

# WHAT THE BIBLE REALLY SAYS ABOUT JERUSALEM'S DESTRUCTION

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To arrive at its date of 607 BCE for the destruction of Jerusalem, the Watchtower Society [WTS] starts with an event that supposedly happened in 537 BCE. The WTS then says the city was destroyed 70 years earlier, in accordance with the announcement at Jeremiah 25:15. While this explanation appears feasible, that is not what the Hebrew Scriptures wrote about the city's destruction.

## Centuries of warning

When the Hebrew nation was given the Promised Land, the prophets warned that if they disobeyed God's commands, he would remove them from that land and destroy the cities and lay waste the land.

If you will not listen to me and carry out all these commands, and if you reject my decrees and abhor my laws and fail to carry out all my commands and so violate my covenant, then I will do this to you: ...

I will turn your cities into ruins (*ḥorbâ*) and lay waste (*šāmēm*) your sanctuaries. ... I will lay waste (*šāmēm*) the land, so that your enemies who live there will be appalled (*šāmēm*). I will scatter you among the nations and will draw out my sword and pursue you.

Your land will be laid waste (*š<sup>e</sup>māmâ*), and your cities will lie in ruins (*ḥorbâ*). Then the land will enjoy its sabbath (*šabbāt*) ["*not in Hebrew*"] years all the time that it lies desolate (*šāmēm*) and you are in the country of your enemies; then the land will rest (*šābat*) and enjoy its sabbaths (*šabbāt*). All the time that it lies desolate (*šāmēm*), the land will have the rest (*šābat*) it did not have during the sabbaths (*šabbāt*) you lived in it. ...

These are the decrees, the laws and the regulations that the LORD established on Mount Sinai between himself and the Israelites through Moses. (Lev. 26:3-46; all Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version* [NIV])

This warning was also given at Deuteronomy.

If you ever forget the LORD your God and follow other gods and worship and bow down to them, I testify against you today that you will surely be destroyed. Like the nations the LORD destroyed before you, so you will be destroyed for not obeying the LORD your God. (Deut. 8:19-20; See also Deut 28:15-68)

The prophets – their preachers – continually repeated that same warning. (Joel 1:2, 6-7, 12, 15; 2:1-3; Isa. 28:13-14; 51:17, 19; Zep. 1:4; 2:1-2; 3:7-8; Hab. 1:5-7; Eze. 5:8, 9, 11, 14)

## Reason for Israel's fate

Every king of the northern kingdom of Israel was evil in the sight of God's prophets, so God caused it to be destroyed and the people scattered among the nations.

All this took place because the Israelites had sinned against the LORD their God. ... They worshiped other gods and followed the practices of the nations. ... They built themselves high places in all their towns. They set up sacred stones and Asherah poles on every high hill and under every spreading tree. At every high place they burned incense, as the nations whom the LORD had driven out before them had done. They did wicked things that provoked the LORD to anger. They worshiped idols, though the LORD had said, "You shall not do this." (2 Kings 17:7-12)

### **Manasseh's detestable sins**

Since Judah's king Manasseh disobeyed the prophets and embraced the beliefs of neighbouring nations, he was particularly identified as a prime cause for God's anger.

Manasseh king of Judah has committed these detestable sins. ...

Therefore this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: I am going to bring such disaster on Jerusalem and Judah that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle. ... I will wipe out Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down.

I will forsake the remnant of my inheritance and hand them over to their enemies ... because they have done evil in my eyes and have provoked me to anger from the day their forefathers came out of Egypt until this day." (2 Kings 21:11 – 15)

### **Judah more evil than Israel**

Judah was considered more evil than Israel because Judah's people had seen Israel's fate yet remained determined to walk along the same pathway.

I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries. Yet I saw that her unfaithful sister Judah had no fear; she also went out and committed adultery.

Because Israel's immorality mattered so little to her, she defiled the land and committed adultery with stone and wood. In spite of all this, her unfaithful sister Judah did not return to me with all her heart, but only in pretense," declares the LORD. The LORD said to me, "Faithless Israel is more righteous than unfaithful Judah." (Jer. 3:8-11)

### **Jeremiah's message repeated earlier warnings**

Jeremiah's life was threatened when he warned that Jerusalem would be destroyed, but he was saved when it was pointed out that he was only repeating the message by previous prophets. (Jer 25:2-7; 26:18)

### **The destruction could be avoided**

Whenever a prophet gave this warning, he made it clear that God would not carry out his punishment if the people heeded the message. When a nation relented and amended its ways, God would relent and the threatened punishment would be avoided.

If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. (Jer. 18:7-8)

### **70 years of servitude could not be avoided**

When Babylon became the region's superpower, God's prophet Jeremiah repeated the age-old threat of the city's destruction. He then added that all the nations were going to serve Babylon for 70 years:

And these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years. (Jer. 25:11)

God decided to use Babylon as his servant, and all the nations would serve his servant for 70 years. That servitude commenced at the same time for all the nations – at the moment when God decided to use Babylon as his servant implementer.

At the same time, Jeremiah made it clear that when a nation served Babylon willingly, they would remain in their own country.

All nations will **SERVE** him and his son and his grandson until the time for his land comes. ...

**If**, however, any nation or kingdom will **not SERVE** Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon or bow its neck under his yoke, I will punish that nation with the sword, famine and plague, declares the LORD, until I **destroy** it by [Nebuchadnezzar's] hand.

So do not listen to your prophets, your diviners, your interpreters of dreams, your mediums or your sorcerers who tell you, "You will not **SERVE** the king of Babylon." **They prophesy lies to you** that will only serve to remove you far from your lands; I will banish you and you will perish.

**BUT** if **any nation** will bow its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon and **SERVE** him, I will let that nation remain in its own land to till it and to live (*yāšab*) there, declares the LORD.

[Jeremiah] **gave the same message to Zedekiah** king of Judah. I said, "**Bow your neck** under the yoke of the king of Babylon; **SERVE** him and his people, and you will live.

**Why will you and your people die** by the sword, famine and plague with which the LORD has threatened any nation that will not **SERVE** the king of Babylon? **Do not listen to the words of the prophets who say to you, "You will not SERVE the king of Babylon", for they are prophesying lies to you.** (Jer. 27:1-3, 6-14)

#### **False prophets promised swift release**

The events recorded at chapters 28 and 29 of Jeremiah show that this 70 years of servitude to Babylon by the nations could not be avoided. This was very different to the threatened destruction of Jerusalem, as it could be avoided.

Shortly after Nebuchadnezzar had exiled Judah's king Jehoiachin, false prophets at Jerusalem and at Babylon promised swift release and an end to the situation.

At Jerusalem, the false prophet Hananiah said that the yoke of bondage would be broken, and Jeremiah responded by saying that continued resistance to the current bondage would only see it intensify. (Jer 28:1-4, 10-14) Through their actions, Jeremiah and Hananiah show that the Babylonian yoke was already in place.

To the people at Babylon, Jeremiah told them to stop listening to their false prophets. They were to settle down, build houses and raise families. The 70 years of servitude to Babylon would run its full course until Babylon received its punishment.

This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:

"Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. ...

"Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them," declares the LORD.

This is what the LORD says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place." (Jer. 29:4-6, 8-10)

The people fully understood that Jeremiah was telling them it would take a long time before the situation ended. The servitude was in place and it could not be avoided. (Jer. 29:27-28)

### **“Without men and animals” while Jerusalem stood**

Before Jerusalem was destroyed, already the people were saying that because Babylon controlled the land, it was without men and animals. (Jer. 32:43; 33:10–12)

### **Destruction could be avoided, while the 70 year servitude could not**

The contrast between these avoidable and unavoidable situations is demonstrated at the time when Jeremiah confronted Zedekiah while Babylon was attacking Jerusalem. Jeremiah pleaded with Zedekiah that if he willingly went forward in surrender, Zedekiah would be showing his preparedness to serve Babylon, and this would prevent the Lord's threatened destruction of Jerusalem. Jeremiah did not want to see the city destroyed, which could still be avoided. But the King did not listen to God's messenger.

Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, “This is what the LORD God Almighty, the God of Israel, says: ‘**If you surrender** to the officers of the king of Babylon, ... this **city will not be burned down**. ...

But if you will not surrender to the officers of the king of Babylon, this city will be handed over to the Babylonians and they will burn it down.’” ...

But if you refuse to surrender, this is what the LORD has revealed to me: ... this city will be burned down.” (Jer. 38:17-18, 21, 23)

**Serve** the king of Babylon, and you will live. Why should this city become a ruin (*h'rbâ*)? (Jer 27:17)

Thus the 70 would run its course; that could not be avoided. The city, however, did not need to be destroyed; that could be avoided.

### **The end of the 70 years of servitude**

The servitude by all the nations to Nebuchadnezzar and his descendants ended at the moment the nation of Babylon fell. Its dominance could not end before, it could not end later. Its days had been numbered.

[Nebuchadnezzar] carried into exile to Babylon the remnant, who escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and his sons **until the kingdom of Persia came to power**. (2 Chr 36:20)

Since the 70-year period of servitude to Babylon had ended, Cyrus was able to issue his decree that permitted the captives of the nations to return to the lands of their fathers. The Chronicler said the rest enjoyed by the land came to its end at the moment the seventy years of servitude ended.

The land enjoyed its sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation (*šammâ*) it rested, **until the seventy years were completed** (*mālē'*) in fulfillment (*mālē'*) of the word of the LORD spoken by **JEREMIAH**. (2 Chr 36:21)

The verse says that the resting ended when the Seventy Years ended. It does not say that the rest lasted seventy years. The end of Babylon's rule ended the land's sabbath rest.

### **The Watchtower's confusion**

*The WTS confuses the 70 years of servitude, which could not be avoided, with the destruction of Jerusalem, which could have been avoided. The avoidable destruction took place years after the nations had started their unavoidable 70 years of servitude.*

There is thus no contradiction between the neo-Babylonian chronology which says that Jerusalem was destroyed in 587/586 BCE and the Biblical record.

There is no Biblical support for the WTS's explanation of the destruction of Jerusalem or of the 70 years of servitude to Babylon by the nations.