

The Current Jewish Year

The Strange and Tragic Story of the Sedar Olam Rabbah

The Sedar Olam Rabbah or the "Book of the Order of the World" was compiled by Rabbi Yose ben Halafta (died 160 AD) and is to this day the traditional Jewish chronology. It is the reason why the Jewish people reckon the current year (2010) to be 5770 - that is, the 5770th year since the creation of Adam. Students of Scripture have wondered why it is not closer to the standard Ussher chronology which from the Biblical years places creation at 4004 BC.

The Sedar Olam is divided into three parts, each consisting of ten chapters. Part One enumerates the dates of major events from the Creation to the crossing of Jordan by Joshua. Part Two extends from the Jordan crossing to the murder of Zechariah King of Israel (II Kings 15:10). Chapters 21-27 in Part Three extend to the destruction of the Temple by Nebuchadnezzar, and chapter 28 to the conquest of Babylon by Cyrus. Chapter 29 and the first part of chapter 30 cover the Persian period, and the remainder of chapter 30 contains a summary of events from the conquest of Persia by Alexander to the Bar Kokhba revolt.

At the time of its composition, the Jews generally dated their years from the beginning of the Seleucid era in 312 BC, and for the next centuries the Sedar Olam was of interest only to students of the Talmud.

Only when the centre of Jewish life moved to Europe and the calculation according to the Seleucid era became meaningless was it replaced by the *anno mundi* or "from the creation of the world" reckoning of the Sedar Olam. It began to appear in the 8th and 9th centuries, and from the 11th century became dominant in most of the world's Jewish communities.¹

We would expect the Jewish chronology to be similar to that of Ussher, with creation taking place about 6000 years ago. But rather than 4000 BC, the Sedar Olam places creation in 3761! What is the reason for this? On what basis do the Jews count their years according to a system that appears to be about 246 years short? The answer seems clearly to involve something more than a mere disagreement over computation. Before examining this, the following shows where the shortfall lies.

The Missing Years

1. From the Creation of Adam to the Birth of Abraham

Ussher	2008 years	4004-1996 BC
Sedar Olam	<u>1948 years</u>	3761-1811 BC (exclusive reckoning)
	60 years	

Most today have accepted that Terah was 130 years old ² rather than 70 years when Abraham was born (Gen 11:26). Thus the first shortfall is 60 years.

2. From the Birth of Abraham to the Exodus

Ussher	505 years	1996-1491 BC
Sedar Olam	<u>500 years</u>	1811-1311 BC
	5 years	

Abraham was 75 years old when the covenant was made (Gen.12:4), the Exodus was 430 years later (Gal.3:17; Ex.12:40,41). The Sedar Olam without the New Testament revelation reckons five fewer years. The shortfall is now 65 years.

3. From the Exodus to the Temple Foundation (I Kings 6:1)

Ussher	480 years	1491-1012 BC
Sedar Olam	480 years	1311-831 BC

The shortfall remains at 65 years.

4. From the Foundation of the First Temple to the Consecration of the Second Temple

Ussher	497 years	1012-515 BC
Sedar Olam	<u>480 years</u>	831-351 BC
	17 years	

Differences in computing the divided monarchy would be the reason for these 17 years. Thus the Sedar Olam reckons 82 fewer years from the Creation to the consecration of the Second Temple, of which the major part concerns the age of Terah at Abraham's birth. Now, however, the difference between the two chronological systems becomes radical.

5. From the Consecration of the Second Temple to its destruction by the Romans

Ussher	584 years	515 BC - 70 AD
Sedar Olam	<u>420 years</u>	351 BC - 70 AD
	164 years	

The total shortfall now reaches (82 + 164) 246 years. But it is the shortening of this final period by 164 years in the Sedar Olam that is our primary concern. And as this 420 year final period is divided into periods of 34, 180, 103 and 103 years of successive rule in Israel, it is remarkable to note that the 164-year difference is nearly entirely in the *first, and Persian period*. The remaining three periods are reasonably close to the standard chronology.

34 years (351-317 BC) for the remainder of the Persian rule in the land: from the dedication of the Temple to Ptolemy's invasion of Jerusalem.

180 years (317-137 BC) for the Grecian rule: from Ptolemy's invasion to the times when Simon the Maccabean became ruler in Israel and Rome recognized the independence of the Jewish state.

103 years (137-34 BC) for the rule of the Hasmonean (Maccabean) family in Israel: from Simon to the beginning of Herod's reign.

103 years (34 BC - 70 AD) for the Herodian rule until the time of the Temple's destruction.

In the later three periods there is some discrepancy with the standard dates. Alexander defeated Darius in 331 rather than 321, Simon's rule is accepted to have begun in 142 BC, and Herod's in 38 BC. But what are we to make of only 34 years for the remainder of the Persian period? In fact, by the Sedar Olam reckoning, it is only 30 years from the Temple dedication to Darius' defeat at the hands of Alexander in 321 BC and four further years to Jerusalem's capture by Ptolemy after Alexander's death.

It is striking to note that the standard Ptolemaic chronology lists eight Persian kings from Darius Hystaspes to Darius III, the king defeated by Alexander. But according to the Sedar Olam, the Darius during whose reign the Temple was dedicated and the Darius defeated by Alexander are one and the same.

Based on the Sedar Olam we have the following construction for the 52/53 years of the Persian Kingdom.³

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Darius the Mede reigns 1 year
 Babylon conquered
 Daniel in the lions' den | 3389-3390 AM (374-373 BC) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Cyrus reigns 3 years
 The Jews return
 Temple construction begins | 3390-3392 AM (373-371 BC) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Artaxerxes (Cambyses) reigns one half year
 Temple construction halted | 3393 AM (370 BC) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ahasuerus reigns 14 years
 Esther chosen Queen; bears Darius the Persian | 3393-3407 AM (370-356 BC) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Darius the Persian reigns 35 years
 Temple construction resumes
 <u>Temple dedicated</u>
 Ezra settles in Jerusalem
 Nehemiah settles in Jerusalem
 <u>Defeated by Alexander</u> | 3407-3442 AM (356-321 BC)
3408 (355 BC)
3412 (351 BC)
3413 (350 BC)
3426 (337 BC)
3442 (321 BC) |

Thus the kingdom of Persia lasts only 53 years, from 374 to 321 BC.

Through the centuries orthodox rabbis have differed somewhat in their listing of the Persian kings,⁴ but they generally have not departed from the 52/3-year parameter laid down for the Persian period in the Sedar Olam.

Humphrey Prideaux gives an interesting summary of this traditional Jewish position:

In the last year of Darius Hystaspes, the prophets Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi died, that thereon the spirit of prophecy ceased from among the children of Israel, and that this was the obsignation or sealing up of the vision and prophecy spoken of by the prophet Daniel (Dan. 9:24). The same tradition tells us that the kingdom of the Persians ceased also the same year, for they will have it that this was the Darius whom Alexander the Great conquered, and that the whole continuance was only 52 years.⁵

Therefore, rather than an extended gap between Zerubbabel and Ezra, Nehemiah and Malachi, rabbinic scholars believed, or at least said they believed, that these men were of the same generation, and that this generation spanned the Persian period to Alexander.

He Shall Think to Change Times!

These words are from Daniel 7:25 and refer to the Antichrist's time-changing activities during the coming Tribulation Period. There are reasons to believe that a major precedent for time changing has already taken place in both the Gentile and Jewish worlds. Evidence will be shown that the chronologists who influenced Ptolemy may have lengthened the Persian era and the Sedar Olam *most certainly* shortened it. The result is that the primary prophecy and foundation block of chronology - The Seventy Weeks of Daniel - has become dislodged.

If indeed some adjustments occurred leading up to Ptolemy and whether it was an accident or plan are matters we will look at later. With the Sedar Olam the plan was deliberate! And while not openly admitting this, Jewish scholars of the present day acknowledge that there is something enigmatic about the Sedar Olam dating.

Rabbi Simon Schwab, after enumerating the Ptolemaic and Sedar Olam systems from Cyrus onward, and agreeing that the commonly received dates "can hardly be doubted", yet at the same time upholding his own tradition, writes:

The gravity of this intellectual dilemma posed by such enormous discrepancies must not be underestimated. The unsuspecting students - including the pupils of our own yeshivoth and Beth Jacob High Schools - are faced with a puzzle that appears insoluble. How could it have been that our forebears had no knowledge of a period in history, otherwise widely known and amply documented, which lasted over a span of 165 years and which was less than 600 years removed in time from the days of the Sages who recorded our traditional chronology in Sedar Olam? Is it really possible to assume that some form of historical amnesia had been allowed to take possession of the collective memory of an entire people? This should be quite like assuming that some group of recognized historians of today would publish a textbook on mediaeval history, ignoring all the records of, say, the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.⁶

Rabbi Schwab lists a number of clearly unsatisfactory attempts at a solution by recent orthodox writers and then puts forward his own view:

There seems to be left, as yet unexplored, only *one* avenue of approach to the vexing problem confronting us. It should have been possible that our Sages - for some unknown reason - had "covered up" a certain historic period and *purposely eliminated and suppressed all records and other material pertaining thereto*. If so, what might have been their compelling reason for so unusual a procedure? Nothing short of a *Divine command* could have prompted ... those saintly "men of truth" to leave out completely from our annals a period of 165 years and to correct all data and historic tables in such a fashion that the subsequent chronological gap could escape being noticed by countless generations, known to a few initiates only who were duty-bound to keep the secret to themselves.⁷

This is an astonishing proposal! And yet apart from his appeal to Divine direction in such a cover-up, the possibility that Talmudic rabbis of the 2nd century AD became involved in a "time-changing" exercise becomes, upon investigation, increasingly likely.

The reason why God would have so directed them to hide these years was, as Schwab goes on to explain, to prevent past generations from using the prophecies of Daniel to determine the time of the Messiah's coming. He then adds that if the 165 years are added in, it demonstrates "we are much closer to the end of the 6th Millennium than we had surmised."⁸

But as the facts unfold, I think it will become clear that Rabbi Schwab is avoiding some matters here. It will become difficult to escape the conclusion that in the Seder Olam there *is* the deliberate hiding of Messiah's coming according to Daniel's prophecies, but not after 6000 years, but rather at that time when *He came unto his own and His own received Him not* (John 1:10). A matter of simple arithmetic will show that the 2nd century rabbis made major alterations to their own national chronology in order to point the Seventy Week prophecy not to Christ but to Bar Kokhba!

Rabbis in the century immediately after Christ had a tremendous dilemma with so direct a prophecy as Daniel 9, i.e. that the Messiah would be cut off 69 weeks or 483 years after the *going forth of a commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem*. Any thought of this decree being proclaimed in the mid-fifth century BC would of course point to Jesus Christ and His crucifixion. Such a prospect must be completely erased from the Jewish consciousness. If, however, the 69 or 70 weeks could begin a century later, then it will be possible for them to point to *another messiah* who, as circumstances would have it, was cut off in death some 100 years after the crucifixion of Christ.

The 9th day of the Jewish month Av (around mid-July) is to Israel the great day of sorrow. On this day Solomon's Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians and the second Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. *And* on this same day in 135 AD, after a 3^{1/2} year revolt, the army of the "messianic" Simon Bar Kokhba was crushed by the Romans.

Bar Kokhba had been declared the long-awaited Messiah by the foremost scholar of the time, the much venerated Rabbi Akiva. To Akiva, he was the *star out of Jacob*, and the *sceptre out of Israel* (Num. 24:17).⁹ And, for his part in the rebellion, Akiva was also to die at the hands of the Romans in 135 AD.

Among the many accolades heaped upon Akiva, and that which gave him such pre-eminent authority was the acknowledgement that he was "the father of the Mishnah".¹⁰ He made a preliminary gathering and formulation of the material for the six orders (containing 63 chapters or tractates) of that religious code which was the heart of the Talmud. Near the end of the 2nd century, Judah ha-Nasi completed the work. Thus, with such prominence, Akiva gave great weight to the messianic expectancy upon Bar Kokhba.

Akiva's students became some of the most prominent sages of the following generation. Among these was Yose (Josi) ben Halaftha. The influence of Akiva was so strong upon him that when the matter of Yose's education was discussed, it was merely said, "Rabbi Akiva his teacher."¹¹ And as such, Yose would have been thoroughly imbued with Akiva's views on Bar Kokhba.

Yose's own influence is demonstrated by the fact that some of his writings were included in Judah ha-Nasi's final editing of the Mishnah, and his name is mentioned in 59 of its 63 tractates.¹² His Sedar Olam, though referred to in the Mishnah and Talmud, is not a formal part of that work. It is what the Jews call a *baraita*, meaning an "outside" Mishnah. That is, it was not included in Judah ha-Nasi's final edition of the Mishnah. It is, though, a work of Talmudic authority, and openly to contradict it is unthinkable to orthodox Jews.

As Rabbi Schwab stresses,

However, *our traditional chronology is based on Sedar Olam because of the authority of its author*. It is therefore quite inconceivable that any post-Talmudic teacher could possibly "reject" those chronological calculations which have been the subject of many a Talmudic discussion.¹³

And Judah ha-Nasi, who because of his own esteem was known simply as "Rabbi", writes at the end of the Mishnah tractate *Gittin*:

How can we humble disciples question the words of Rabbi Josi since the difference between our generation and that of Rabbi Josi is comparable to the difference between the most holy and the most profane...¹⁴

In all this we can see why the Sedar Olam holds such sway and why Jews to this day use it for their national dating. But despite the heaping of laurels the fact remains that it is an attempt to hide the true end and goal of the Seventy Weeks of Daniel.

A Demonstration

By Sedar Olam reckoning, the decree of Cyrus and the commencing of the Seventy Weeks would be about 372 BC.¹⁵

372 BC + 490 years = 119 AD

372 BC + 483 years = 112 AD

This would indicate a termination for the 69 or 70 weeks some 13 to 20 years before the revolt began in 132 AD. Thus, this is reasonably close to the years in which Bar Kokhba rose to prominence as Israel's military and economic leader¹⁶ - And when Akiva proclaimed, "This is the King Messiah"¹⁷ - And "all the contemporary sages regarded him as the King Messiah"¹⁸ - And, "even in later generations, despite the disappointment engendered by his defeat, his image persisted as the embodiment of messianic hopes."¹⁹ - And the consistent verdict of Jewish historians: "The most important historical messianic figure was surely Bar Kokhba."²⁰

Yose and his fellow compilers of the Sedar Olam would have sought to terminate the 69/70 weeks as close to the 132 AD revolt as possible. But they were limited as to where the "cuts" could be made. Years could not be pared from their history after 312 BC, for as we have seen, the chronology of the Seleucid era and onward was firmly fixed among the Jews. This left only the Persian period, and this they cut down radically. But here the point needs to be made that in order for them to get away with such a wholesale reduction there must have been room for considerable doubt in those days as to how long the Persian period actually lasted!

I have not seen, and one would have to search very hard indeed to find an open Jewish admission that they so altered their chronology to make the 69/70 weeks of Daniel point to Bar Kokhba rather than Jesus Christ. Apart from receiving Christ as Saviour it would be virtually impossible for a Jewish person to come to such an admission. Yet this appears to be the only reasonable conclusion that can be drawn from the facts as they now appear.

Notes

1. Olam", *Encyclopedia Judaica*, (Jerusalem, Keter Publ. House Ltd., 1972).
2. Terah died at 205, when Abraham was 75 (Gen.11:32; 12:4; Acts 7:4). Hence Terah was 130 when Abraham was born. This seems obvious. Nevertheless, Jews based on their Book of Jasher (22:33-34 p.57) believe Terah was 70 when Abraham was born. Perhaps the matter needs to be looked at further."Sedar
3. See Zechariah Fendel, *Charting the Mesorah: Creation through Geonim*, (New York: Haskafah Publ.,1994), p.45.
4. For a list of various views see Simon Schwab, "Comparative Jewish Chronology", *Dr Joseph Breuer Jubilee Volume*, (New York, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch Publications Society, Philipp Felheim Inc., 1962), p.187.
5. *The Old and New Testaments connected to the History of the Jews*, (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1851), p.235.
6. Simon Schwab, p.182.
7. *Ibid.* p.188. Emphasis *his!*
8. *Ibid.* pp.190,191.
9. "Akiva", *Encyclopedia Judaica*, pp.488-492.
10. "Mishna", *Encyclopedia Judaica*, p.102.
11. "Yose ben Halafta", *Encyclopedia Judaica*, p.852.
12. *Ibid.* p.853.
13. Schwab, p.186.
14. *Ibid.* p.186.
15. Fendel, *Charting the Mesorah*, p.45.
16. "Bar Kokhba", *Encyclopedia Judaica*, p.230.
17. *Ibid.* p.230.
18. *Ibid.* p.231.
19. *Ibid.* p.231.
20. "Messiah", *Encyclopedia Judaica*, p.1410.

Jack Moorman,
From *Bible Chronology: The Two Great Divides*