

Part 11: When Was Jerusalem Destroyed?

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Following Zedekiah's decision to rebel and stop paying tribute to Babylonia in what seems to have been the ninth year of his reign, Judah was attacked by Babylonia, whose army blockaded Jerusalem on the tenth day of the tenth month of Zedekiah's ninth regnal year (2 Kings 25:1; Jeremiah 39:1; 52:4; Ezekiel 24:1-2).¹ Fortified cities of Judah were systematically isolated and destroyed (Jeremiah 34:7).² The Babylonian army breached the walls of Jerusalem on the ninth day of the fourth month of Zedekiah's eleventh regnal year (2 Kings 25:2-4; Jeremiah 39:2; 52:5-7)—in either 587 or 586 B.C., depending on one's chronological assumptions (see part 2, pages 4-6, of this chapter and the sources cited therein). Under the direction of the Babylonian captain of the guard, Nebuzar-adan, who was left in charge at Jerusalem, the city was torched in the nineteenth year of Nebuchadrezzar, in the fifth month, on the seventh day (2 Kings 25:8) or tenth day (Jeremiah 52:12-13) of the month.³ Then the walls were torn down and the surviving prisoners were taken into exile in Babylonia (2 Kings 25:10-11; Jeremiah 52:14-15).

The chronology of Lehi's escape requires Lehi to have departed from the city before its destruction. Lehi also had to come out of Jerusalem when there was no siege; so, it would seem he had to leave before the siege was imposed. That is the first possibility. However, the Hebrew scriptures present another possibility for Lehi's escape. During the siege against Zedekiah, his plea for assistance from the pharaoh of Egypt was answered (Jeremiah 37:5-10; Ezekiel 17:15).⁴ The army of Egypt marched toward Judah. The Babylonian army withdrew from besieging Jerusalem to meet the Egyptian force (Jeremiah 34:21-22; 37:5-10).⁵ Jerusalem's gates swung open, presumably so that the stores of the city could be replenished and Zedekiah's army could secure roads leading to the city. At the command of the Lord, Jeremiah called upon the people of the city to escape.

¹ "[T]he Babylonian tablets dealing with the final fall and destruction of Jerusalem have not yet been found...." Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1965), 169. See also Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, Rev. ed. (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 258; idem., *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 207-08.

² "The Lachish Letters are a group of 21 ostraca discovered in 1935 and 1938, the bulk of which date to 589/8 [B.C.] (one is dated exactly in the 'ninth year' [of Zedekiah])." In Lachish Letter IV, "an officer in charge of an observation post writes to the garrison commander in Lachish that the fire signals of Azekah can no longer be seen." John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 4th edition (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 330 and 330 n.58.

³ Michael Avioz, "When Was the First Temple Destroyed, According to the Bible?" *Biblica* 84 (2003): 562-65, argued that the two dates cannot be harmonized and expressed the reasons for his preference for the tenth day of the fifth month.

⁴ Lachish Letter III refers to the commander of Judah's army visiting Egypt. Bright, *A History of Israel*, 330; J. Arthur Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, R.K. Harrison, ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1980), 606. Perhaps the commander was seeking the help from Egypt that is referred to in Ezekiel 17:15.

⁵ The Egyptians may have been able to mass their forces in the vicinity of Gaza because of their earlier victory over the Babylonians in 601/600 B.C. Donald J. Wiseman, *Nebuchadrezzar and Babylon*, The Schweich Lectures of the British Academy (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1983), 29; Oded Lipschits, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem: Judah under Babylonian Rule* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 40 n.13, 50. See also Jeremiah 47:1.

Thus saith the Lord, Behold, I set before you the way of life and the way of death. He that abideth in this city shall die by the sword, and by the famine, and by the pestilence: but he that goeth out, and falleth to the Chaldeans that besiege you, he shall live; and his life shall be unto him for a prey. For I have set my face against this city for evil, and not for good, saith the Lord: it shall be given into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire (Jeremiah 21:8-10).

The period when the Babylonian siege was lifted and then re-inflicted might be estimated from three of the prophet Ezekiel's rebukes against Egypt. Ezekiel heard the word of the Lord commanding him to censure Zedekiah's rebellion and alliance with Egypt (Ezekiel 17:12-21). When the Babylonians lifted their siege, Ezekiel proclaimed the doom of Egypt's advance toward Jerusalem (Ezekiel 29:1-16). A few months later (Ezekiel 30:20-26), a partial defeat of Egypt was decreed and a couple of months after that, a convincing defeat was prophesied (Ezekiel 31).

Scholarly opinion on the dates in these passages is not settled. K.S. Freedy and Donald B. Redford placed Ezekiel's three oracles in December/January 588/87 B.C., and March/April and May/June, 587 B.C., as reports dated to the time when news of the Egyptian advance and defeat reached Ezekiel, four or five months after the actual events.⁶ Daniel I. Block viewed the prophecy of Ezekiel 29:1-2, as representing "the prophet's response to political and military developments in Judah, or more accurately, his reaction to the exiles' response to those events." Block also saw Ezekiel 30:20-26 in a similar vein, with the dates of these first two oracles being "several months" after the events, but he disagreed with the Freedy and Redford view of Ezekiel 31:1 as representing "the defeat of Pharaoh as an accomplished event" known to the prophet in June 587 B.C. Block's view seems to be that Egypt's defeat was yet to be fully realized at that time.⁷ Abraham Malamat adopted the January/June 587 B.C. period as the actual time when Hophra's forces advanced from Egypt and were defeated.⁸ Freedy, Redford and Malamat all used chronological assumptions that began the siege of Jerusalem in January 588 B.C. and placed the capture and destruction of Jerusalem in the summer of 586 B.C. For scholars whose assumptions begin the siege in January 588 B.C. and end it in the summer of 587 B.C., presumably the actual dates when the siege was lifted would be earlier than those adopted by Malamat (see part 2, page 6, of this chapter and the sources cited therein).

For the limited purposes of this chapter, I have confirmed that for a period of several months (perhaps as long as five or six months), the siege of Jerusalem was lifted and Lehi may have come out of Jerusalem during that interval. If Lehi escaped from Jerusalem shortly before the siege was imposed, his sons might have returned to Jerusalem to obtain the brass plates during the interruption in the siege.

⁶ K.S. Freedy and Donald B. Redford, "The Dates in Ezekiel in Relation to Biblical, Babylonian and Egyptian Sources," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 90/3 (1970): 468-72. See also Julie Galambush, "Ezekiel," in John Barton and John Muddiman, eds., *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 553-54, who placed the oracles in January, April and June 587 B.C., "in the aftermath of Pharaoh Hophra's aborted attempt of 588 BCE to lift Nebuchadrezzar's siege of Jerusalem."

⁷ Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25-48* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 133-34, 175, 183.

⁸ Abraham Malamat, "The Last Kings of Judah and the Fall of Jerusalem," *Israel Exploration Journal* 18 (1968): 151-53, 156