

## The Prophecy of Israel's Seventy Years of Servitude to Babylon

This is the first in a series of five essays on fulfilled prophecy. In these essays I present a Biblical prophecy that has been legitimately fulfilled. The prophecy is contained in Jeremiah 25:1-14 which foretells the seventy-year servitude of the Jews in Babylon. Before I begin, certain preliminary details are discussed. First, the generally accepted definition of a genuine prophecy consists of at least three components: (1) a prediction of an event with specific details that go beyond a general forecast; (2) an element of the prediction that goes beyond the prophet's natural ability to foresee, and a time delay that far exceeds the prophet's lifetime; and (3) a subsequent event that fulfills the prediction. The prophecy under discussion contains the elements of (1), both elements of (2)--historical elements that are beyond the prophet's natural ability to foresee, and a specified time delay significantly beyond the prophet's lifetime and beyond his natural ability to forecast. It also includes (3) a verifiable fulfillment. This essay discusses the date of the prophecy, the reason for the prophecy, content of the prophecy, and the fulfillment of the prophecy. Subsequent essays further discuss the author and date of the prophecy, the validity of the Biblical text, the duration of the servitude, and the validity of the evidence.

The second subject under consideration here are qualified authorities to validate the available evidence. In this instance, I use two authorities--one a highly qualified secular historian, and one a highly qualified Biblical historian. The secular historian I use is A. T. Olmstead the eminent Professor of Oriental History at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. Of his numerous publications he has written *The History of Palestine and Syria*, originally published by Charles Scribner's Sons (1931), and *The History of the Persian Empire* published by the University of Chicago Press (1948). These are the classic works cited by most other authors on the subject. Professor Olmstead is not a fundamentalist or a Biblicist but a world class secular historian.

Since some of the evidence comes from the Bible, I use John Bright, the Cyrus H. McCormick Professor of Hebrew and Interpretation of the Old Testament at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, VA. Dr. Bright was trained in Union Theological Seminary and Johns Hopkins University; he is not a fundamentalist, nor one who believes in the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible. In fact, he is liberal in his theological perspective and skeptical of the supernatural elements in Scripture. He is a professional linguist and historian. His publications include the Commentary on Jeremiah in the Anchor Bible series, and *A History of Israel*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972).

Some critic may respond here that Olmstead and Bright do not accept the idea of fulfilled prophecy, and thus I cannot use them in a discussion of prophecy. It is true that these historians share the presupposition against fulfilled prophecy. But I do not use these historians for their theological views but for their expertise in history. I use them to demonstrate that the dates and other historical evidence for the pertinent events discussed here are regarded by reputable authorities as valid. These historians disagree with me in the arena of theology, not in the arena of history. If a critic wants to dispute the validity of the historical evidence, then he stands against the authority of world class historians, not merely against me.

### **The Date of the Prophecy**

The date of the prophecy is given by the prophet himself at the beginning of the passage:

The word that came to Jeremiah concerning all the people of Judah, in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah (which was the first year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon), which Jeremiah the prophet spoke to all the people of Judah and to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, saying: (Jer. 25:1-2).

The prophet Jeremiah dated this prophecy in the fourth year Jehoiakim which was the first year of Nebuchadnezzar. According to John Bright<sup>1</sup> this occurred in 605 B.C., the year Nebuchadnezzar's father died and Nebuchadnezzar ascended to the throne of Babylon. That year, Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army were engaged in the conquest of the Palestinian area. The conquest was temporarily interrupted by the death of his father, but the following year he returned and completed the conquest. Jehoiakim became the vassal of Nebuchadnezzar, and although there were some times of short-lived rebellion, for all practical purposes Judah was under the servitude of Nebuchadnezzar or the Babylonians for seventy years, some of that time as captives exported from their native land to Babylon.

### **The Reason for the Prophecy**

The reason for this prophecy of judgment is given in Jeremiah 25:3-7. The people had refused to repent of their evil deeds and their idolatry after a long period of God's patient and consistent warning by His prophets.

### **The Content of the Prophecy**

The principal content of the prophecy is contained in Jeremiah 25:8-14.

Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts: "Because you have not heard My words, behold, I will send and take all the families of the north," says the LORD, "and Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, My servant, and will bring them against this land, against its inhabitants, and against these nations all around, and will utterly destroy them, and make them an astonishment, a hissing, and perpetual desolations. Moreover I will take from them the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the sound of the millstones and the light of the lamp. And this whole land shall be a desolation and an astonishment, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. Then it will come to pass, when seventy years are completed, that I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity," says the LORD; "and I will make it a perpetual desolation. So I will bring on that land all My words which I have pronounced against it, all that is written in this book, which Jeremiah has prophesied concerning all the nations. (For many nations and great kings shall be served by them also; and I will repay them according to their deeds and according to the works of their own hands.)"

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<sup>1</sup> John Bright, *History*, p. 325.

Jeremiah 29:10 contains a more specific detail the prophet added about ten years later: "For thus says the LORD: After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place."

The details of the prophecy consist of the following:

(1) Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian armies [the families of the north] would conquer the entire territory, destroy their property, make the inhabitants an international disgrace, and take them into captivity. The term "perpetual desolations" is understood to refer to international disgrace, because the promise of return to the land after seventy years indicates that the word "perpetual" does not apply to the land but to the people's disgrace. The conquest includes Judah and the surrounding nations.

(2) The Jews and the peoples of the surrounding nations would be in servitude to the King of Babylon for seventy years. The period of seventy years is beyond Jeremiah's natural ability to foresee or anticipate. It would extend far beyond his death, given his age at the time of the prophecy. Thus the fulfillment of this detail would ordinarily be regarded as of supernatural origin.

(3) At the end of the seventy years the Babylonian nation and its king would be judged and the Jews would be restored to their lands. In all history known to Jeremiah, no nation taken into captivity by the Assyrians, the Babylonians, or any of the preceding world powers had ever been released to return to their native land. The foretelling of such an unprecedented restoration would ordinarily be regarded as of supernatural origin, because it was something that Jeremiah's natural experience could not anticipate.

The rest of chapter 25 is a separate oracle, and contains a figurative elaboration of God's judgment of Judah and the surrounding nations in poetic terms. Such figurative language is not to be interpreted beyond the reasonable way Jeremiah's ancient readers would have understood it.

### **The Fulfillment of the Prophecy**

The above significant details were fulfilled according to the following evidence:

(1) Concerning the conquest of Judah and Jerusalem, Olmstead stated:

On the ninth day of the fourth month of the eleventh year, 586, the walls were breached. Zedekiah and his men of war fled that night by the gate between the two walls at the southeast corner near the king's garden and the pool of Siloam; they hoped to reach the Arabah and so pass to the east Jordan country, but were overtaken at Jericho. Zedekiah was carried to Nebuchadnezzar at Riblah, where his sons were slain before his eyes and then he was blinded that his last sight might be the end of his hopes of posterity.<sup>2</sup>

Bright provided added details:

Having witnessed the execution of his sons, he [Zedekiah] was blinded and taken in chains to Babylon, where he died (II Kings 25:6f.; Jer. 52:9-11). A month later (II Kings

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<sup>2</sup> Olmstead, *History of Palestine*, pp. 526-27.

25:8-12; Jer. 52:12-16) Nebuzaradan, commander of Nebuchadnezzar's guard, arrived in Jerusalem and, acting on orders, put the city to the torch and leveled its walls. Certain of the ecclesiastical, military, and civilian officers, and leading citizens, were hauled before Nebuchadnezzar at Riblah and executed (II Kings 25:18-21; Jer 52:24-27), while a further group of the population was deported to Babylon. The state of Judah had ended forever.<sup>3</sup>

It should be noted that both of these professional historians regarded many historical details recorded in 2 Kings and Jeremiah as valid. The conquest of Jerusalem is also verified by archaeological evidence.<sup>4</sup> Some details of the Babylonian invasion of Judah are given in the Lachish Letters.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, few Babylonian records for this era have survived. However, Josephus described this event in great detail, deriving much of his information from the Bible, but also from such ancient historians as Berosus, Menander, Megasthenes, Abydenus, and Alexander Polyhistor. Few, if any, modern historians question Nebuchadnezzar's conquest and destruction of Jerusalem and the surrounding territory.

(2) Concerning the seventy years, the interval is calculated from the date of the prophecy (605 B.C.) to the date the Jew's return to their land (536 B.C.) following Cyrus' decree. The servitude of the Jews began in 605 B.C. when Nebuchadnezzar subjugated the territory west of the Euphrates river. This may seem to be only sixty-nine years from our western perspective, and thus not an exact fulfillment. However, the number seventy is a round number that is sufficient for the facts. According to the way the ancient Jews reckoned time, and according to the calendar then in use, the first event may have occurred late in the first year and the second event early in the seventieth year, which would appear to span only sixty-nine years according to western convention. Further, as much as a year may have elapsed from the time the decree was issued until the time the Jews actually arrived in Judah. We do know that the contemporary Jews regarded the interval to be seventy years, and to be a fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy (2 Chron. 36:21-23; Ezra 1:1-4).

Now some critics quibble over the precision of the dates, perhaps citing some historian with differing figures. The truth is that these ancient dates cannot be established with rigorous precision; the various authorities differ by a year or two. However, the intervening interval remains approximately seventy years, sufficient to fulfill the requirements of a round number.

Further, a skeptic may assert, as some radical critics have done, that a later scribe altered Jeremiah's prophecy by changing his original number to the number seventy in order to make Jeremiah's prophecy appear fulfilled. If so, he will be making an assertion for which there is absolutely no objective evidence. Such an assertion is based solely on the presupposition that long-range, specific prophecy is impossible, a presupposition that is inadmissible in this current discussion. It involves assuming the conclusion, begging the question, arguing in a circle. It is not sufficient for someone to cite critical scholars who share his faulty theological presupposition. If a critic

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<sup>3</sup> Bright, *History*, p. 330.

<sup>4</sup> See Kathleen M. Kenyon, *Jerusalem* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1967) pp. 78-104, 107f.

<sup>5</sup> See Albright in James Prichard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1955), pp. 321f.].

wants to make this assertion, then let him first produce convincing objective evidence that such a forgery took place. Otherwise, let him admit by default that the number is authentic.

(3) Concerning the restoration of the Jews and the surrounding nations to their native lands, an ancient Persian record known as the Cyrus Cylinder, dated about 536 BC, and composed by Cyrus himself, records the fact that Cyrus granted release to the nations taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar, and granted them permission to return to their native land and restore their temple worship. It states in part:

I returned to (these) sacred cities on the other side of the Tigris, the sanctuaries of which have been in ruins for a long time, the images which (used) to live therein and established for them permanent sanctuaries. I (also) gathered all their (former) inhabitants and returned (to them) their habitations. . . . May all the gods whom I have resettled in their sacred cities ask daily Bel and Nebo for a long life for me and may they recommend me (to him); . . . all of them I settled in a peaceful place . . . I endeavored to fortify/repair their dwelling places.<sup>6</sup>

The general decree of Cyrus was followed by a specific decree for the Jews (and perhaps specific decrees for the other nations). Various parts of this specific decree are recorded in four places in the Bible.<sup>7</sup> Two of these sources<sup>8</sup> are written in Aramaic, the language in which the original decree would have been written. Bright stated that "the authenticity of which need not be questioned."<sup>9</sup> The other two passages are in Hebrew and thus are translations. Concerning the Ezra record, Bright asserted that "it contains no intrinsic improbability that might cast doubt upon its essential historicity."<sup>10</sup>

Both Olmstead and Bright (and almost all other historians of that era) record the fact that a large company of Jews returned from the Babylonian captivity and rebuilt their temple. The contents of the Cyrus Cylinder indicate that Cyrus permitted all the nations west of the Tigris river to return to their native lands. Thus the citizens of those lands must have been taken captive by the Babylonians, and they, like the Jews, must have returned to their native lands in fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy. There is no reasonable evidence to doubt this fact.

## Conclusion

I have demonstrated that all the objective evidence supports the fact that the prophet Jeremiah wrote the prophecy in 605 B.C., and that the prophecy was fulfilled at the end of the predicted "seventy years," interpreted as a round number. The round-number interpretation has the consensus of both conservative and liberal scholars. I have presented numerous lines of consistent

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<sup>6</sup> Prichard, p. 316.

<sup>7</sup> 2 Chr. 36:23; Ezra 1:2-4; 5:14-15; 6:3-5.

<sup>8</sup> Ezra 5:14-15; 6:3-5.

<sup>9</sup> Bright, *History*, p. 361.

<sup>10</sup> Bright, *History*, p. 362.

objective evidence. The readers must evaluate the evidence for themselves and not let someone else do their thinking. The verdict seems quite certain. Jeremiah 25:1-13 is a genuine fulfilled prophecy.

I believe I have presented common sense, rational, objective, historical evidence that Jeremiah's prophecy of the seventy-year servitude and restoration of the Jews was indeed fulfilled. The evidence is sufficient for rational people to accept the prediction as a genuine prophecy that has been fulfilled in its pertinent details. Only radical skeptics who insist on the validity of their theological presuppositions in spite of objective evidence deny this conclusion.

### **Objections of Skeptics**

I am aware that some critics of Biblical prophecy claim that the Biblical texts are forgeries that were actually written after the fulfillment of an alleged prophecy in order to give the false impression that a genuine prophecy took place. These claims include denying that the traditional author actually existed, or if he existed that some later unknown person wrote the prophecy. Or if the prophet actually existed and wrote the book attributed to him, that later scribes altered the text to make the prophecy appear fulfilled.

Likewise, they demand absolute proof, and refuse to accept the witness of evidence that would ordinarily be sufficient to validate events in ancient secular history. This demand is based on their philosophical presupposition that supernatural events, such as fulfilled prophecy, cannot and do not happen.

In subsequent essays I present adequate answers to all those objections as they would apply to the above prophecy. The next essay discusses the author and date of the prophecy in greater depth.

Respectfully,  
James D. Price, Ph.D.  
Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament  
Temple Baptist Seminary  
Chattanooga, TN 37404  
e-mail drjdprice@aol.com