

CALENDAR NOTATIONS IN THE PROPHETS

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Elsewhere, I discussed the difference between the pre-Exilic and post-Exilic prophets in their view of the place of the Davidic dynasty in the eschatology of Israel. In this article, I shall focus on another striking difference which, while not as significant nor as basic as the other, nevertheless, I believe, has something to teach us about the history of Israel in ancient times.

It is regrettable that the Bible offers us so little information about the personal lives of the prophets. Later compilers of the prophetic writings added superscriptions to some of the pre-Exilic prophetic books listing the names of the kings during whose reigns they prophesied. Thanks to them, we have at least a general idea as to when they lived, but there are other prophetic books for which there is not even a superscription.¹ Here and there we find a direct reference to, or some statement implying, an historical event which may provide us with a more specific time-frame. For example, in Isaiah's Temple vision it is noted that it happened *in the year that King Uzziah died* (Isa. 6:1). In Amos, we are told that he spoke *in the days of Uzziah, King of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam son of Joash, King of Israel, two years before the earthquake* (Amos 1:1).²

By sharp contrast, in the post-Exilic prophets (except for Deutero-Isaiah discussed below) we are given very specific dates, with the regnal year of a king or some other reference identifying the year, the month and the day.

In Ezekiel we find 13 dated prophecies (1:1, 8:1, 20:1, 24:1, 26:1, 29:1, 29:17, 30:20, 31:1, 32:1,17, 33:21, 40:1). In Haggai there are four (1:1, 21:1,10,18), and in Zechariah there are three (1:1,7, 7:1). Ezekiel counts the years from the exile of King Jehoiachin (597 BCE), of which the prophet himself was a part. Haggai and Zechariah, who lived two generations later, counted the years from the regnal years of Darius II, King of Persia. In Ezekiel and Haggai, the months are mentioned by number only, with the first month of spring – later known by its Babylonian name of Nisan – considered the first month of the year. In Zechariah the 9th and 11th months are also given by name: Kislev and Shevat.³

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Why this striking difference between the pre-Exilic and post-Exilic prophets? I would like to suggest that the answer to this question is not trivial, that it does not reflect personal idiosyncrasies, but rather that it has to do with Babylonian culture, a culture rooted in astrology. "The wise men of Mesopotamia found that there existed a relationship between events in the heavens and those on earth."⁴ Hence, each month of the year and the day of the month had its own value for good or for bad, so that a careful record had to be kept of all significant activities. This is illustrated most notably in the Babylonian Chronicle⁵ which meticulously records the dates of Nebuchadnezzar's military campaigns, not only with the regnal years in which they took place but also with the name of the month and the day on which the troops were called out. There are Assyrian astrological texts that predate the Babylonian Chronicle by more than a century.⁶ The exiles from Judah, including Ezekiel, found themselves in this atmosphere. It was not difficult for the process of acculturation to affect them. "It was during the Exile that they became acquainted with the names of the months"⁷ which they brought back to their homeland, together with a new script and other features of Babylonian civilization.

Astrology was not unknown in Jerusalem and Judah before the Exile. The Deuteronomic historian castigates the people for worshipping the אֱלֹהֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם [host of the heavens] (II Kg. 17:16 *et al.*), as does Isaiah (19:13). They do not mean worship of angels but rather of constellations, because they supposedly could affect peoples' lives. Jeremiah is more pointed when he calls upon the people that they *not be dismayed by the portents in the sky* [אֱלֹהֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם] (Jer. 10:2). It is clear that while Jeremiah himself may not have been a believer in the "portents in the sky" the masses apparently were.⁸

In the centuries that followed, astrological ideas became deeply rooted in the minds of the people, especially in Babylonia and Persia, even though the stars were no longer objects of worship. Even the rabbis of the Talmud seem to have believed in the powers of the constellations, and they engage in a lively discussion of how the constellations relate to everyday life (B. Shabbat 156a). The Talmud records Rabbi Chaninah as opining that Israel is under the control of a constellation. Rabbi Yochanan demurs, saying: Israel has no constellations. That is, Israel is not in the hands of a constellation but in the

hands of the Holy One Himself, blessed be He.⁹ Rabbi Yochanan cites Jeremiah 10:2 as his proof text.

It is, therefore, clear that the pre-Exilic prophets strenuously resisted the influence of astrology and hence considered it unnecessary, indeed forbidden, to date their prophecies even by the number of the month let alone its name.

In this regard, the puzzling artifact known as the Gezer Calendar may be significant. It is a small piece of limestone about one-by-two inches in size, inscribed with Hebrew characters dated by most scholars to the 10th Century BCE, King Solomon's era. The Hebrew words seem to describe the months of the year by their agricultural characteristics. Yet neither the names of the months nor even their numbers are mentioned.

Now, Ezekiel lived in the very midst of the astrological milieu. In their desire to establish a normal life in their new environment, involving interaction with the population of Babylonia, the exiles must have found it expedient to take note of the daily calendar. By the sixth year of their Exile, the first date in Ezekiel, the use of the Babylonian calendar must have been a common practice among the exiles. Ezekiel did not find this inconsistent with the traditions of Israel's faith, at least insofar as to the numbering of the months and days. But he resisted the use of the Babylonian names of the months; that was, perhaps, going too far.

As is noted above, when the exiles returned to Jerusalem, in accordance with the decree of Cyrus in 538 BCE, they brought the Babylonian calendar back with them. It was soon adopted by all the Judeans. Thus it is not surprising that a generation later Haggai and Zechariah mention the number of the month and the day of the month of their prophecies. The appearance in Zechariah of the Babylonian names for the 9th and 11th months may be a gloss by a later redactor for whom those names no longer presented a religious problem.¹⁰ This may also be the case in the Book of Esther, where the number of the month is followed by the Babylonian name: *In the first month, that is the month of Nisan . . . the twelfth month, that is the month of Adar* (Est. 3:7).

We now turn to the problem of Deutero-Isaiah. We know that this unidentified prophet, called by tradition "the comforting prophet," was living in 538 BCE, at the time of Cyrus' decree, and was probably born and educated there.¹¹ Yet, none of his prophecies is dated. Why? We can only speculate

about the answer. He may have been a religious purist, like those exiles in Psalm 137 who refused to *sing a song of the Lord on alien soil* (v. 4), and would not adopt any elements of Babylonian culture, such as keeping a calendar. The presence of dates in his prophetic work might have prevented the compiler from associating him with the Isaiah ben-Amotz of Jerusalem, whose time was the Eighth Century BCE. This association may in fact have saved these marvelous and historic utterances from oblivion.

The dating by the post-Exilic prophets, largely ignored by scholars, is far from inconsequential. It tells us how the Jews in the first Diaspora interacted with the foreign culture in which they found themselves, and this experience would repeat itself in every host-country for the next 2500 years.

As the Sages have said: מַעֲשֵׂי אֲבוֹת טִיּוֹן לְבָנֵיָם [The deeds of the ancestors are a model for their descendants] (B. Sotah 34a).

NOTES

1. As with Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, and Habakkuk.
2. In some instances, a date noted in the Bible can create severe problems for scholars. For example, we are told in I Kings 6:1 that Solomon began building the Temple *480 years after the children of Israel went out of Egypt*. If this number is correct, then the Exodus would have occurred in the middle of the 15th century BCE, instead of the 13th, as most scholars believe.
3. All the months of the year are mentioned in the Bible by their Babylonian names (and used by Jews universally thereafter) except for the fifth month, Ab. However, the second, seventh and eighth months are referred to by what may have been earlier Babylonian names: Ziv (I Kg. 6:1), Eitanim (8:2) and Bul (6:38). Some scholars are of the opinion that these names in the Book of Kings are glosses included in the text by the compiler in the Exilic period. See John Gray, *I & II Kings* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963) p. 151.
4. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. I, p. 342.
5. The Babylonian Chronicle is a collection of clay tablets inscribed in Akkadian cuneiform, recording the military campaigns of Nebuchadnezzar, his father, Nabopolassar, and his son Evil-Merodach. The tablets are now in the British Museum. For photographs of them, the transcription of the texts into printed cuneiform, translation into English and interpretation, see D. J. Wiseman, *Chronicles of the Chaldean Kings* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1956).
6. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, op. cit.
7. *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, John Hastings, ed. Vol. IV, p. 117.
8. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol.7, col. 538.
9. In Yiddish and in modern Hebrew, *mazel* is used for "luck." Thus wishing someone *mazel tov* is simply a congratulation, without any inference of astrology.
10. Some scholars suggest that the undated prophecies in Zechariah, and possibly in Ezekiel, are not genuine but are insertions by a later redactor. See O. Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament, An Introduction* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) p. 431. The text gives us very little informa-

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tion about Haggai and Zechariah, but from the dating of their prophecies it is not farfetched to suppose that they were children of returned exiles, whether born in Babylonia or in Jerusalem.

11. See my article "Isaiah and Cyrus," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 1996;24, 173-177.