

Searching For Israel (Part Seven): Seven Years' Punishment

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*"Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted for her children, because they are no more."
(Jeremiah 31:15)*

The mass expulsion of the children of Israel from Canaan, first by Assyrian kings and then by Babylonian ones, left Canaan essentially bereft of Israelites. The theocracy was gone; the monarchy was not around; the people were slaves to Gentile peoples. All this came as a consequence of the people's habitual rejection of God's law. Was this punishment of indefinite duration? Did God turn away from physical Israel and begin to work with spiritual Israel, the church (Galatians 6:16), instead?

That is what some teach, but they are wrong. God is still working with physical Israel. God established a specific time to terminate Israel's punishment. That point in time becomes a vital search criterion for identifying modern-day Israel.

Leviticus 26 records a number of conditional promises God made to the children of Israel. This chapter relates what He will do *for* them "if you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments, and perform them" (verse 3)—and what He will do *to* them "if you do not obey Me" (verse 14). In the context of punishment, related in verses 14-39, God uses the phrase "seven times more" four times (verses 18, 21, 24, and 28): "If you do not obey Me, then I will punish you *seven times more* for your sins."

The phrase "seven times more" can refer to *intensity*. It is used this way in Daniel 3:19, where Nebuchadnezzar ordered a furnace to be heated seven times hotter than usual.

However, in Leviticus 26, God uses the phrase to refer to *duration*, not intensity of punishment. God says He will punish Israel for a length of seven times. Understanding this, we can easily calculate when God completed His punishment of Israel, when He stopped withholding His fulfillment of the promises. A prophetic "time" is one year of 360 days. Seven "times" is obviously seven prophetic years. Using this logic, the Kingdom of Israel's period of captivity, national humiliation, and deprivation must have ended seven years after her fall. Since she fell to the Assyrians in 718 BC, God ended her punishment seven years later, in 711 BC.

But history will not support that facile conclusion! Indeed, the northern Kingdom of Israel was not restored in 711 BC; the people did not then inherit the land as an eternal possession, where they now live as a wealthy, powerful, populous company of nations. Emphatically, *nothing* like that happened in 711 BC.

Scriptural Evidence

The five-fold record of the Scriptures, the Apocrypha, the Talmud, Jewish tradition, and history is clear. Notice first the scriptural evidence.

1. The author of II Kings records, "Israel was carried away from their own land to Assyria, as it is to this day" (II Kings 17:23). That is, Israel was still in Assyria at the time this passage was written. To determine the approximate point in time to which the phrase *as it is to this day* refers, we need only determine the date of the *latest* historical event recorded in the book. That date will be the *earliest* possible date the book could have been written. That is, a historical—as distinct from a prophetic—book can be written no earlier than the latest event it records.

Chronologically, the latest event recorded in II Kings is the release of one of Judah's kings, Jehoiachin, from prison some 26 years after the fall of Jerusalem in 585 BC. This release took place about 559 BC (585 - 26 = 559).¹ We know, then, that the phrase *as it is to this day* can refer to a year *no earlier* than 559 BC, which is a full 159 years *after* Israel's fall in 718 BC. Israel did not return to its homeland in 711 BC, but was still in exile *at least* 159 years after its fall. God's punishment of Israel lasted far longer than a mere seven years!

2. About 540 BC, the prophet Daniel testified, in a prayer recorded in Daniel 9:7, that the house of Israel had not returned to its homeland. As of that date, they were still "far off."

O Lord, righteousness belongs to You, but to us shame of face, as it is this day—to the men of Judah, to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and all Israel, those near and those far off in all the countries to which You have driven them, because of the unfaithfulness which they have committed against You.

The phrase "those near" refers to the captives of the Kingdom of Judah—of whom Daniel was one—who were interned in and around Babylon. "[T]hose far off in all the countries to which You have driven them" probably refers to the exiles of the Kingdom of Israel. Daniel says Israel still had not returned, as of about 178 years *after* their deportation in 718 BC. Daniel would not agree that God's punishment of Israel was to last only seven years.

3. The punishment had not even ended in Christ's time, more than 700 years *after* Israel's fall. In about AD 31, Christ says He was "not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15:24). They were still "lost" in His day, not having returned to Canaan.

4. Still decades later, the apostle James addresses a letter to "the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad" (James 1:1). In New Testament times, the house of Israel was still scattered—still in a state of punishment.

Therefore, Israel was still in exile as late as the generation of James, still punished more than 750 years after Assyria conquered it.

Other Records

Second, there is the extra-biblical evidence of the apocryphal writings. II Esdras 13:40-41, 45, dated AD 81 to 96, indicates its author's conviction that ten-tribed Israel was in captivity at the time he wrote:

Those are the ten tribes, which were carried away prisoners out of their own land in the time of Osea the king, whom Salmanasar the king of Assyria led away captive, and he carried them over the waters, and so came they into another land. But they took this counsel among themselves, that they would leave the multitude of the heathen, and go forth into a further country, where never mankind dwelt. . . . For through that country there was a great way to go, namely, of a year and a half: and the same region is called Arsareth.

Third, there is Talmudic evidence. The Talmud, compiled during the four centuries after AD 100, attests to its writers' convictions that the ten tribes were still exiled from Canaan:

DD. . . . "The ten tribes are not destined to return,

EE. since it is said, *And he cast them into another land, as on this day* (Dt. 29:28). Just as the day passes and does not return, so they have gone their way and will not return," the words of R. [Rabbi] Aqiba.

FF. R. Eliezer says, "Just as this day is dark and then grows light, so the ten tribes for whom it now is dark—thus in the future it is destined to grow light for them." (Neusner, Jacob, *The Mishnah*, Sanhedrin 10:3.V)

The Talmud goes on to attribute the inability of the ten tribes to rejoin Judah to the "fact" that the ten tribes were exiled beyond the mysterious river Sambatyon (*The Midrash*, Breishet Rabba 73:6).

Fourth, there is traditional evidence. The authoritative *Encyclopedia Judaica* (1972 ed., "Ten Lost Tribes") summarizes the Jewish tradition that Israel has not returned to its homeland: "The belief in the continued existence of the ten tribes was regarded as an incontrovertible fact during the whole period of the Second Temple [516 BC to AD 70] and of the Talmud [ad 100 to 500]."

Finally, there is historical evidence. The conservative Jewish historian Josephus wrote in about AD 94: "The ten tribes are beyond the Euphrates till now, and are an immense multitude, and not to be estimated by numbers" (*Antiquities of the Jews*, XI, 5.2).

The scriptural, apocryphal, Talmudic, traditional, and historical sources do not substantively contradict one another. Israel did *not* return to Canaan in 711 BC to inherit the promises God made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Nor is Israel to be found elsewhere in that year as a rich and powerful nation. Rather, ten-tribed Israel was still exiled from its homeland, under the thumb of the Assyrian.

The phrase "seven times more" as used in Leviticus 26 cannot refer to a period of seven *literal* years. We need to dig deeper to understand the meaning of this phrase.

Seven Long Years

Numbers 14 relates an incident that occurred as the children of Israel approached the Promised Land. Moses sent twelve men to "see what the land is like" (Numbers 13:18). All but two of the spies brought back a "bad report" (verse 32). So discouraged were the people, so afraid that their "wives and children [would] become victims" (Numbers 14:3), they determined to "select a leader and return

to Egypt" (verse 4). Moses, intervening on behalf of the people, dissuaded an angry God from destroying them outright.

However, God did punish Israel for its faithlessness: "According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, for each day you shall bear your guilt one year, namely forty years" (Numbers 14:34). In punishing Israel, God used the year-for-a-day principle: *Each day counts as one year.*

God reversed the year-for-a-day principle in Ezekiel 4:4-8. God told Ezekiel that Israel had sinned for 390 years—from the time it had demanded that Samuel provide it with a king to its fall to Assyria. In verses 4-5, He commands Ezekiel:

Lie . . . on your left side. . . . According to the number of the days that you lie on it, you shall bear their iniquity. For I have laid on you the years of their iniquity, according to the number of the days, three hundred and ninety days; so you shall bear the iniquity of the house of Israel.

Ezekiel could not, of course, lie on his side one year for each day in the 390-year interval. That would be 360×390 , or 140,400 prophetic years, or the equivalent of just under 2,006 seventy-year lifetimes! So, God reversed the formula to a day-for-a-year. Ezekiel was to lie on his side for 390 days, *one day for each year.* This was to be a sign to the house of Israel (Numbers 4:3) that it was to be punished.

Hosea also makes a veiled reference to the year-for-a-day principle. Offering hope that God will "heal" Israel after allowing it to be wounded (Hosea 6:1), the prophet alludes to three days. These are probably years: "After two days He will revive us; on the third day He will raise us up, that we may live in His sight" (verse 2). Hosea might be saying that God will progressively show mercy to Israel in its afflictions, providing some relief after two years, more during the third.

All these scriptures have this in common: *When speaking about the time-period of Israel's punishment, God uses the year-for-a-day principle, or its inverse.* We now have a solid formula to define the length of "seven times more" as used in Leviticus 26. Each "time" is one 360-day prophetic year. Seven "times" is 2,520 days ($7 \times 360 = 2,520$).

Each day represents one *year*. So, the actual time span in "seven times" is 2,520 years. That is far longer than seven years!

Grab your calculator; take the time to confirm the math! From 718 BC to AD 1802 is 2,520 years. Remember, there is *no* year zero, but there is a 1 BC *and* an AD 1.

Leviticus 26:18, 21, 24, 28 all prophesy the same thing: If Israel refuses to obey God, He will withhold fulfilling His *conditional* promises to it for 2,520 years. Those 2,520 years began with the fall of Israel in 718 BC. They ended in the year AD 1802. Here is an amazingly specific search criterion to identify modern-day Israel. We will see later on, too, that history fully supports it.

Next month, we will look in another area for our search criteria: geography. God tells us quite specifically "where in the world" we can find Israel.