

Did the Babylonian Captivity Really Last for 70 Years?

Introduction

One of the events that is well known to students of the Bible is that of the “Babylonian captivity”. The **basic** points about that event are as follows: First, the Babylonian empire defeated Judah in the late 7th century BC – i.e., close to 601 BC. The majority of the Jewish people were eventually *exiled* to Babylon – and were kept in captivity there for a number of decades. After that, Babylon itself was conquered by Medeo-Persia; and the Persian king Cyrus subsequently allowed the Jews to return to Judah.

The above “basic points” are not in dispute; they are widely *agreed upon* by almost everyone – even by secular historians. However, in *addition* to the above general ideas, there are some very specific items about the Babylonian captivity that are accepted by Bible students. The following two items, in particular, are accepted by most believers:

- The duration of the Babylonian captivity was *precisely* **70** years;
- The reason for that captivity is that the Israelites had *failed* to observe **70** Sabbath years.

In other words, the Israelites were kept in captivity in Babylon for 70 years, in order to “atone” for the 70 Sabbath years that they had failed to observe.

The above specific points are somewhat difficult to “reconcile” in Scripture, however. In other words, in *some* cases, it **appears** that Scripture contradicts itself, about the above points.

Of course, unbelievers are always looking for *any opportunity* to discredit Scripture. As a result, it is quite important for *believers* to be able to demonstrate that Scripture actually does **not** contradict itself.

So, let’s examine the information in Scripture, about the Sabbath year and about the Babylonian captivity, to determine if the above points are actually verified by Scripture.

The Sabbath Year

First of all, it is necessary to discuss the concept of the “Sabbath year”. Many people are familiar with the Sabbath day - that is, the commandment that the 7th day of the week is a day of rest.

It turns out that there is **also** a commandment that every 7th year is a “year of rest”. In this case, the land, itself, will be given “rest” – in that **no** crops may be planted or harvested during a Sabbath year. Here is the relevant passage, which states that the land must rest on the Sabbath year:

Leviticus 25:1-5 (ESV):

¹ The Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying, ² “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you come into the land that I give you, the land shall keep a Sabbath to the Lord.

³ For six years you shall sow your field, and for six years you shall prune your vineyard and gather in its fruits, ⁴ but in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a Sabbath to the Lord. You shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. ⁵ You shall not reap

what grows of itself in your harvest, or gather the grapes of your undressed vine. It shall be a year of solemn rest for the land.

The Year of Jubilee

Another special year in Scripture is called the “Year of Jubilee”. Scripture states that every **50th** year is a Year of Jubilee. There are several important events that take place in a Jubilee year – and one such event is that the land must rest on Jubilee years – just as it does on Sabbath years.

The following passage contains the command for the land to rest, on the Year of Jubilee:

Leviticus 25:8-11 (ESV):

⁸ “You shall count seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the time of the seven weeks of years shall give you forty-nine years. ⁹ Then you shall sound the loud trumpet on the tenth day of the seventh month. On the Day of Atonement you shall sound the trumpet throughout all your land. ¹⁰ And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property and each of you shall return to his clan. ¹¹ That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you; in it you shall neither sow nor reap what grows of itself nor gather the grapes from the undressed vines.

Consequences of Failure

In many places, Scripture states that if the Israelites fail to keep God’s commandments, then God will allow the Israelites to be *conquered* by their enemies – and that the Israelites will then be held captive in their **enemies’** countries.

One of the reasons why this is important is that Scripture explicitly states that while the Israelites are in captivity, the land of Israel will be able to **have** its Sabbath rest:

Leviticus 26:27-35 (ESV):

³⁴ “Then the land shall enjoy its Sabbaths as long as it lies desolate, while you are in your enemies’ land; then the land shall rest, and enjoy its Sabbaths. ³⁵ As long as it lies desolate it shall have rest, the rest that it did not have on your Sabbaths when you were dwelling in it.

The above passage indicates that if the Israelites fail to allow the land to rest – i.e., if they **continue** to keep planting and harvesting crops, during Sabbath years – then the Israelites will be taken away to captivity, to allow the land to rest.

Prophecies about the Exile

Scripture tells us that the Israelites did not keep God’s commands – including his command of Sabbath rest for the land – and as a result, the Israelites were *conquered* by their enemies. The northern kingdom of Israel was conquered by Assyria; and the southern kingdom of Judah was defeated by Babylon. The Babylonian victory was prophesied by Jeremiah, as listed in the passage below:

Jeremiah 25:8-12 (ESV):

⁸ “Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts: Because you have not obeyed my words, ⁹ behold, I will send for all the tribes of the north, declares the Lord, and for Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all these surrounding nations. I will devote them to destruction, and make them a horror, a hissing, and an everlasting desolation. ¹⁰ Moreover, I will banish from them the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the grinding of the millstones and the light of the lamp. ¹¹ This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. ¹² Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, declares the Lord, making the land an everlasting waste.

The above prophesy came true, of course. 2 Chronicles 36 mentions that Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon did, indeed conquer Israel – and he then kept the Israelites in captivity in Babylon for 70 years.

The reason why this is important is because that Babylonian “exile” allowed the land of Israel to have its “Sabbath rest”, for the 70 years of the captivity. Here is the relevant passage:

2 Chronicles 36:20-21 (ESV):

²⁰ He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, ²¹ to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its Sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years.

Summary of the Information

Here is a summary, of the information that has been presented so far:

- Every 7th year is a Sabbath year – in which the land, itself, must be given “rest” (i.e., with **no** crops being planted);
- Every 50th year is a Jubilee year – and the land must be given “rest” in those years as well;
- If the Israelites do not allow the land to rest, then they will be taken into captivity – so that the land can rest during that captivity;
- Scripture states that the Israelites were in captivity in Babylon for **70 years** – to make up for the **70 Sabbath years** that they failed to observe.

All of the above items are *explicitly* mentioned in Scripture – so there is no doubt about them.

However, there are some “difficulties” in reconciling the above items, with **other** passages in Scripture. The two sections below describe the two main difficulties.

How many Sabbath Years were missed?

As mentioned previously, the Israelites were held in captivity for 70 years – to “make up” for 70 Sabbath years that they **failed** to observe. Also as noted, every 7th year is a Sabbath year.

Given the above information, one might *expect* the following to be true:

In order for **70 Sabbath** years to be missed, the Israelites must have lived in Israel – **without** observing the Sabbath year – for a **total** of **490** years. This is because only one year out of seven is a Sabbath year – and $490 \text{ total years} / 7 = 70 \text{ Sabbath years}$.

There is a problem with the above calculation, though. Scripture tells us that the total length of time that the Israelites lived in the land – without observing the Sabbath year – was **less** than 490 years. That fact is stated in a rather cryptic prophesy from Ezekiel, as follows:

Ezekiel 4:1-6 (ESV):

“And you, son of man, take a brick and lay it before you, and engrave on it a city, even Jerusalem. ² And put siegeworks against it, and build a siege wall against it, and cast up a mound against it. Set camps also against it, and plant battering rams against it all around. ³ And you, take an iron griddle, and place it as an iron wall between you and the city; and set your face toward it, and let it be in a state of siege, and press the siege against it. This is a sign for the house of Israel.

⁴ “Then lie on your left side, and place the punishment of the house of Israel upon it. For the number of the days that you lie on it, you shall bear their punishment. ⁵ For I assign to you a number of days, 390 days, equal to the number of the years of their punishment. So long shall you bear the punishment of the house of Israel. ⁶ And when you have completed these, you shall lie down a second time, but on your right side, and bear the punishment of the house of Judah. Forty days I assign you, a day for each year.

The above prophesy indicates the following:

- The northern kingdom of Israel had failed to keep God's commandments (including the Sabbath year) for 390 years;
- The southern kingdom of Judah had failed to keep God's commandments for 40 years.

So, the total length of time, that the Israelites had **failed** to keep the Sabbath year, was 430 years (390 + 40).

Of course, 430 years is shorter than 490 years – and as a result, **less** than 70 Sabbath years fall within 430 years. So, what is going on here? Why were the Israelites kept in captivity for 70 years, if less than 70 Sabbath years were missed?

The answer to this question has to do with the Year of Jubilee. As mentioned above, the land must rest on Jubilee years as well – and as a result, Jubilee years are **also** “Sabbath” years. (Note that the Hebrew word for sabbath – **shabbat** – means “rest”.)

There is one other item to note: Jubilee years fall within the seven year “Sabbath cycle”. Basically, each Jubilee year is also the first year of a new Sabbath cycle.

So, during the course of 49 years, there will be **eight** years in which the land must rest – the first year, which is a Jubilee year; **and every** seven years, which are Sabbath years. That is, the following years will be years of rest, during each 49 year “group”: 1, 7, 14, 21, 28, 35, 42, and 49.

As a result, we can determine the number of “rest” years that were missed, by dividing up the 430 total years into 49 year “groups”. There are **eight complete** “49 year groups” within that total time, and **one partial** group. This is because $49 * 8 = 392$ years; with 38 years “left over”.

So, the eight complete groups of 49 years give us **64** years of rest – because $8 * 8 = 64$. The partial group of 38 years gives us **6** years of rest – on years 1, 7, 14, 21, 28, and 35.

Of course, $64 + 6 = 70$ total years of rest that were missed. That, in turn, explains why the Israelites were kept in captivity for 70 years – it is because they had failed to let the land rest for 70 years!

As a result, Scripture does not contradict itself on this issue – instead, Scripture is **consistent** on the issue.

More information on this “70 years of missed Sabbath rest” issue can be found on the following, very useful web page:

[70 Sabbaths without rest](#)

How Many Years did the Captivity Last?

As listed above, Jeremiah and 2 Chronicles both mention that the Israelites were held captive in Babylon, for 70 years. That 70 year captivity then allowed the land of Israel to have its “Sabbath rest” – the rest that the Israelites did not allow it to have, because they failed to observe the Sabbath years.

There is some “difficulty” in verifying that 70 year captivity in Scripture, however. Basically, at first glance, it appears that the length of the captivity was significantly *shorter* than 70 years.

This difficulty can be seen in the various dates that are provided for the beginning and end of the captivity. Basically, most of the dates that are specified for the captivity do not span 70 years.

The **end** date of the captivity is relatively well-agreed upon; even by secular historians. Basically, the captivity ended when Medeo-Persia conquered Babylon; and then King Cyrus of Persia allowed the Jews to return to Israel. Most sources agree that Medeo-Persia conquered Babylon in 538 BC; and that Cyrus allowed the Israelites to return to Israel in the following year – 537 BC. So, 537 BC appears to be the “consensus” date for the end of the captivity.

The more difficult date to determine is the start of the captivity. There are **two** primary dates that are usually specified for the captivity’s beginning – 597 BC, and 586 BC. The year 597 BC is the year in which King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon first conquered Jerusalem – and he took some Israelite captives to Babylon at that time. Some years after that, Judah rebelled against Babylon. As a result, in 586 BC, Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem **again** – and at that time, he destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. Also, after that second victory, Nebuchadnezzar brought many more Israelites into captivity in Babylon.

So, the reason why those two dates are used as the start of the captivity, is that those dates are times in which Israelites were taken into captivity in Babylon.

The trouble with both of the above dates is that if either of them are used for the **start** of the captivity, then the total length of the captivity is much shorter than 70 years – because the **end** of the captivity is in 537. If 597 is the start of the captivity, then the captivity only lasts for **60** years (597 – 537). If 586 is the start, then the captivity only lasts for **49** years.

So, what is going on here? How could the Babylonian captivity have lasted for less than 70 years – when the Israelites had missed **70** Sabbath years? Not only that, but Scripture *explicitly* states that the Israelites were in captivity for precisely 70 years – so if the captivity is less than 70 years, then Scripture appears to contain contradictions.

The first item to note about this issue is that there was a **third** time in which Israelites were taken into captivity. Both Scripture – *and* secular historical sources – tell us that Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem in the spring of **605** BC – and that some Israelites were taken to Babylon in captivity at that time. In fact, the prophet Daniel – and his three friends – were taken captive at that time.

Note that 605 BC fell within the third year of King Jehoiakim of Judah’s reign. With that in mind, consider the following passage:

Daniel 1:1-6 (ESV):

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. ² And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god. ³ Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, ⁴ youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king’s palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. ⁵ The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he drank. They were to be educated for three years, and at the end of that time they were to stand before the king. ⁶ Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah.

Based upon the above information, it is possible to place the start of the captivity at 605 BC – since that is the very first time in which any Israelites were taken into captivity in Babylon.

Of course, even if 605 BC is used as the start of the captivity, there is *still* an apparent issue. Basically, the length of time between 605 BC and 537 BC is only **68** years – not 70 years.

There are two **other** points to be aware of, which explain this apparent discrepancy. First, the Jewish calendar is *different* than our modern, Gregorian calendar. In particular, the Jewish civil year starts in the **fall** – in September or October – rather than on January 1.

The reason why this is important is because it means that the Jewish years “overlap” with our Gregorian years. For example, as stated above, the very first time that Israelites were taken into captivity was in the spring of 605 BC, on the Gregorian calendar. However, the Jewish year in question began on the **previous fall** – which is **606** BC on the Gregorian calendar. Similarly, the end of the captivity was

“officially celebrated” in late 537 BC – after the beginning of the Jewish year that fall. So, that Jewish year extended into **536** BC on the Gregorian calendar.

Basically, the Gregorian dates of spring of 605 BC until late fall of 537 BC comprise 68 **full** Jewish years, *and parts* of two *additional* Jewish years.

That information leads to the second point to note. For the most part, the Jewish culture uses the principle of “inclusive counting”. In essence, that principle means that when *lengths of time* are being determined, **fractions** of units of time are treated as if they were full units of time. This is especially true of units at the **beginning** and **end** of a given time period.

The easiest way to explain this “inclusive counting” principle is with an example. Here is a simple one: Scripture states that baby boys must be circumcised on the eighth day after their births. The item to note is that the very first day of a boy’s life is **counted**, when determining the day for his circumcision. This is true no matter how late in the day the boy is born.

For example, let’s say that a boy is born very late in the day, on a Sunday. That Sunday, itself, is **counted** as the first full day of the boy’s life. As a result, that Sunday is the first day of the counting – and then seven *more* days are counted from there. That means that the boy will be circumcised on the following Sunday after his birth – even though that is not actually eight **full** days since his birth.

Of course, the reason why this is important is because as noted above, the spring of 605 BC, to the late fall of 537 BC, comprises 68 full Jewish years, plus **parts** of two additional Jewish years (at the beginning and end of the period). Using the principle of “inclusive counting”, above, the two partial years would be **counted** as full years. That, in turn, would mean that the captivity actually did last for **70** Jewish years – just as specified in Scripture!

More information on this “Jewish year / inclusive counting” issue can be found on the following very useful web page:

[When was Judah’s 70-Year Babylonian Captivity?](#)

Conclusion

A thorough investigation of Scripture – as well as information about the Jewish culture – demonstrates that Scripture does not contradict itself, about the Babylonian exile.

As shown above, Scripture demonstrates that the Babylonian exile did, indeed, last for **70** years; and that that exile allowed the land to rest for the **70** Sabbath years that the Israelites had failed to observe.

I hope this article was useful to you!