himself from thoughts that stray from this view. Praiseworthy is one who does not read external works" (*Chazon Ish, Letters* 1:206).

Approach 2 – Others take the opposite position, rejecting the rabbinic chronology in favor of the scholarly consensus. Perhaps the best-known advocate for this view is R.

⁶ Malbim (*Nechemia* 2:6), building on the rabbinic exegesis, claims that the woman sitting next to Artaxerxes when Nechemia approached the king was none other than Esther, the king's mother. This surprising suggestion is a non-starter for one who follows the scholarly consensus.

⁷ Translation adapted from First, p. 30.

Zerachia Ha-levi, author of *Ba'al Ha-maor* (12th-century Provence). After citing and discussing the rabbinic viewpoint at length, the *Ba'al Ha-maor* concludes:

This is what emerges from the *midrash* and analyses of our rabbis. However, the correct interpretation according to the literal rendering is that... Cyrus, Artaxerxes and Darius were different kings. (Commentary to *Rif, Rosh Hashana* 1a)

The implication is clear. If the three monarchs were different people, it is implausible that the Persian kings ruled for a mere fifty-two years, in which case it is nearly impossible to maintain a 420-year period of duration for the Second Temple. Although *Ba'al Ha-maor* does not directly endorse the scholarly consensus – no such thing existed when he wrote in the twelfth century – he does reject the rabbinic view conflating the three kings, implicitly scuttling *Seder Olam* and the Talmud's thirty-four years.

Approach 3 – There are yet others who analyze the issue yet leave the question open. While many scholars take this tack, perhaps most interesting is the analysis of R. Yaakov Medan,⁸ who rejects the suggestions that the rabbis really accepted the conventional account, instead arguing cogently that the statements in *Seder Olam* are intended as historical fact and are part and parcel of a wider rabbinic worldview. While not deciding between the competing chronologies, R. Medan does make two noteworthy arguments in attempting to account for the rabbis' rejection of the conventional count. First, following R. Saadia Gaon, R. Medan claims that the rabbis might have believed that the conventional chronology was invented in support of the Christian interpretation of the Bible. Second, it is possible that the rabbis viewed the additional 150 years as implying a break in the unbroken chain from Sinai to the rabbinic period.

Approach 4 – Another camp attempts to reconcile the rabbinic approach with the conventional chronology by claiming that rabbis maintained a longer period than would appear at first glance. For instance, R. Chaim Hirschenson,⁹ noting that other time spans mentioned in the same passage include the word "*meah*," 100, maintains that the text of *Seder Olam* must be emended from 34 to 134. While this does not fully resolve the inconsistency, it narrows the gap considerably.

In a different but related vein, R. Mordechai Breuer¹⁰ maintains that *Seder Olam's* account should not be taken as literal but as metaphorical, and therefore one who accepts the scholarly account does not thereby display a lack of faith in the Sages. However, at least in this article, R. Breuer does not explain the deeper meaning of the Sages' account.

Approach 5 – A number of traditional scholars have proposed that the rabbis knew and accepted the conventional chronology but obscured it for some reason.

⁸ "*Mavo le-Ma'amaro shel Chaim Chefetz al Malchut Paras U-Madai*," *Megadim* 14 (1991), pp. 47-77.

⁹ *Sefer Yamim Mi-kedem*, Jerusalem, 1908, pp. 226-230 and 233-45.

¹⁰ "*Hora'at Ha-historya Ve-emunat Chachamim*," *Shema'atin* 10 (1973), pp. 52-62.

This position was perhaps most famously adopted by Rabbi Shimon Schwab, leader of the German Jewish community in Washington Heights, New York, until his death in 1995. He maintained that the rabbis had intentionally obscured “the missing years” in order to dissuade anyone from calculating the time of the coming of Messiah. This followed the charge laid out in the book of *Daniel* (12:4): “But you, Daniel, keep the words secret, and seal until the time of the end. Many will range far and wide and knowledge will increase.” Toward the end of his life, however, it seems that Rabbi Schwab recanted his position, expressing concern that the masking would have had too great a negative impact on halakhic matters such as the *molad*, and therefore the notion that the rabbis would have obscured the actual dates is implausible.¹¹

A second theory, proposed as early as 1852 by R. Solomon Judah Rapoport,¹² proposes that the years were omitted so as to align the historical chronology of the Egyptian Exodus with “*minyan shtarot*,” a counting system begun in 312 BCE in the wake of the Seleucid conquest of the Babylonian empire. According to *Seder Olam*’s chronology, as noted already by the Talmud (*Avoda Zara* 10a), *minyan shtarot* begins precisely 1,000 years after the Exodus. In this way, the rabbis ensured that even as they were adopting a secular accounting of history, they were simultaneously counting the years in accordance with the Exodus. In doing so, they were following the model of the Bible, which records that Shlomo built the Temple some 480 years after the redemption (I *Melakhim* 6:1).

Finally, the authors of a 2006 article in *Hakirah*¹³ develop a novel theory. They begin by noting that the Talmud (*Avoda Zara* 8b) divides human history into three epochs: 2,000 years of *tohu* (chaos), 2,000 years of Torah and 2,000 years of the messiah. The meaning of the years of Torah and those of *tohu* and messiah is unclear. The authors propose that the rabbis sought to situate the publication of the Mishnah toward the conclusion of the 2,000 years corresponding to the era of “Torah.” In its time, the Mishnah was a highly controversial work looking to position itself as a definitive summary of the Oral Law, much as Maimonides’ publication of *Mishneh Torah* was a highly controversial attempt to become the final word of Jewish law. To implicitly establish its legitimacy, the rabbis “shortened” the Persian period, placing the publication of the Mishnah toward the end of 2,000 years of Torah.

Conclusion

While we have offered only a bare-bones outline of the controversy, it is evident that the dispute concerning the chronology of the Persian kings carries significant theological, historical and exegetical implications. Throughout our treatment of *Shivat Tzion* we will be operating within the framework of the scholarly consensus. This view

¹¹ Both relevant statements of Rabbi Schwab are available at: <http://www.rabbimanning.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Controversial-Issues-from-the-Second-Temple-Shiur-2-The-Missing-168-Years.pdf>.

¹² *Erekh Milin*, p. 74. For a discussion, see First, p. 51 and pp. 125-129.

¹³ <http://www.hakirah.org/Vol%203%20Epstein.pdf>.

most easily accounts for the evidence and is endorsed by traditional thinkers such as Ba'al Ha-maor. Still, when a particular interpretive question hinges on the dispute, we will make note of how a devotee of the rabbinic view might tackle the question at hand.

Having reviewed the historical background to *Shivat Tzion* and the chronology of the Persian kings, we turn to the books of *Ezra-Nechemia* in our next class.