

# Did Jerusalem Fall In 587 or 586 BCE?

## Four Authors Compared

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Scholars today assign the fall of Jerusalem in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE either to 587 or 586 BCE based on various nuances of interpretation of the Bible records. What are the differences?

First let us note that the Bible is the only direct source of information on the date of Jerusalem's destruction. As Rodger Young noted:

The Babylonian records describing the destruction of Jerusalem by the army of Nebuchadnezzar have not been found. As a consequence, all dates for that event must be derived from the scriptural record, as tied to the last events prior to the destruction that are described in the Babylonian archives. These are the Battle of Carchemish in 605 BC and the initial capture of the city and its ruler Jehoiachin in the spring of 597 BC. <sup>1</sup>

In 1944 Edwin Thiele published his PhD thesis *The Chronology of the Kings of Judah and Israel* <sup>2</sup>, where he argued for the 586 date based on his analysis of the regnal dates for Jewish kings around that time. He published his first full analysis in 1951, in *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* <sup>3</sup>. In the ensuing years a small majority of scholars have preferred 586 for Jerusalem's fall, while others, based on a slightly different analysis, have argued for 587.

What is the difference in the analyses? Fundamentally it comes down to whether a scholar properly accounted for a synchronism between two dates in Ezekiel 40:1, namely, that the 25<sup>th</sup> year of the exile of Ezekiel is synchronized with the 14<sup>th</sup> year after the destruction of Jerusalem. When Ezekiel 40:1 mentions the 14<sup>th</sup> year after the destruction, the question arises: Was the author counting the year of the destruction as the 1<sup>st</sup> year or as the 0<sup>th</sup> year? The text reads:

In the twenty-fifth year **of** our exile, at the beginning of the year, on the tenth of the month, in the fourteenth year **after** the city was taken, on that same day the hand of the LORD was upon me and He brought me there. – Ezekiel 40:1 (NASB)

Most scholars seem to have missed this point. Either they have neglected to discuss it at all, or they have glossed over the fine points of the biblical text and interpreted Ezekiel's mention of the 14<sup>th</sup> year **after** the destruction as the 14<sup>th</sup> year **of** the destruction. This is the same sort of counting issue encountered in assigning an age to a person: in the year **of** a person's birth his age ranges from zero to one year; in the year **after** a person's birth his age ranges from one year to two years.

For example, in discussing Ezek. 40:1 Jack Finegan wrote:

The date of Ezekiel's vision of the temple in Ezek 40:1 has already been identified (§439) as evidently marking the anniversary of the "very day" of the inauguration of the exile. The date, Ezekiel says, is in the twenty-fifth year "of our exile," at the beginning of the year [evidently in the first month, Nisan], on the

1 Rodger C. Young, *When Did Jerusalem Fall?*, JETS (Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society), 47/1 (March 2004), p. 21

2 Edwin R. Thiele, *The Chronology of the Kings of Judah and Israel*, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Volume 3, Number 3 (July 1944), pp 137-186, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago (1944)

3 Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, (1st ed.; New York: Macmillan, 1951; 2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965; 3rd ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan/Kregel, 1983). ISBN 0-8254-3825-X, 9780825438257

tenth day of the month, and in the fourteenth year after the city was conquered. The twenty-fifth year of the exile was 573/572, and in 573 the tenth day of Nisan was Apr 28. Inasmuch as Jerusalem fell according to our reckoning (§442) on Tammuz 9 (July 18), 586, in the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar (586/585), **the fourteenth year from that date, counted inclusively**, was 573/572 and the exact anniversary date is Apr 18, 573 B.C.<sup>4</sup>

This point is crucial in setting the dates for the reign of Jewish king Zedekiah. The Bible states that Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in the 4<sup>th</sup> month of the 11<sup>th</sup> year of Zedekiah, but what exactly does that mean? Did the Bible writer use accession-year or non-accession-year dating for the reigns of kings? Did he start the regnal year in the spring (Nisan) or autumn (Tishri)? Was the 4<sup>th</sup> month of the 11<sup>th</sup> year of Zedekiah in 586 or 587? How does the meaning of Ezek. 40:1 affect the answer to these questions?

This paper discusses how four modern authors have tackled the problem of Zedekiah's regnal dates: Edwin Thiele, Jack Finegan, Rodger Young and Carl Olof Jonsson. Young's analysis seems to be the most comprehensive and accurate, as it accounts for all of the secular and biblical chronological data. Thiele's analysis misses the above point about the 14<sup>th</sup> year after Jerusalem's destruction, as well as other critical points, which makes his dating of Zedekiah's reign one year too late, and with it a number of other events. Finegan largely follows Thiele, and misses the same points. Jonsson arrives at 587 but for different reasons.

## Rodger Young

In 2004 Rodger Young published a paper *When Did Jerusalem Fall?*<sup>5</sup> in which he used a form of systems analysis that separates invalid from valid assumptions about proposed dates using the data from appropriate biblical passages as a filter. For anchor dates, Young used two basic, well established dates derived from the Babylonian archives: 605 BCE for the battle of Carchemish and Nebuchadnezzar's accession year, and Adar 2, 597 BCE for the initial seizure of Jerusalem and capture of king Jehoiachin. Then he analyzed passages from the Bible books of Ezekiel, 2 Kings and Jeremiah to see whether 587 or 586 was consistent with all of the passages. Only 587 survived the analysis.

Ezekiel was a captive of Babylon alongside king Jehoiachin, and he measured most of the time periods in his book by the years of captivity of Jehoiachin. However, there is an uncertainty whether Ezekiel used accession-type or non-accession-type counting, or Nisan or Tishri for the starting month of the counting year. Young starts his analysis with Ezekiel 40:1:

In the twenty-fifth year of our exile, at the beginning of the year, on the tenth day of the month, in the fourteenth year after the city was struck down, on that very day, the hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me to the city. (ESV)

“Twenty-fifth year” implies non-accession counting (count starts with 1) for the date, and “fourteenth year after” implies accession counting (count starts with 0) for the date.

Henceforth I'll use the following notation:

NT = Non-accession-year Tishri dating

NN = Non-accession-year Nisan dating

AT = Accession-year Tishri dating

AN = Accession-year Nisan dating

4 Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, Revised Edition, Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998, p. 265

5 JETS, 47/1 (March 2004) 21-38

So, if we knew for certain that Ezekiel counted the exile as beginning on Adar 2, 597, then the Jewish year he counted as the 1<sup>st</sup> year must have run either from Tishri 1, 598 up to the day before Tishri 1, 597 (NT or AT), or from Nisan 1, 598 up to the day before Nisan 1, 597 (NN or AN).

Similarly, the 25<sup>th</sup> year must have run from Tishri 574 to Tishri 573 (NT or AT), or Nisan 574 to Nisan 573 (NN or AN). If Jerusalem fell in Tammuz/July 587, the year in which it fell must have been Tishri 588 to Tishri 587 (NT or AT), or Nisan 587 to Nisan 586 (NN or AN).

Then the 14<sup>th</sup> year after the fall was Tishri 574 to Tishri 573 (NT or AT), or Nisan 573 to Nisan 572 (NN or AN).

Comparing the 25<sup>th</sup> year to the 14<sup>th</sup> year, only Tishri 574 to Tishri 573 (NT or AT) works, and so Ezekiel must have used Tishri dating.

Young uses a convenient notation for Nisan and Tishri years: a date like 598n denotes the year that began Nisan 1, 598 and ended the day before Nisan 1, 597; similarly a date like 598t denotes the year that began Tishri 1, 598 and ended the day before Tishri 1, 597. The six-month overlap between 598n and 598t is denoted 598n/598t, and between 598t and 597n is denoted 598t/597n.

Young builds decision tables listing the eight possible combinations of three questions:

Does Ezekiel use Tishri or Nisan years?

Does the captivity start before or after Nisan 1, 597?

Did Jerusalem fall in 587 or 586?

The tables show that no combination works in which Jerusalem fell in 586 BCE. Thus, based on Ezek. 40:1 alone, Jerusalem fell in 587 BCE.

The tables show that if Ezekiel used Nisan counting, the captivity began after Nisan 1, 597 BCE. If Ezekiel used Tishri counting, the captivity could have begun before or after Nisan 1, 597.

Young next uses Ezekiel 33:21 to determine whether Ezekiel used Nisan or Tishri counting. The text reads:

In the twelfth year of our exile, in the tenth month, on the fifth day of the month, a fugitive from Jerusalem came to me and said, 'The city has been struck down.' (ESV)

Young shows that the 10<sup>th</sup> month of the 12<sup>th</sup> year of exile must have been about January of either 586 or 585 BCE. In the first case, news of the city's fall took about 6 months to reach the exiles in Babylon; in the second case the news took about 18 months to reach them. Six months is a reasonable period of time but eighteen months is not. Hence, Ezekiel must have used Tishri dating.

Young's conclusion is that Jerusalem fell in 587 BCE, Ezekiel used Tishri counting, and it is irrelevant whether the exile and Jehoiachin's capture occurred shortly before or after Nisan 1, 597 BCE. Ezekiel used accession or non-accession counting as implied in individual texts.

Young considers more evidence concerning Ezekiel; it is consistent with his preceding analysis. See his paper for details.

Young's conclusion: "It has been shown that the chronology of Ezekiel is internally consistent, and it is consistent with two references external to the Bible which are independent of each other, namely the Talmud and the Babylonian Tablets in the British Museum that provide the date when Jehoiachin was taken captive."

Young then considers 2 Kings and Jeremiah, and shows how those texts are consistent with the 587 date but not 586; see his paper for details. Young concludes:

This study has examined all texts in Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and 2 Kings that bear on the question, “When did Jerusalem fall?” Many side issues needed to be addressed to answer the question satisfactorily. A technique called Decision Analysis was used to ensure that all combinations of hypotheses were considered and that any hidden assumptions were brought out into the open. The analysis allowed us to rule out many presuppositions that were accepted in former studies and to replace them with presuppositions that do not contradict the data (the received text). The conclusions from the analysis are as follows.

- (1) Jerusalem fell in the fourth month (Tammuz) of 587 BC. All sources which bear on the question—Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and 2 Kings—are consistent in dating the event in that year.
- (2) Ezekiel consistently dated events from the time that Jehoiachin was taken captive in early 597 BC. He used Tishri years in all his reckoning.
- (3) Similarly, 2 Kings 24–25 consistently used Tishri years and non-accession reckoning for Judean kings. For Nebuchadnezzar, non-accession years, starting in Nisan, were used.
- (4) In the writings of Jeremiah (which excludes the fifty-second chapter), Jeremiah consistently used Tishri years for Judah, as did Ezekiel and the source for the last chapters of 2 Kings. This is in harmony with the usage of Judah throughout the monarchic period, in contrast to Thiele’s assumption that Jeremiah and Ezekiel used Nisan reckoning for Judah. Jeremiah used non-accession years for the kings of Judah and for Nebuchadnezzar. There is not enough information to determine if he started the years for Nebuchadnezzar in Tishri or Nisan; both assumptions fit the data.
- (5) All three sources are internally consistent and consistent with each other. There are no texts which bear on the question of the chronology of the last years of the Judean monarchy and the fall of Jerusalem which do not fit the methods described here regarding how the biblical authors treated the history of their times.
- (6) None of these conclusions was arrived at by forcing presuppositions on the data found in the scriptural text received from the Masoretes, except perhaps the presupposition that when the data conflicted with one of our hypotheses, then any reasonable set of hypotheses which did not conflict with the data was to be preferred over the set which produced conflict. This approach may be contrasted with an approach which says that when a favorite set of hypotheses conflicts with the data, the data will be declared in error and no further effort will be expended to see if another set of hypotheses offers a better explanation.
- (7) The use of Decision Tables reveals that previous studies have overlooked many possibilities that were entirely consistent with the ideas of the author of the study, but which were not explored simply because they were never thought of. This failure to explore all the possibilities has been a major problem in the studies of OT chronology, and one that has led to significant confusion in the chronologies produced. It is to be hoped that future studies will not declare that some new solution is to be preferred, or the text needs to be emended, until it is demonstrated that there are no other sets of hypotheses that better explain the data. Ignoring this practice will reduce the credibility of the study.

The other three authors discussed in this paper demonstrably overlooked some critical possibilities bearing on the question of the date of Jerusalem’s fall. I will briefly discuss each of these, in light of Young’s conclusions.

## Edwin Thiele

In the several editions of *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* Thiele partially discusses Ezekiel 40:1, but never considers that the phrase “in the 14<sup>th</sup> year **after** Jerusalem’s destruction”

demands counting from zero. Had he done so, his tables of dates would have shown that Ezekiel dated his exile using non-accession-year Tishri counting, which would have moved many of Thiele's dates back by one-half to one year.

Figure 1 below is based on Thiele's Diagram 21 (p. 192 of *Mysterious Numbers*) but includes Young's dates, as well as other pertinent and corrected information. A chart of Nebuchadnezzar's regnal dates for each of the four dating methods is shown for convenience.

The chart shows graphically why Thiele's comparison between the 25<sup>th</sup> year **of** Jehoiachin's exile and the 14<sup>th</sup> year **after** Jerusalem's destruction does not produce a valid synchronism. Using Young's date notation, the 25<sup>th</sup> year = 573n, whereas the 14<sup>th</sup> year = 572n. But with Young's dates, the 25<sup>th</sup> year = 574t and the 14<sup>th</sup> year = 574t, which synchronizes the dates.

**Figure 1**  
**The Fall of Jerusalem in 587 or 586 BCE**

Accession-year Nisan dating for Nebuchadnezzar  
Thiele - Accession-year Nisan dating by Jeremiah and Ezekiel  
Young - Non-accession-year Tishri dating for Ezekiel

	598	597	596	595	594	593	592	591	590	589	588	587	586	585	584	583	582	581	580	579	578	577	576	575	574	573	572
Nebuchadnezzar by Babylonian dating	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33
Jehoiachin	11																										
Jehoiachin's captivity and year of exile	ac	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
Zedekiah	ac	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
Jehoiachin's captivity and year of exile	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	
Zedekiah	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	
Young																											

**Nebuchadnezzar's Years of Reign**

	598	597	596	595	594	593	592	591	590	589	588	587	586	585	584	583	582	581	580	579	578	577	576	575	574	573	572
Nebuchadnezzar by accession-year Nisan dating	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33
Nebuchadnezzar by non-accession-year Nisan dating	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34
Nebuchadnezzar by accession-year Tishri dating	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34
Nebuchadnezzar by non-accession-year Tishri dating	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35

598, December to 597, January -- Chislew to Tebeth -- Jehoiachin dies, Jehoiachin begins rule of 3 months, 10 days

597, 16 March -- 2 Adar -- Jerusalem taken in 8th year of Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 24:10-12; 7th by Babylonian reckoning; BM 21946)

597, 22 April -- 10 Nisan -- Jehoiachin deported (Ezek. 40:1)

589, Jan. 27 -- 10th month, 10th day of the 9th year of Zedekiah, siege against Jerusalem began (2 Kings 25:1; Ezek. 24:1-2; Jer. 39:1, 52:4)

588, 10th of Zedekiah = 18th of Nebuchadnezzar (Jer. 32:1)

587, Jul 29 -- 4th month, 9th day of the 11th year of Zedekiah, the 19th year of Nebuchadnezzar, Jerusalem fell (2 Kings 25:2-7; Jer. 39:2; 52:5-11)

586, Jan 19 -- 10th month, 5th day, 12th year of the captivity, captives in Babylon hear that Jerusalem has fallen (Ezek. 33:21)

574, 10 April -- 10 Nisan, 25th year of captivity, 14th year after Jerusalem's fall -- Ezekiel has vision of the temple (Ezek. 40:1-2)

## Jack Finegan

In *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* <sup>6</sup>, Finegan basically follows Thiele, and so his dating of Jerusalem's destruction to 586 BCE is wrong for the same reasons that Thiele's is wrong.

## Carl Olof Jonsson

In *The Gentile Times Reconsidered* <sup>7</sup>, Jonsson does not discuss Ezekiel 40:1, but fixes 587 BCE as the date of Jerusalem's destruction by means of Jeremiah 52:28, 29 and 2 Kings 25:8, plus a variety of historical sources that fix certain year(s) in Nebuchadnezzar's reign.

The first passage dates one instance of taking captives to Nebuchadnezzar's 18<sup>th</sup> year (via Babylonian accession-year Nisan dating). Most commentators understand that Jer. 52:28-30 was not written by Jeremiah but was taken from Babylonian records and inserted into the book of Jeremiah by a later hand. The second passage directly dates Jerusalem's destruction to Nebuchadnezzar's 19<sup>th</sup> year (via non-accession-year Tishri dating). It is this difference between references to the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> years that has resulted in much discussion and confusion, but the differences are easily reconciled, as shown above.

Using Rodger Young's dating notation, with Nebuchadnezzar's 18<sup>th</sup> year fixed at 587n and his 19<sup>th</sup> year fixed at 588t, and using Figure 1, it is easily seen that Jerusalem's destruction occurred in the half-year 587n/588t.

Jonsson uses a variety of biblical and secular historical sources to fix Nebuchadnezzar's 18<sup>th</sup> year to 587n/588t, including Ptolemy's Canon (pp. 78, 81, 148), the writings of Berossus (pp. 98, 148), the Adad-Guppi' stele (pp. 112-113), contemporary cuneiform tablets such as VAT 4956 (pp. 84, 158-159, 186), BM 32313 (p. 186), BM 33041 (p. 146), LBAT 1419, 1420, etc. (pp. 187-190), Zechariah 1:7-17 and Zechariah 7:1-5.

## Table of Important BCE Dates

All reckoning of dates uses conclusions 1-12 from Rodger Young's paper listed above.

605, May-June: battle of Carchemish in 4<sup>th</sup> year of Jehoiakim by non-accession-year Tishri dating (3<sup>rd</sup> year by Babylonian dating; cf. Dan. 1:1), which Jer. 25:1 equates with 1<sup>st</sup> year of Nebuchadnezzar.

605, 1 Elul (Ululu; 6<sup>th</sup> month) = 7 September: Accession of Nebuchadnezzar.

597, 2 Adar (12<sup>th</sup> month) = 16 March: Jerusalem taken. Undisputed.

597, 2 Adar: 8<sup>th</sup> year of Nebuchadnezzar by non-accession-year Nisan dating (7<sup>th</sup> by Babylonian dating). (2 Kings 24:12). Consistent with Jerusalem's fall in 19<sup>th</sup> year (2 Kings 25:8).

597, 2 Adar to 10 Nisan (1<sup>st</sup> month): Captivity of Jehoiachin and Ezekiel begins. Uncertainty about the exact day; irrelevant if Ezekiel used Tishri counting but important if Ezekiel used Nisan counting

<sup>6</sup> Finegan, *op cit.*

<sup>7</sup> Carl Olof Jonsson, *The Gentile Times Reconsidered*, Fourth Edition, Atlanta: Commentary Press, 2004

(which he did not). Zedekiah's 1<sup>st</sup> year begins.

589, 10 Tebeth (10<sup>th</sup> month) = 27 January: siege of Jerusalem begins in 9<sup>th</sup> year of Zedekiah. (2 Kings 25:1; Ezek. 24:1-2; Jer. 39:1, 52:4). Writers used non-accession-year Tishri dating.

588, 10<sup>th</sup> year of Zedekiah = 18<sup>th</sup> year of Nebuchadnezzar (Jer. 32:1). Jeremiah used non-accession-year Tishri dating.

587, 9 Tammuz (4<sup>th</sup> month) = 29 July: Jerusalem falls in 11<sup>th</sup> year of Zedekiah, 19<sup>th</sup> year of Nebuchadnezzar (18<sup>th</sup> by Babylonian dating). (2 Kings 25:2-7; Jer. 39:2; 52:5-6). Writers used non-accession-year Tishri dating for Zedekiah, non-accession-year Nisan dating for Nebuchadnezzar.

586, 5 Tebeth (10<sup>th</sup> month) = 19 January: 12<sup>th</sup> year of Jehoiachin's captivity; captives in Babylon hear that Jerusalem has fallen. (Ezek. 33:21).

574, 10 Nisan (start of the year) = 10 April: 25<sup>th</sup> year of captivity, 14<sup>th</sup> year after Jerusalem's fall, Ezekiel has vision of the temple. (Ezek. 40:1-2). Ezekiel counts years **of** captivity using non-accession type Tishri dating, and counts years **after** Jerusalem's fall starting from year zero = 587 BCE.