

The ANNALS of the WORLD

JAMES USSHER'S CLASSIC SURVEY OF WORLD HISTORY

Appendix G: The *Seder Olam Rabbah* — Why Jewish Dating Is Different

The *Seder Olam Rabbah*¹ 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.² From this ancient work, the Jewish people reckon the current year (2003 AD) as 5763 and understand it to be the number of years since the creation.

At the time the *Seder Olam* was compiled, the Jews generally dated their years from 312 BC—the beginning of the Seleucid era. For the next few centuries, the *Seder Olam* was of interest exclusively to only students of the Talmud.³

When the centre of Jewish life moved from Babylonia to Europe during the 8th and 9th centuries AD, calculations from the Seleucid era became meaningless. Over those centuries, it was replaced by that of the *anno mundi* era (AM = “from the creation of the world”) of the *Seder Olam*. From the 11th century, *anno mundi* dating became dominant throughout most of the world’s Jewish communities.⁴

As Old Testament Scripture is the basis for *Seder Olam* dating, we would suppose the Jewish chronology to be similar to that of Ussher’s and thus expect them to place the creation date around 6,000 years ago. Yet rather than 4004 BC, the *Seder Olam* places creation at 3761. The question thus becomes: On what basis do the Jews number their years such that a 243-year shortfall occurs?

The Missing Years:⁵

1. From the creation to the birth of Abraham

Ussher	2008 years	4004–1996 BC
<i>Seder Olam</i>	1948 years	3761–1811 BC (exclusive reckoning)
	shortfall — 60 years	

Terah was 130 years old rather than 70 when Abraham was born (Ge 11:26; but cf. Ge 11:32 12:4 where 205–75 = 130). Thus, the first deficit is about 60 years.

2. From the birth of Abraham to the Exodus

Ussher	505 years	1996–1491 BC
<i>Seder Olam</i>	500 years	1811–1311 BC
	shortfall — 5 years	

Abraham was 75 years old when the covenant was made; {Ge 12:4} the Exodus was 430 years later. {Ga 3:17 Ex 12:40–41} Without New Testament revelation for clarification, the *Seder Olam* reckons five fewer years. The shortfall now totals 65 years.

3. From the exodus to the laying of the temple foundation {1Ki 6:1}

Ussher	480 years	1491–1012 BC (inclusive reckoning)
<i>Seder Olam</i>	480 years	1311–831 BC
	shortfall — 0 years	

As there is no difference, the total 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
<i>Seder Olam</i>	480 years	831–351 BC
	shortfall — 17 years	

Differing decisions in placing the dates of the kings of Israel with respect to the kings of Judah during the period of the divided monarchy account for these 17 years.

Thus far, the *Seder Olam* reckons 82 (65 + 17) fewer years over a 3,489 year span (4004–515) from creation to the consecration of the second temple—of which the major part concerns the age of Terah at Abraham’s birth.

5. From the consecration of the second temple to its destruction by Titus of Rome

Ussher	584 years	515 BC–70 AD
<i>Seder Olam</i>	420 years	351 BC–70 AD
	shortfall — 164 years	

Here we see the main source of the discrepancy found in the *Seder Olam*’s shorter chronology. Its 420 years are divided into spans of 34, 180, 103, and 103 years of successive foreign rule over Israel. As shown in that which follows, it is remarkable that the 164-year disparity is almost entirely from within (a; see below), the first or Persian period. The remaining three periods closely approximate that of the standard chronology.⁶

a) 34 years (351–317 BC) for the remainder of the Persian rule over Israel: from the dedication of the second temple to Ptolemy I Soter’s invasion of Jerusalem (Ptolemy I was one of Alexander the Great’s favourite generals—also called Soter or Saviour, 367?–283 BC. After Alexander’s death in 323, he seized Egypt as his share of the divided Greek empire and assumed the title “King of Egypt”).

b) 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.

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

d) 103 years (34 BC–70 AD) for the Herodian rule until the destruction of the temple.

There is some discrepancy with the standard dates in the later three periods (b, c, & d). The standard date for Alexander's defeat of Darius is 331 BC rather than the *Seder Olam's* 321. It gives Simon's rule as beginning in 142 BC (not 137) and Herod's in 37 BC (not 34).⁷

But what are we to understand from (a) where the *Seder Olam* allows only 34 years for the remainder of the Persian period? Indeed, by *Seder Olam* reckoning there are only 30 years from the dedication of the second temple to Darius' defeat at the hands of Alexander in 321 BC and merely four years after that unto Jerusalem's capture by Ptolemy following Alexander's death.

Moreover, here the two systems exhibit a striking contrast. The Ptolemaic chronology lists eight Persian kings from Darius I Hystaspes to Darius III Codomannus, the king whom Alexander overcame. However, the *Seder Olam* identifies the Darius who was reigning during the dedication of the second temple as the same Darius that Alexander defeated.⁸

Recording only five Persian monarchs, the *Seder Olam* gives the following chronology for its 52/53-year depiction of Persian history:

1. Darius the Mede reigns 1 year
3389–3390 AM (374–373 BC)
Babylon conquered
Daniel in the lions den
2. Cyrus reigns 3 years
3390–3392 AM (373–371 BC, inclusive)
The Jews return
Second temple construction begins
3. Artaxerxes (Cambyses) reigns one-half year
3393 AM (370 BC)
Temple construction halted
4. Ahasuerus reigns 14 years
3393–3407 AM (370–356 BC)
Esther chosen Queen
Esther bears Darius the Persian
5. Darius the Persian reigns 35 years
3407–3442 AM (356 BC)
Temple construction resumes — 3408 AM (355 BC)
Second temple dedicated — 3412 AM (355 BC)
Ezra comes to Jerusalem — 3413 AM (350 BC)
Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem — 3426 AM (337 BC)
Darius defeated by Alexander — 3442 AM (321 BC)

Thus, the *Seder Olam* depicts the Kingdom of Persia as lasting a mere 53 years from 374 to 321 BC, rather than about 207 years (538–331 BC).⁹

Over the centuries, orthodox rabbis have differed somewhat in their listing of the Persian kings, but they generally have not departed from the 52/53-year parameter established within the *Seder Olam*.¹⁰

The result of this shorting of the span of the Persian Empire is that the paramount prophecy and major foundation block of chronology—the Daniel 9:25 seventy weeks of years—has become dislodged. Furthermore, this shorting as perpetuated within the *Seder Olam* is deliberate!

While not openly admitting this, present day Jewish scholars acknowledge that there is something enigmatic about the *Seder Olam's* dating. For example, after stating that the commonly received dates in the Ptolemaic chronology “can hardly be doubted,” Rabbi Simon Schwab nevertheless goes on to uphold his own tradition:¹¹

“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.” (emphasis Schwab's)

This is an astonishing proposal! Schwab, along with other Jewish commentators, further suggests that the reason God directed the sages of the 2nd century AD to become involved in falsifying the data was to confuse anyone who might try to use the prophecies of Daniel to predict the time of the Messiah's coming.

This was supposedly done to honour Da 12:4: “shut up the words, and seal the book, even to the time of the end.” He adds that the reason the sages had adopted the non-Jewish Seleucid Era calendar was part of the scheme to do just that—to close up the words and seal the book of Daniel.¹² Schwab also states that if the 165 years were included it would reveal, “we are much closer to the end of the 6th Millennium than we had surmised”¹³ (Schwab mentions this date as the time when many rabbis expect Messiah to come.).

But can any sincere reader accept such a flimsy reason as justification for distorting history? It actually accuses God himself of perpetrating a dishonest deception.

Indeed, it is manifestly apparent that the real reasons for the deliberate altering of their own national chronology in the *Seder Olam* were: (1) to conceal the fact that the Da 9:25 prophecy clearly pointed to Jesus of Nazareth as its fulfilment and therefore the long awaited Messiah, and (2) to make that seventy week of years prophecy point instead to Simon Bar Kokhba!

Rabbis in the century immediately following Christ Jesus had a tremendous problem with so direct a prophecy as Da 9:24–27. This chapter speaks of Messiah's appearing 69 "weeks" (i.e., 69 sevens) or 483 years after the going forth of a commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem. This 538 BC prophecy {Da 9:1} unmistakably points to the start of the ministry of Jesus Christ in 29 AD.

Such must either be acknowledged and his person accepted or completely erased from Jewish consciousness. The latter could be accomplished if the 69 (or 70) weeks of years could somehow be made to apply to the century after the life of Christ. Then it would be possible for the rabbis to point to *another messiah* who, as circumstances would have it, was cut off in death some 100 years after the crucifixion of our Lord.¹⁴

The 10th day of the month Ab (c. mid-August) is a great day of sorrow to Israel. On this day in 588 BC, the Babylonians destroyed Solomon's Temple. Further, the second temple was laid waste by the Romans under Titus on the same day in 70 AD. And on this very day in 135 AD, at the conclusion of a 3½-year revolt, the Romans crushed the army of the "messianic" Simon Bar Kokhba (also spelled "Cocheba").

Bar Kokhba had been declared the long-awaited Messiah by the foremost Jewish scholar of that day, the highly venerated Rabbi Akiva (Akiba) ben Joseph. In 130 AD, Emperor Hadrian of Rome declared his intention to raise a shrine to Jupiter on the site of the temple,¹⁵ and in 131 he issued a decree forbidding circumcision as well as public instruction in the Jewish law.¹⁶ Having preached peace all his life, the 90-year-old Akiva gave his blessing to the revolution by proclaiming that Bar Kokhba was the "star out of Jacob" and the "sceptre out of Israel." {Nu 24:17}¹⁷

In his 98th year, Akiva was eventually imprisoned and condemned to death by the Romans.¹⁸ Among the many accolades heaped upon Akiva, that which elevated him as a pre-eminent authority, was the acknowledging of him as "the father of the Mishnah."¹⁹ Such prominence

gave great weight to the messianic expectancy Akiva placed upon Bar Kokhba.

Akiva's students became some of the most prominent sages of the following generation. Among these was Yose (Josi) ben Halafta. Akiva's influence on Halafta is apparent from a statement made concerning his education; it was merely said that Rabbi Akiva had been his teacher.²⁰ As his mentor, Akiva's regard for Bar Kokhba would have been thoroughly imbedded in Yose.²¹

The preceding overview explains why the *Seder Olam* is held in such veneration and why the Jews still use it for their national dating. Yet the fact remains that it is a dishonest attempt to conceal the truth with regard to the Da 9:24–27 prophecy.

By removing the 164 (or 165) years from the duration of the Persian Empire, Rabbi Halafta was able to make the 483 year Da 9:24–27 prophecy fall reasonably close to the years prior to the 132 AD revolt during which Bar Kokhba rose to prominence as Israel's military and economic leader.²² Then with Akiva proclaiming, "This is the King Messiah"²³ followed by "all the contemporary sages regarded him as the King Messiah,"²⁴ the Jewish populace united around this false hope.

Dio Cassius states that the whole of Judea was in revolt. To quell the rebellion, Hadrian dispatched Julius Severus, his ablest general, from Britain. The Romans destroyed 985 towns in Palestine and slew 580,000 men. A still larger number perished through starvation, disease, and fire. All Judah was laid waste, and Bar Kokhba himself fell while defending Bethar.²⁵

Even more astonishing is that "even in later generations, despite the disappointment engendered by his defeat, his image persisted as the embodiment of messianic hopes."²⁶ Indeed, the consistent verdict of Jewish historians is: "The most important historical messianic figure was surely Bar Kokhba."²⁷

Yose ben Halafta²⁸ and his fellow compilers of the *Seder Olam* sought to terminate the 69 "weeks of years" as close to the 132 AD revolt as possible, but they were limited as to where they could make the "cuts." As the chronology of the Seleucid era onward was firmly fixed among the Jews, years could not be pared from their history after 312 BC.

Since the Da 9:24–27 prophecy dealt with a decree that was biblically and historically issued by a Persian monarch, this left only the Persian period of history for them to exploit. The Persians had been so hated by the Greeks and later by the Moslems that these two conquerors destroyed nearly all of the Persian records. This has cre-

ated great difficulty in recovering their sequence of kings, the length of their reigns, and thereby their chronology. Thus, the Persian period was readily vulnerable to manipulation.²⁹

This author offers the conclusions given herein as the only reasonable, logical deductions that can be drawn from the historical and biblical facts.

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References:

1. The *Seder Olam* is divided into three parts, each consisting of ten chapters (called tractates). Part One gives the dates of major events from the creation to the crossing of the Jordan River under Joshua's command. Part Two extends from the Jordan crossing to the murder of Zachariah, King of Israel. {2Ki 15:10} Chapters 21–27 of Part Three extend to Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of the temple, and chapter 28 to the conquest of Babylon by Cyrus. Chapter 29 and the first part of 30 cover the Persian period. The remainder of chapter 30 contains a summary of events from the conquest of Persia by Alexander to the 132 AD Bar Kokhba (also spelled "Cocheba") revolt during the reign of Hadrian (AD 76–138). *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, Israel: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971), Vol. 14, "Seder Olam Rabbah," p. 1091–1092.
2. Jack Moorman, *Bible Chronology: The Two Great Divides* (Collingswood, NJ: Bible For Today Press, 1999), p. 10–15. Moorman's research was a primary source for this exposé.
3. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, "Seder Olam Rabbah," p. 1092.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Not having access to *Seder Olam* for this exposé, the numbers are those recorded by Moorman. As his source occasionally reckoned exclusively or inclusively, so did he. Most Jewish dates may be confirmed in Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), p. 130.
6. Moorman, *Bible Chronology: The Two Great Divides*, p. 12.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Martin Anstey, *The Romance of Bible Chronology* (London: Marshall Bros., 1913), p. 23–24.
9. Moorman, *Bible Chronology: The Two Great Divides*, p. 12.
10. *Ibid.* p. 13.
11. Simon Schwab, *Dr. Joseph Breuer Jubilee Volume*, "Comparative Jewish Chronology" (New York, NY: Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch Publications Society, Philipp Felheim Inc., 1962), p. 188.
12. Shimon Schwab, *Selected Speeches: A Collection of Addresses and Essays on Hashkafah, Contemporary Issues and Jewish History*, "Comparative Jewish Chronology" (Lake-wood, NJ: CIS Pub., 1991), p. 270–272.
13. Schwab, *Dr. Joseph Breuer Jubilee Volume*, p. 190–191.
14. Of course no such admission by any of the Jewish sages can be cited, but the facts are obvious.
15. Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, Vol. VIII, Loeb (2000), Bk. 69, p. 447.
16. Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization. Caesar and Christ*, Volume 3 (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1944), p. 548.
17. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 2, "Akiva," p. 489.
18. Durant, *The Story of Civilization. Caesar and Christ*, p. 548–549.
19. Akiva 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. Moorman, *Bible Chronology: The Two Great Divides*, p. 14.
20. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 16, "Yose ben Halafta," p. 852.
21. *Ibid.* p. 853. Yose ben Halaft's own influence may be seen in 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. Though referred to in the Mishnah and Talmud, Halafta's *Seder Olam* is not a formal part of that work. Nevertheless, it is a work of Talmudic authority, and to openly contradict it would be unthinkable to orthodox Jews. As Rabbi Schwab stated: "...our traditional chronology is based on *Seder 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." (Schwab, *Dr. Joseph Breuer Jubilee Volume*, p. 186). Thus it is that the *Seder Olam* is held in such high esteem and is still used by the Jews for their national dating.
22. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 4, "Bar Kokhba," p. 230.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*, p. 231.
25. Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, Vol. VIII, Bk. 69, p. 449–450; Durant, *Caesar and Christ*, p. 548.
26. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 4, "Bar Kokhba," p. 231.
27. *Ibid.*, Vol. 11, "Messiah," p. 1410.
28. Not only do the Jews venerate Jose because the *Seder Olam* had its origin in his school, he is regarded with a near superstitious reverence. This may be seen in that it was said: "that he was worthy of having the prophet Elijah reveal himself to him regularly in order to teach him." *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 16, "Yose ben Halafta," p. 853.
29. Yet despite all that has been said concerning the Jews veneration for Jose, the *Encyclopedia Judaica* forthrightly admits: "The most significant confusion in Jose's calculation is the compression of the Persian period, from the rebuilding of the temple by Zerubbabel in 516 BC to the conquest of Persia by Alexander, to no more than 34 years" (*Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 14, "Seder Olam Rabbah," p. 1092).

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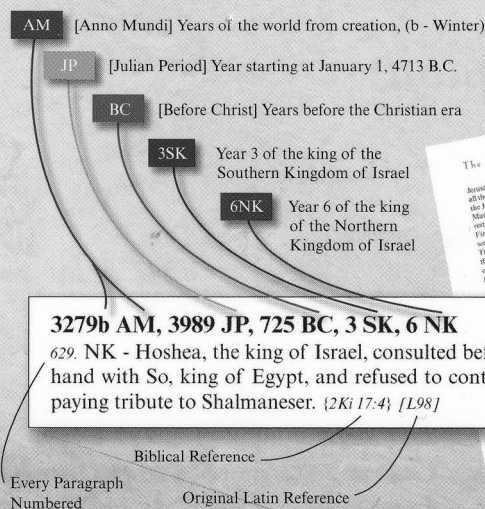
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