



Type: Web Article

Nephite History in Context 1: Jerusalem Chronicle

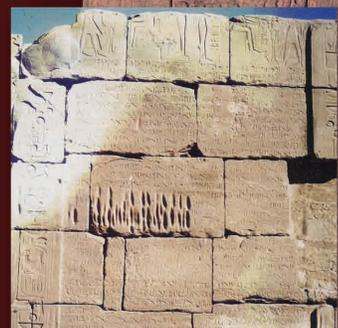
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Published at: *Studio et Quoque Fide*, 2 November 2017

Abstract: A Babylonian tablet, known colloquially as the “Jerusalem Chronicle,” provides brief annal-like reports of the early reign of Nebuchadrezzar II (biblical Nebuchadnezzar), including his invasion of Jerusalem and selecting a “king of his choice,” known as Zedekiah through the biblical accounts (2 King 24:9–17; 2 Chronicles 36:9–10; Jeremiah 37:1). Since the Book of Mormon begins in the first year of the reign of Zedekiah (1 Nephi 1:4), this tablet helps date the opening events of the Book of Mormon.

Nephrite History in CONTEXT

Artifacts, Inscriptions, and
Texts Relevant to the
Book of Mormon



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Number 1 (November 2017)

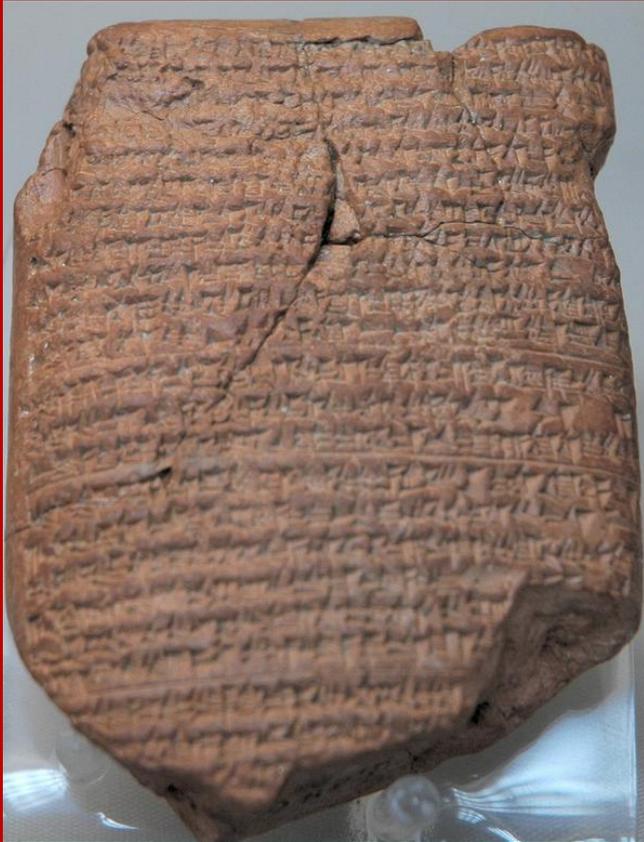
A supplementary resource for



THE
And It Came To Pass
PROJECT

Jerusalem Chronicle (ABC 5/BM 21946)

Neal Rappleye



ABC 5/BM 21946 (Jerusalem Chronicle) documents Nebuchadrezzar II's siege on the "city of Judah," where he "captured the king" and appointed Zedekiah as "a king of his choice." Photo credit: Jona Lendering, Livius.org

Background

The so-called "Babylonian Chronicles" are an important collection of brief historical reports from Mesopotamia, found in Iraq in the late-19th century.¹ They are written on clay tablets in Akkadian using cuneiform script, and cover much of the first millennium BC, although several tablets are missing or severely damaged, leaving gaps in the record. One tablet, colloquially known as the "Jerusalem Chronicle" (ABC 5/BM 21946),² provides brief annal-like reports of the early reign of Nebuchadrezzar II (biblical Nebuchadnezzar), including mention of his invasion of Jerusalem.

Biblical sources report that King Jehoiachin's brief reign was terminated when Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king, invaded the city, took the king and others captive, raided the royal residence of its valuables, and appointed Mattaniah, renamed Zedekiah, as king (see 2 Kings 24:9–17; 2 Chronicles 36:9–10; Jeremiah 37:1). The Jerusalem Chronicle does not mention the names of the Judahite kings, but nonetheless confirms that near the end of his seventh year, Nebuchadnezzar II invaded "the city of Judah," where he "captured the king," claimed a "massive tribute," and placed "a king of his choice" on the throne. There is no doubt this refers to the kings Jehoiachin and Zedekiah.³

Translation

The following translation is from Jean-Jacques Glassner, *Mesopotamian Chronicles* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), 231 (see p. 230 for transliteration),⁴ with annotations added:

The seventh year,⁵ in the month of Kislev,⁶ the king of Akkad mustered his troops,⁷ marched on Ḫatti,⁸ and set up his quarters facing the city of Yeḫud.⁹ In the month of Adar,¹⁰ the second day, he took the city and captured the king.¹¹ He installed there a king of his choice.¹² He colle[cted] its massive tribute and went back to Babylon.

Book of Mormon Relevance

Since this tablet provides the very day Jerusalem was captured (Adar 2), it has been touted as the most accurate date in all of biblical chronology.¹³ The Babylonian Chronicles are correlated almost precisely (give or take a day) with the modern calendar, thanks to the documentation of eclipses in 621 and 568 BC.¹⁴ Adar 2 in the seventh year of Nebuchadrezzar II corresponds with March 10, 597 BC.¹⁵ This, in turn, means that Zedekiah was appointed king in the spring of 597 BC, although whether he was appointed king this very day (Adar 2/March 10) or a few weeks later is uncertain.¹⁶

Perhaps serendipitously, the Book of Mormon begins “in the commencement of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah” (1 Nephi 1:4), and Lehi’s departure from Jerusalem happened “in the first year of the reign of Zedekiah” (3 Nephi, headnote). The events of 1 Nephi 1–2, therefore, all happened within the first year of Zedekiah’s reign, which can be determined pretty accurately thanks to the Jerusalem Chronicle. However, even with the nearly precise date for Zedekiah’s accession, the exact timing of his first regnal year still cannot be determined with absolute certainty, due to some ambiguity regarding how the regnal years in pre-exilic Judah were counted.

Some argue that a king’s first regnal year began the moment of accession (non-accession year dating), but most scholars favor the view that the king’s first official year did not begin until *after* the start of the next new year (accession year dating). These scholars are divided as to whether the new year was counted from the fall (Tishri) or the spring (Nisan).¹⁷ This results in three different, though overlapping, one-year timespans in which the events of 1 Nephi 1–2 could take place. Thanks to the Jerusalem Chronicle, the timing of that one-year span can be dated to within a relatively narrow window, sometime between spring 597 and spring 595 BC (see table below).¹⁸

Potential Time Frames for Zedekiah’s First Regnal Year*		
	Begins	Ends
Date of Accession	March 10–April 16, 597 BC	February 26–April 5, 596 BC
Fall New Year	October 2, 597 BC	October 20, 596 BC
Spring New Year	March 28, 596 BC	April 16, 595 BC

*All dates should be considered approximations (see n.18)

Based on this information, we can reasonably assume that 1 Nephi 1:4 connects Lehi’s prophetic call to three possible time-periods, depending on how regnal years were counted: (1) around the time of

Zedekiah's accession in March/April 597 BC; or if accession year dating was followed, close to Zedekiah's formal coronation, during either (2) the fall festivals in early October 597 BC or (3) the Passover season in late March 596 BC.¹⁹ Meanwhile, in order for Lehi's departure from Jerusalem to be within "the first year of reign of Zedekiah" (3 Nephi, headnote), he must have left after March 10, 597 BC, likely sometime between 597–596 BC, although if a spring new year dating was followed, he could have left as late as mid-April 595 BC.²⁰

Notes

¹ For background and provenance information, see Clyde E. Fant and Mitchell G. Reddish, *Lost Treasures of the Bible: Understanding the Bible through Archaeological Artifacts in World Museums* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008), 208–211. See also Caroline Waerzeggers, "The Babylonian Chronicles: Classification and Provenance," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 71, no. 2 (2012): 285–298.

² There are multiple different classification systems for the Babylonian Chronicles, but the two most common are the Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles (ABC) and the British Museum (BM) catalogue. See, respectively, A. K. Greyson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* (Locus Valley, NY: J. J. Augustin, 1975); D. J. Wiseman, *Chronicles of the Chaldean Kings (626–556 BC)* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1956)

³ Fant and Reddish, *Lost Treasures of the Bible*, 208–211; Lester L. Grabbe, *Ancient Israel: What Do We Know and How Do We Know It?*, rev. ed. (New York, NY: Bloomsbury/T&T Clark, 2017), 252 §5.2.7 and 5.2.8.

⁴ This was originally published in French as *Chroniques Mésopotamiennes* in 1993.

⁵ 2 Kings 24:12 has Nebuchadnezzar taking Jehoiachin in his eighth year, not his seventh. This has been explained in a couple of different ways: (1) The most common explanation reasons that since Adar is the last month of the Babylonian year, it is possible it wasn't until "the year was expired" that the Babylonian troops actually finished gathering all the deportees, the bounty, and "brought [Jehoiachin] to Babylon" (2 Chronicles 36:10), thus making it the eighth year by the time he was actually deported. See David Noel Freedman, "The Chronology of Israel and the Ancient Near East: Old Testament Chronology," in *The Bible and the Ancient Near East: Essays in Honor of William Foxwell Albright*, ed. G. Ernest Wright (Garden City, NY: Double Day, 1961), 213; Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, rev. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 256–257 §439. (2) Another possibility is that the biblical writers were reckoning Nebuchadnezzar's reign from the fall, rather than the spring, and thus its year count was about 6 months ahead of the Babylonians. See Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, new rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1983), 186. I personally find the first option more likely (see also n.16).

⁶ Kislev typically begins between mid-November and mid-December in the Gregorian calendar. Victor Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East*, 3rd ed. (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006), 197 actually translate *Kislev* as *November*, but this is problematic since Kislev didn't start until December that year. See Richard A. Parker and Waldo H. Dubberstein, *Babylonian Chronology, 626 BC–AD 45* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1942), 25; Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 256 §437. See also Wiseman, *Chronicles of the Chaldean Kings*, 32–33.

⁷ The "king of Akkad" is the Babylonian king, who is identified as Nebuchrezzar II earlier on the same tablet, as can be confirmed by consulting any accessible translation, e.g., Wiseman, *Chronicles of the Chaldean Kings*, 69; Greyson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*, 100; Glassner, *Mesopotamian Chronicles*, 229; Matthews and Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels*, 196; A. Leo Oppenheim, "Assyrian and Babylonian Historical Texts," in *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 273.

⁸ Ḫatti is a Babylonian term for the broader Syro-Palestine region. See Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 252–253 §431. Oppenheim, "Assyrian and Babylonian Historical Texts," 273 translates it as "Syria," although this is not entirely accurate.

⁹ *Yehud* = Judah; "city of Judah" = Jerusalem. The sense of "set up his quarters facing" is that he besieged or attacked the city. Wiseman, *Chronicles of the Chaldean Kings*, 73; Greyson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*, 102; Oppenheim,

“Assyrian and Babylonian Historical Texts,” 273 all have “encamped against,” while Matthews and Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels*, 197 most clearly captures the sense with “laid siege.”

¹⁰ Adar typically begins between mid-February and mid-March in the Gregorian calendar. Hence, Matthews and Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels*, 197 actually translate “on the second day of February,” though this is very misleading since the actual date in the Gregorian calendar is March 10 (see the section on Book of Mormon Relevance).

¹¹ I.e., Jehoiachin.

¹² I.e., Zedekiah.

¹³ Siegfried H. Horn, “The Babylonian Chronicle and the Ancient Calendar of the Kingdom of Judah,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 5, no. 1 (1967): 21: “The most exact information ever obtained from cuneiform records for any event recorded in the Bible is that of the Babylonian Chronicles pertaining to the capture of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar during the reign of Jehoiachin.” See also John H. Hayes and Paula K. Hooker, *A New Chronology for the Kings of Israel and Judah and its Implications for Biblical History and Literature* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1988), 15; Gershon Galil, “The Babylonian Calendar and the Chronology of the Last Kings of Judah,” *Biblica* 72, no. 3 (1991): 367.

¹⁴ Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 253 §431.

¹⁵ I’ve converted the typical date given (March 16, 597 BC) based on the Julian calendar to the Gregorian calendar using rosettacalendar.com. For March 16, 597 BC (Julian) as the correct date, see (among others), Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 256 §437, following the indication in Parker and Dubberstein, *Babylonian Chronology*, 25 that in 597 BC, Adar began on March 15 (Julian).

¹⁶ Although the tablet makes it sound like the city was captured, king deported, tribute taken, and a new king appointed all on Adar 2, it’s likely that these events took some time, and Adar 2 is probably just the day Jerusalem was officially taken, while subsequent events took place over the next few weeks (see n.5). In fact, some scholars interpret Ezekiel 40:1 as indicating that Nisan 10 was the 25th anniversary of the deportation of Jehoiachin, which would mean he was deported on April 16, 597 BC (converted from the Julian date April 22, 597 BC using rosettacalendar.com). Zedekiah’s accession, therefore, must have happened sometime between March 10–April 16, 597 BC. See Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 256–257 §439–440; Thiele, *Mysterious Numbers*, 186–187.

¹⁷ For a summary of these different factors, see Thiele, *Mysterious Numbers*, 43–45; Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 246–247 §421; William H. Shea, “Chronology of the OT,” in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 244; J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2006), 442–444; Antti Laato, *Guide to Biblical Chronology* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2015), 13–19. For the view that Judah used non-accession year dating, see M. Christine Tetley, *The Reconstructed Chronology of the Divided Kingdom* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 91; Rodger C. Young, “When Did Jerusalem Fall?,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47, no. 1 (March 2004): 21–38. For Tishri-based accession year dating, see Thiele, *Mysterious Numbers*, 51–53, 184, chart 31 for Zedekiah specifically; Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 246–247 §421. For Nisan-based accession year dating, see Hayes and Hooker, *A New Chronology*, 12–14, 17–18, 93–94 for Zedekiah specifically; Galil, “The Babylonian Calendar,” 367–378, esp. 377.

¹⁸ Since the details of pre-exilic Hebrew calendaring are uncertain, all dates should be considered approximations, based on the Babylonian calendar in Parker and Dubberstein, *Babylonian Chronology*, 25, converted from Julian to Gregorian dates using rosettacalendar.com. The beginning and ending of each year may be off by about a month if Judean practices of intercalation differed from those of the Babylonians. See Galil, “The Babylonian Calendar,” 372–376. It should also be noted that the dates for the spring new year assumes an original appointment *after* the spring new year of Nisan 1 (April 7), 597 BC. If Zedekiah were appointed previous to that date (between March 10–April 6), and Judah was counting regnal years from the spring, then Zedekiah’s first regnal year would be April 7, 597 BC to March 27, 596 BC. I did not include this fourth possibility in the table because it is essentially duplicative of the time frame that emerges if one assumes the years are counted from the date of accession. Another possibility not included is that non-accession year dating was used, but the regnal years were still counted from a Tishri-based new year, in which case Zedekiah’s first regnal “year” would technically be from March 10/April 16, 597 BC to October 1, 597 BC. This possibility was likewise omitted because while it narrows the timeframe in which the events of 1 Nephi 1–2 must fit, it falls within the other timeframes already offer and thus provides no further possibilities for dating specific events; i.e., a scenario wherein Lehi receives his prophetic call in March/April 597 BC and departs before October of that same year is already viable within possibilities provided in the table.

¹⁹ Another possibility is that the term “commencement” in 1 Nephi 1:4 indicates the period between formal appointment and the start of the first official regnal year (after the new year), called an *accession year* or *accession period* by

scholars. The Babylonians called this period the *resh sharruti*, and some have argued that the Hebrew phrase *reshit malkut* (ראשית מלכות), typically translated as “in the beginning of the reign of ...” is also equivalent to the accession period. See Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 75 §160; p. 247 §421. The statement “in the commencement ... of the reign of Zedekiah” in 1 Nephi 1:4 may also be a translation of *reshit malkut* (ראשית מלכות), and thus indicate that Lehi’s call came sometime during the accession period (March 10/April 16 to either October 1, 597 BC or March 27, 596 BC). This possibility is unlikely, however, since 1 Nephi 1:4 also explicitly says it was “the *first year* of the reign of Zedekiah,” thus indicating that the events are happening within the first official regnal year and not before.

²⁰ This seemingly obvious datum for Book of Mormon chronology is, unfortunately, often ignored or dismissed by Book of Mormon chronologists, who have proposed dates for Lehi’s departure that span nearly a 20-year spectrum from 605–587 BC, using various levels of speculation to justify such wild departures from the available data. Supporting a departure in 605 BC, which is far too early, is Jeffrey R. Chadwick, “Has the Seal of Mulek Been Found?” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12, no. 2 (2003): 117–118 n.24; Jeffrey R. Chadwick, “An Archaeologist’s View,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15, no. 2 (2006): 123 n.8; Jeffrey R. Chadwick, “Dating the Death of Jesus Christ,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (2015): 147–148 n.46. Others support 601/600 BC, another date that is too early. See Joseph L. Allen, *Exploring the Lands of the Book of Mormon* (Orem, UT: SA Publishers, 1989), 21–25; Joseph L. Allen and Blake J. Allen, *Exploring the Lands of the Book of Mormon*, rev. ed. (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2011), 69–72; John P. Pratt, “Lehi’s 600-Year Prophecy of the Birth of Christ,” March 31, 2000, online at <http://www.johnpratt.com/items/docs/llds/meridian/2000/lehi6apr.html> (accessed April 22, 2017). On the other side of the spectrum are those who argue for 588/587 BC, which is too late. See Randell P. Spackman, “Introduction to Book of Mormon Chronology: The Principle Prophecies, Calendars, and Dates,” (FARMS Preliminary Report, 1993), 7–14; Randall P. Spackman, “The Jewish/Nephite Lunar Calendar,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7, no. 1 (1998): 48–59, 71; Jerry D. Grover Jr., *Translation of the “Caractors” Document* (Provo, UT: Grover Publications, 2015), 70–73, 209–210. Obviously, all of these views are problematic in light of the Jerusalem Chronicle, which provides our most secure chronological information. Gratefully, there are others who follow the ca. 597/596 BC dating. See Robert F. Smith, “Book of Mormon Event Structure: The Ancient Near East,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5, no. 2 (1996): 98–101, 122–123; S. Kent Brown and David Rolph Seely, “Jeremiah’s Imprisonment and the Date of Lehi’s Departure,” *Religious Educator* 2, no. 1 (2001): 15–32; David Rolph Seely, “Chronology, Book of Mormon,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2003), 197–199. My own views are most closely aligned with those of Smith (1996).