

THIS NEW BOOK OFFERS A CRITICAL AND IMPORTANT ASSESSMENT of three central and related topics concerning Jehovah's Witnesses and the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society in the form of three dissertations.

THE FIRST addresses the question of authority as it exists and is exercised by the two main groups that together comprise the entire organization of Jehovah's Witnesses. These two groups are known as the "faithful and discreet slave class" and the "great crowd of 'other sheep.'" The majority of Jehovah's Witnesses belong to the "great crowd" and so the Witness whom you meet on the street corner or at your doorstep is most likely a member of this group. But what is the relationship between members of the "great crowd" and the "faithful slave class"? The author explores this question in detail with a look back at the views of Charles T. Russell (first president of the Watchtower Society) and his associates on the identity of the "faithful slave" of Jesus' parable in Matthew 24:45-47.

THE SECOND dissertation offers a comprehensive look at the history of chronology as it has been presented in *The Watchtower* magazine, published by Jehovah's Witnesses. It offers a detailed look at twenty-four key dates identified by the Watchtower Society since *The Watchtower* was first published in 1879. It is a carefully documented yet easy-to-read discussion of the Watchtower's application of Bible prophecy to relatively recent times and events.

THE THIRD and final dissertation objectively considers four key aspects of the Witnesses' belief system. The author evaluates the Witnesses' views on God and Christ, the divine name, the Watchtower policy on blood, in particular blood transfusions, and finally the question of legalism and several of the forms it takes in the Watchtower organization. The overriding question in this dissertation is whether or not the spiritual "food" or doctrines taught by the Watchtower Society are of the quality one would should expect from a "faithful slave" such as the one mentioned by Jesus in Matthew 24:45-47.

In *Three Dissertations on the Teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses*, the author, Greg Stafford, presents important issues facing Jehovah's Witnesses and those interested in their beliefs. Complete with an informative Appendix on questions about the "Gentile times" chronology, detailed and informative notes, bibliography, and subject index, this book is a refreshing look at many difficult but important questions involved in the study of Watchtower history and theology.



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THREE DISSERTATIONS on the Teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses

STAFFORD



Three Dissertations

on the
Teachings of
Jehovah's
Witnesses

GREG STAFFORD

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APPENDIX

Appendix

Have the “Gentile Times” Ended?

The Second Dissertation detailed Charles T. Russell’s belief that the “Gentile times” began in 606 BCE, with the desolation of Jerusalem. Russell also believed that these Gentile times would end in 1914 CE when Jerusalem would no longer be subject to Gentile rule. As early as 1904, however, a reader of *Zion’s Watch Tower* wrote to Russell concerning the chronology presented in non-Watchtower sources, sources that had fixed the date for the start of the seventy-year Jewish captivity in Babylon to 587/586 BCE, not 606 BCE.¹

Today Jehovah’s Witnesses still teach that the Gentile times ended in 1914, and some continue to question the accuracy of the chronology they advance with respect to both the beginning and ending of the Gentile times. However, Jehovah’s Witnesses no longer believe that the Gentile times began in 606 BCE; rather, they identify 607 BCE as the point from which the 2,520 days (counted as years) of Daniel 4:23 began. This change was officially adopted in or about 1944. The current reasoning adopted by the Witnesses in explaining why they chose 607 BCE is as follows:

[T]he inspired Bible writer Ezra reported that the 70 years ran until “the first year of Cyrus the king of Persia,” who issued a decree allowing the Jews to return to their homeland. (Ezra 1:1-4; 2 Chronicles 36:21-23) Historians accept that Cyrus conquered Babylon in October 539 B.C.E. and that Cyrus’ first regnal year began in the spring of 538 B.C.E. If Cyrus’ decree came late in his first regnal year, the Jews could easily be back in their homeland by the seventh month (Tishri) as Ezra 3:1 says; this would be October 537 B.C.E. . . . It seems evident that the easiest and most direct understanding of the various Biblical statements is that the 70 years began with the complete desolation of Judah after Jerusalem was destroyed. (Jeremiah 25:8-11; 2 Chronicles 36:20-23; Daniel 9:2) Hence, counting back 70 years from when the Jews

returned to their homeland in 537 B.C.E., we arrive at 607 B.C.E. for the date when Nebuchadnezzar, in his 18th regnal year, destroyed Jerusalem, removed Zedekiah from the throne and brought to an end the Judean line of kings on a throne in earthly Jerusalem.—Ezekiel 21:19-27.²

In defending his choice of 606 BCE against those who suggested that he might be in error for not accepting 587/586 BCE as the date for the fall of Jerusalem,³ Russell challenged the reliability of all ancient histories except for the Bible. He believed that at some points non-biblical histories could be trusted to corroborate the chronology of the Bible, but that where the two conflicted the Bible should always be given precedence.

For example, Russell rejected what is known as Ptolemy's canon "back of the first year of Cyrus, 536 A.D." because it disagreed with his interpretation of Bible chronology. Russell coupled what he saw as an error on the part of some to view the 70 years of Daniel 9:2 and Jeremiah 26:9 as a period of captivity (whereas Russell believed it to be a period of complete *desolation* of the land, 'without an inhabitant') with his views concerning all the harmonious parallels between the harvest period (1874 to 1914) and the Gospel age. Because of his views, Russell at times reacted strongly against any notion that the chronology he presented was not correct.⁴

While recognizing that his chronology was not infallible,⁵ Russell still did not grant much, if any, credibility to arguments presented against his view of Bible chronology. Today Jehovah's Witnesses adopt basically the same attitude with respect to the Bible and secular history, though their approach is more sophisticated than was Russell's approach since they attempt to use historical data to contradict the traditional chronology. Additionally, they also offer some alternative interpretations of the data used to support the traditional chronology. But they are still faced with challenges from those who oppose their interpretation of the Gentile times and related biblical and historical chronologies.

Perhaps the most outspoken of those who reject the Watchtower's chronology concerning the Gentile times and 1914 is Carl Olof Jonsson. Since 1983 he has published three

versions of a book that presents a detailed analysis, critique and history of Watchtower chronology and the Gentile times teaching of Jehovah's Witnesses.⁶ Jonsson offers alternative interpretations to key Bible texts used by the Witnesses to support their Gentile times chronology. Four of these texts are Jeremiah 25:10-12, Jeremiah 29:10, Daniel 9:1-2, and 2 Chronicles 36:20-21. Each of these four passages refers to "seventy years" and the Watchtower Society applies each reference to the period from 607 BCE to 537 BCE, 607 BCE being the point from which they count the 2,520 days (interpreted on the 'year-day principle' of Numbers 14:34 and Ezekiel 4:6) of Daniel 4:16 forward to 1914 CE. This period of 2,520 day-years is linked with Jesus' comments about the "appointed times of the nations" (NWT, or "Gentile times") in Luke 21:24.

Jeremiah 25:10-12

Regarding the use of Jeremiah 25:10-12, Jonsson argues that rather than meaning seventy years of complete desolation for Jerusalem, Jeremiah's prophecy actually refers to a period of *servitude*. The prophecy states, "And all this land must become a devastated place, an object of astonishment, and these nations will have to serve the king of Babylon seventy years" (Jeremiah 25:11).

This text and the surrounding context clearly refer to the devastation of "this land" (Judah). But there is no explicit link between the 'devastation' and the seventy-year period mentioned. In other words, the text does not say, "This land will be devastated for seventy years." Jonsson is correct when he argues that the seventy years of Jeremiah 25:11-12 explicitly refers to a period of servitude to Babylon by "these nations," namely, the nations surrounding Judah, including all the nations and peoples mentioned in Jeremiah 25:15-29.⁷ This is clear from what is said in Jeremiah 25:9, where reference is made to both "this land [Judah] and its inhabitants and against all these nations round about."⁸ Therefore, this text does not offer any indisputable support to the Watchtower's interpretation of seventy years of

desolation for the land of Judah, though it is still possible to link the two clauses to the time period of seventy years.⁹

Jonsson argues that the seventy-year servitude began for *some* nations, such as those nations in the Hattu area, shortly after the battle of Carchemish in 605 BCE. Other nations, though, including those subjected to the Assyrian empire, began to serve Babylon in 609 BCE, which marks the start of the 70 year period of Babylonian supremacy that ended in 539 BCE according to Jonsson's view.¹⁰ As I see it, the problem with Jonsson's view at this point is that while he views the 70 years as a round number, the application of it to the nations in servitude to Babylon calls for viewing the 70 years as an exact number for some nations and as a round number for others.

In correspondence with Jonsson on this issue, he replied that round numbers may sometimes match exactly with the number used. For example, in Psalm 90:10 Moses says, "the days of our years are seventy years; and if because of special mightiness they are eighty years." Though the numbers here are round numbers, some persons live to be exactly 70 or 80 years old. But I would suggest that in this case we have a statement about a range of years determined from life experience. In the case of Jeremiah 25:11, we are dealing with a prophecy that does not spring from life experiences that suggest more than one date or a range of years, making the number(s) inherently round by usage. Nevertheless, in spite of what I consider to be important differences between the two passages, Jonsson's response is legitimate in that he cites real biblical examples of how round numbers can have both an exact and inexact application.

One of the problems with the Watchtower Society's interpretation, as Jonsson points out, is in linking this text with 607 BCE and counting the 70 years down to 537 BCE. Why is this a problem? Because Jeremiah 25:12 states that "when seventy years have been fulfilled I shall call to account against the king of Babylon and against that nation ... their error, even against the land of the Chaldeans, and I will make it desolate wastes to time indefinite." Since the Watchtower agrees with secular history on the date when Babylon was destroyed by Cyrus, namely, 539 BCE, how

could Babylon be 'called to account' two years later in 537 BCE as opposed to the actual date of Babylon's fall (539 BCE)?¹¹

It should be mentioned that the Jews are the nation in view here, and they are the ones who were exiled. Also, the Hebrew verb *paqad* ("appoint," "visit," "punish") is in the imperfect form and can be translated with English past, present, perfect or future. So it is possible to translate this verb as "I have been punishing," which could mean that Jehovah was already in the process of punishing Babylon before the 70 years were completed. This punishment could have been seen in the initial conquest of Babylon and continued while Babylon's national and religious monuments were removed and while her politicians, officers and citizens were captured, imprisoned or executed. Such punishments could have been completed some time after the initial conquest of Babylon in 539 BCE, perhaps by 537 BCE. This is not necessarily my view, but merely possibilities that could be explored if one is going to argue for the above understanding of *paqad*. This understanding has its own historical obstacles to overcome, to be sure.¹²

It is certainly reasonable, if not likely, to simply interpret this verb in relation to the punishment that occurred in 539 BCE when Babylon was first conquered by Cyrus. The point to remember is that this is not the only possible conclusion, but it appears to be the safest interpretation. Attempts can be made to try and work out some resolution to apparent or real problems with the 607 BCE to 537 BCE view, such as what I have presented in the preceding paragraph. But the fact that we would have to go to these or similar lengths to do so reinforces the point that we should not build our faith on such possibilities nor encourage others to do so. It is best simply to note the facts as we understand them, and allow others to determine their relative importance or spiritual value.

Jeremiah 29:10

The next text that mentions "seventy years" is Jeremiah 29:10, and as previously noted the Watchtower

Society applies this seventy years to the period from 607 BCE to 537 BCE. According to the NWT this text reads, in part: "For this is what Jehovah has said, 'In accord with the fulfilling of seventy years at Babylon I shall turn my attention to you people, and I will establish toward you my good word in bringing you back to this place."

Jonsson believes that the context of this prophecy proves that the period of seventy years was already in progress, which would place the start of these seventy years prior to Jerusalem's destruction since Jeremiah recorded his prophecy eighteen years prior to this event.¹³ I do not see why it is necessary to conclude that the context of Jeremiah's prophecy proves that the seventy years were already in progress. It is highly likely that the seventy years are also the period of servitude mentioned in Jeremiah 25:10-12 which would certainly offer support to Jonsson's conclusion. Nevertheless, Jeremiah could be referring to a *forthcoming* period of desolation and/or servitude, different from the period of servitude already in progress. I find support for this view in the context of Jeremiah 28, which seems to suggest that a different yoke of servitude was forthcoming, namely, "a yoke of iron" as opposed to a 'yoke of wood.' In Jeremiah 28:14 Jehovah says, "A yoke of iron I will put upon the neck of all these nations, to serve Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon." So there could have been either a forthcoming period of desolation or servitude or both.

The forthcoming yoke of servitude would be different from the one they were presently under. This second period of servitude could involve 70 years as a round number, with only some nations experiencing exactly 70 years of servitude. Additionally, for those nations that had already experienced the severest of punishments at the hands of Babylon (namely, the kings in the Hattu area and the land of the Philistines) the forthcoming "yoke of iron" would not need to include them further. "All these nations" could be explained as an expression inclusive of those nations still in a state where they could have the "yoke of iron" placed upon them.

Modern translations differ in how they translate Jeremiah 28:14. The NWT and the NIV use the future "I will

put," as does the Good News Bible, the Contemporary English Version (CEV), Ferrar Fenton, J. M. P. Smith in the Complete Bible: An American Translation (Smith-Goodspeed), the New American Bible, and James Moffatt's translation. Many other translations use an English perfect "I have put," and at least one translation uses a present "I now lay" (New Jerusalem Bible). The translations which use an English future may be doing so because of the relationship between *natan* ("put") and the verb '*avad* which is translated with an English future in nearly all modern Bibles ("they *will* serve"). The Hebrew perfect is timeless but gets "time" from the context. When viewed in relation to '*avad* I think a future translation is appropriate, because it shows that the results of the yoke of iron are yet future. Further, in light of the Hebrew preposition *tachat*, Jeremiah 28:13 involves the idea of an "exchange." As for the false prophecy of Hananiah, his false report was in reference to his claim that within two full years the yoke of wood would be removed, which implied that no yoke at all would remain. Instead, the word of Jehovah occurred to Jeremiah in 28:13 and revealed that a yoke of iron would "replace" (New Jerusalem Bible) the yoke of wood, indicating a more severe punishment.

Jonsson further argues that Jeremiah 29:10 does not refer to seventy years of desolation for the land of Judah and Jerusalem. Rather, he believes it refers to Babylon's supremacy which places the other nations in servitude; hence, the text so interpreted is in harmony with what Jeremiah 25:10-12 says about the *servitude* of the nations surrounding Judah. Jonsson argues that NWT's translation of "at Babylon" in 29:10 is not the most likely meaning of the Hebrew expression *le-Babel*, which is the Hebrew preposition *le* prefixed to the Hebrew word for "Babylon." Jonsson cites various translations, Hebrew works, and scholars who argue against the "locative" (= having to do with location) meaning "at" and who favor the sense "for Babylon."

The prepositions *le* and *be* have some semantic overlap relating to the basic sense of most Hebrew prepositions which is "spatial" or locative according to Waltke and O'Connor's Hebrew grammar, which is quoted with approval by Jonsson on this very point.¹⁴ Indeed, Waltke and

O'Conner also state that *le* "may mark location in or at a point" and they illustrate this sense with two examples.¹⁵ Thus, it is hard to understand just what Dr. Tor Magnus Amble of the University of Oslo, Norway, meant when he wrote Jonsson and claimed that *le* "hardly has a locative sense, and in any case not here [Jeremiah 29:10]."¹⁶ His view of Jeremiah 29:10 is certainly possible, but he does not offer sufficient support for his exclusive claims.

Although Jonsson himself accepts that possibility that *le* can mean "at," one of the scholars he quotes, Dr. Seth Erlandsson, claims that the locative sense is "impossible at Jer. 29:10."¹⁷ Erlandsson's comment is an unfortunate overstatement of the point. The preposition *le* not only *can* carry a locative sense in Jeremiah 29:10 but it also fits well in other contexts, including 1 Chronicles 9:1 which speaks of Judah's exile "in/at" or "to" Babylon (Hebrew: *le-Babel*). (Compare the same expression and meaning in Ezra 2:1 and 5:12.) In Jeremiah 20:4 and 40:1 we find *be* instead of *le*, which also has a locative or directional/locative sense ("in" or "to"). Because both prepositions can convey a directional/locative sense (that is, "to," or "into") we find *be*, not *le*, in Jeremiah 27:20 and 29:1. So, there is no need to place unnecessary restrictions on what an ancient Hebrew writer should or might have used to convey a given semantic. Either preposition can convey the sense of "to" or "into," which can, with verbs of deportation and exile, include both the sense of the direction in which one is "carried away" and the resulting location of the exile.

After sharing a draft of this Appendix with Jonsson, he inquired of Dr. Erlandsson for comment on my statements concerning the meaning of *le* and *be* in several texts. Erlandsson wrote, in part: "With verbs of direction *le* always means 'to,' e.g., with verbs like 'deport, carry away into captivity,' as is the case in point here. . . . *Le* may also mean 'into,' and moreover the result of this, i.e., that one comes to a country and remains there."¹⁸ Though he initially gives "deport, carry away into captivity" as the sense of verbs like *galah*, the remainder of Dr. Erlandsson's comments to Jonsson show a preference for simply "carried away" when addressing texts involving *le+galah*. However, the Hebrew/Aramaic use of *galah* (1 Chronicles 9:1; Ezra 2:1;

5:12 [*gela'/gelah*]; Jeremiah 20:4; 27:20; 29:1) or *galoot* (Jeremiah 40:1) in these texts does not simply involve the act of "carrying someone/something away." Rather, it has to do with the act of taking someone *into exile*! If Dr. Erlandsson is restricting the sense of *galah* to the action of being "carried away" apart from the idea of exile, then naturally he would say, as he does in his comments to Jonsson, "A rendering 'in/at B[abylon]' is impossible!" He says this with respect to 1 Chronicles 9:1, even as he had remarked similarly about the meaning of Jeremiah 29:10.

But of course it would be "impossible" in such texts to suggest that a person or group of persons is being "carried away" in/at Babylon, as if the persons in question are being carried around in the city itself! But that is not what is in view, here. We are talking about the act of "exile," of being "carried *into exile*" or "taken into exile."¹⁹ Once we properly define the semantics of *galah/galoot* in relation to *le+* or *be+*Babylon, then the directional/locative sense is easy to accept. Even Erlandsson, as quoted above, recognizes that *le* may also mean "'into,' and moreover the result of this, i.e., that one comes to a country and remains there." This is particularly clear in Jeremiah 29:1, where the idea is a transfer *from* one location (Jerusalem) *to* another location (Babylon). Such a sense, conveying both the direction and resulting location of the exile, can be communicated in English by using either "to" or "into," both recognized and accepted meanings for *le* and *be*. So, one could translate Jeremiah 29:10 as, "When seventy years to Babylon have been fulfilled," which is capable of conveying the idea of an exile to and resulting location in Babylon, depending on how one views the events of that time in relation to what is said in Jeremiah 29:10.

Jonsson has also referred me to French scholar Émile Nicole's response to a question about NWT's translation of "at Babylon" in Jeremiah 29:10.²⁰ *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* is one of the works to which Nicole refers in his response, and it states that among other meanings *le* can convey the sense of direction (2. "to" or "towards") and place (4. "at," "by," "on," "along," or "over").²¹ This Hebrew dictionary, then, gives direct support for NWT's translation of *le* as "at." Nicole refers to several of the examples given by

this work to illustrate the meaning of "at" for *le*. He first refers to Genesis 49:26 and Genesis 32:2, but neither of these texts are meant to illustrate the sense of "at," but "on." Nicole next refers to the dual use of *le* in 2 Kings 11:11, where it is said that the "runners kept standing . . . by the altar and by the house." This clearly involves location, yet Nicole's only remark is that *le* is here "related to 'al'" another Hebrew preposition which can convey the idea of proximity. He concludes his analysis of the examples presented in this dictionary with the following:

The only example quoted where there is neither movement nor proximity is the first mentioned, Num 20:24, 'you were rebellious at the waters of Meribah,' but it is also possible to understand the preposition *le* as does the [French translation by the] Rabbinat Francais: *respecting* the waters of Meriba.'

I agree that *le* in Numbers 20:24 can mean either "at" or "respecting," but the point is that either meaning is possible. Also, there is no reason for Nicole to remove from the pool of examples supporting the NWT rendering of Jeremiah 29:10 those instances where *le* has a locative sense, simply because it can also be said to involve some idea of "proximity" (as in Numbers 11:10; 1 Kings 2:19; 20:38; 2 Kings 11:11; 1 Samuel 19:3; 2 Chronicles 35:15; Proverbs 8:3). All of these examples *do* support the locative sense of "at" in NWT, and that location is near or at the object or place mentioned. Furthermore, Nicole is in error when he claims that the only example in the dictionary where *le* involves "neither movement nor proximity" is Numbers 20:24. Isaiah 10:28 is also listed, "at Mich'mach he deposits his articles." The idea here is hardly that the articles are stored *near* Mich'mash, but *in* Mich'mash.

Nevertheless, in view of the uncertainty associated with the meaning of *le* in Jeremiah 29:10, one cannot say for sure if it means "to," "into," "for" or "at." In terms of Hebrew semantics, the seventy years of Jeremiah may refer to a period of exile or to a period of Babylonian supremacy, since neither the verbal idea of exile nor servitude to Babylon is specifically linked with *le* in this passage. It seems that the

best position is one that accepts both as possibilities, semantically speaking.

Daniel 9:1-2

The third significant text that mentions "seventy years" is Daniel 9:1-2. According to the NWT it reads:

In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus of the seed of the Medes, who had been made king over the kingdom of the Chaldeans; in the first year of his reigning I myself, Daniel, discerned by the books the number of years concerning which the word of Jehovah had occurred to Jeremiah the prophet, for fulfilling the devastations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years.

Unlike Jeremiah 25:10-12 and 29:10, this text seems to explicitly link "seventy years" with the "devastations of Jerusalem." While there is no explicit reference to servitude or to Babylon's period of supremacy, Jonsson connects Daniel's words to the prophecies in Jeremiah and thereby connects the seventy years of Daniel with the seventy years of Babylonian supremacy. Such a connection with Jeremiah is reasonable since Daniel says that he discerned the number of years from "the books," presumably one of which was the book of Jeremiah. Jonsson then argues from the position that since Jeremiah 25:10-12 refers to seventy years of servitude and Jeremiah 29:10 to seventy years of supremacy "for Babylon," that Daniel would have so understood the prophecies as he was "a Hebrew-speaking Jew."²² Jonsson connects the seventy years of Daniel 9:1-2 with the seventy years "for Babylon" in Jeremiah and states:

It was clear from Jeremiah's letter that the completion of Babylon's seventy years would entail the "fulfilling of the desolations of Jerusalem" (by the return of the exiles), and it is this *consequence* that Daniel lays the stress on in his statement.²³

As I see it, the problem with this argument is that it leans on one understanding of Jeremiah 25:10-12 and

Jeremiah 29:10, when more than one reading of the prophecies in Jeremiah exists. The same problem exists for supporters of the Watchtower position, however. Indeed, if we rely on Jeremiah 25:10-12 or Jeremiah 29:10 to help us understand the meaning of Daniel's words, then there is still no clear answer. As was pointed out above, it is possible that the two clauses in Jeremiah 25:10-12 relating to the desolation of the land of Judah and the servitude of the surrounding nations are both linked to the seventy-year period. Also, the meaning of the Hebrew preposition *le* in Jeremiah 29:10 can include the idea of location, placing the exiles in or "at" (or exiled "to" or "into," with a directional and resulting locative sense) Babylon for seventy years.

Jonsson argues that instead of understanding the seventy years of Daniel 9:2 as the period or length of time for the desolate state of Jerusalem, that the Hebrew word *mal'ot* means "to fulfill." This is also the translation used in the NWT, a term that Jonsson understands as consistent with the following explanation:

What Daniel discovered by reading Jeremiah's letter, then, was not that Jerusalem's desolation would last for seventy years (for this is nowhere stated in Jeremiah), but that the desolations of Jerusalem would not cease until the seventy years "for Babylon" had ceased. The focus of the "seventy years" was on Babylon, and her period of dominance, rather than on Jerusalem.²⁴

It is certainly possible to understand *mal'ot* as indicating a period of time, in this case, the period of Jerusalem's desolation, since the "number of years" seen as being "fulfilled" by Daniel will depend on how one interprets the "seventy years." The question is whether or not this means that the period of seventy years is a period wherein Jerusalem was desolate or a seventy-year period of Babylonian supremacy within which the "devastations of Jerusalem" would be "fulfilled." Daniel is clearly referring, at least in part, to the prophecies of Jeremiah, which as we discussed above under Jeremiah 25:10-12 and 29:10 can be used to support either view. Jeremiah 25:10-12 provides stronger support for Jonsson's view than it does for the

Watchtower's position, while Jeremiah 29:10 can be argued to a "draw," grammatically speaking.

2 Chronicles 36:20-23

The last of our four subject texts that refers to "seventy years" and which the Watchtower links to the period from 607 BCE to 537 BCE, is 2 Chronicles 36:20-23. We will here quote verses 20-21 from the NWT:

Furthermore, he [Nebuchadnezzar] carried off those remaining from the sword captive to Babylon, and they came to be servants to him and his sons until the royalty of Persia began to reign; to fulfill Jehovah's word by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had paid off its sabbaths. All the days of lying desolated it kept sabbath, to fulfill seventy years.

This text refers by name to the prophecy of Jeremiah, and speaks of "the land" paying off its sabbaths, "lying desolated . . . to fulfill seventy years." This passage appears to support the view that the land of Judah and Jerusalem would be desolated for seventy years. Jonsson, however, argues that this contradicts Jeremiah's prophecy (as given in Jeremiah 25:10-12 and 29:10) and the text and context of 2 Chronicles 36:20-21.

Regarding the prophecies of Jeremiah, we have already explained how the two mentioned texts can be interpreted in harmony with the idea that the land of Judah would be desolated for seventy years. This is not an indisputable interpretation, or even a necessary conclusion, and in Jeremiah 25:10-12 it is less probable than in Jeremiah 29:10. But like Daniel 9:1-2, 2 Chronicles 36:20-21 refers to Jeremiah and connects what is there prophesied with the desolate state of Jerusalem and a period of seventy years.

Jonsson argues that 2 Chronicles 36:20-21 actually invokes the prophecy of Leviticus 26:34-35, since Jeremiah does not mention anything about the land 'paying off its Sabbaths.'²⁵ But this is no reason to reject the view that 2 Chronicles 36:20-21 refers to seventy years of desolation in relation to Jeremiah's prophecy. The Chronicler directly

refers to the prophecy of Jeremiah and applies language from Leviticus in relation to the desolation of the land. Jeremiah may not have referred to 'paying off sabbaths,' but he did describe the land as a "devastated place . . . an object of astonishment," which fits perfectly with the Chronicler's use of 'desolation' in reference to the condition of "the land."

2 Chronicles 36:20-21 tells us that the land kept sabbath while desolate "to fulfill seventy years." Here again, as is the case with Daniel 9:2, we find the term *mal'ot*, "to fulfill." Does this term relate to the length of time Jerusalem would be desolated, or does it refer to the period of Babylonian supremacy within which the desolate state of Jerusalem would come to an end? 2 Chronicles 36:20 certainly provides support for Jonsson's view since it refers to the serving of Babylonian kings "until the reign of the kingdom of Persia." But as with Daniel the ambiguous grammar of verse 21, which mentions seventy years in relation to the desolate state of Jerusalem, allows for alternative explanations. It seems the best solution is the one that is in harmony with the context of the verse in question, and the historical data that best supports the explanation offered.

Conclusion

Jeremiah 25:10-12 refers to the condition of the land of Judah and Jerusalem as "devastated." But there is some uncertainty about whether the period of time mentioned (seventy years) refers to the length of time the land would be in this condition or simply to the period of servitude to Babylon, or both. Daniel 9:1-2 and 2 Chronicles 36:20-21 offer interpretations of Jeremiah's prophecy that are grammatically ambiguous in terms of whether or not the seventy-year period mentioned refers to the length of time that Jerusalem would be desolated, or to the fulfillment of time for Babylonian supremacy, after which Jerusalem would no longer be desolate. In attempting to put all of these prophetic pieces together we must not think so strongly of a particular interpretation that we exclude other viable

options, or mandate that the quality of one's faith depends on his or her acceptance of any application of biblical chronology. Jeremiah 29:10 underscores the problem that can result from dogmatic claims made concerning Bible chronology, for here the meaning of just one preposition can create significantly different views of historical events.

Jonsson and others have offered alternate interpretations to the Watchtower teaching concerning the Gentile times that should be taken seriously and evaluated in the light of the available evidence. That evidence includes not only biblical evidence but also secular evidence from a variety of sources. Though I have here focused solely on several biblical texts at the heart of the controversy, Jonsson's strongest presentation is in relation to secular sources and how the Watchtower Society has made or not made use of them. The Watchtower Society must be careful not to be so protective of its chronology that it fails to give all of the relevant facts as they pertain to a historical source. For example, if a person or organization is going to quote Josephus where he says, "all Judea and Jerusalem, and the temple, continued to be a desert for seventy years" (*Antiquities of the Jews* X, ix, 7), or where he writes, "our city was *desolate* during the interval of seventy years, until the days of Cyrus" (*Against Apion* I, 19),²⁶ then that person or organization must also mention the fact that Josephus elsewhere refers to the period of desolation as lasting "fifty years" (*Against Apion* I, 21).²⁷

Have the Gentile times ended? No one knows for sure. We do not even know if Jesus' reference to the Gentile times relates to the seven times of Daniel. But it is not necessary to know when the Gentile times ended to be secure in one's faith. Due to uncertainties or even historical contradictions in secular sources or between secular sources and the Bible, it is unwise to place prophetic applications or speculations about the implications of Bible chronology on so high a level that persons who do not fall in line with all the details of a particular doctrine are viewed as unfaithful. Bible chronology does not appear to be a touchstone for faithfulness in the Holy Scriptures; therefore, neither should it be one for Christians today.

Notes to the Appendix

¹ "The Time of Harvest," *Zion's Watch Tower and Herald of Christ's Presence*, October 1, 1904, reprint pages 3436-3438.

² "*Let Your Kingdom Come*" (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1981), page 189.

³ This date is also referenced as part of an 'opposing' view in "The Gentile Times," *The Watch Tower and Herald of Christ's Presence*, May 1, 1922, page 133, under "Opponents' Conclusions."

⁴ He wrote the following in reference to those who favored Ptolemy's canon and the chronologies of other scholars over his view of 606 BCE: "All this confusion would result from an abandonment of the Bible narrative in favor of Ptolemy's Canon. Let those who want the darkness take it. Let those of us who have had our eyes of understanding opened rejoice in the true light more and more" ("The Time of the Harvest," reprint page 3437).

⁵ See "Knowledge and Faith Regarding Chronology," reprint page 4067; "Views from the Watch Tower," *Zion's Watch Tower and Herald of Christ's Presence*, January 1, 1908, reprint page 4110.

⁶ Carl Olof Jonsson, *The Gentile Times Reconsidered: Chronology and Christ's Return*, 3rd ed. (Atlanta: Commentary Press, 1998). I will be quoting exclusively from this edition.

⁷ Jonsson, *The Gentile Times Reconsidered*, pages 196-199.

⁸ In both instances the Hebrew expression is the same, *ha-goyim ha-elleh* ("these nations"). The Hebrew term *sabib* ("all around" or "round about") suggests that "these nations" do not include Judah, which was mentioned separately.

⁹ C. F. Keil, *The Prophecies of Jeremiah*, vol. 1, in C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch's *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), pages 372-376, is one commentator who believes that the seventy years of Jeremiah 25:10-12 applies both to the period of servitude and to the length of time the land of Judah would be desolate. I do not believe this is clear from reading the text in Jeremiah, but it is not grammatically prohibited, either.

¹⁰ Jonsson, *The Gentile Times Reconsidered*, pages 199-201; see also Jonsson's summary under "G" on pages 228-229.

¹¹ There are commentators who have proposed solutions to similar problems. For example, C. F. Keil, *The Prophecies of Jeremiah*, vol. 1, pages 372-376, describes the seventy years of Jeremiah 25:10-12, not as a "round number," but as "a chronologically exact prediction of the duration of Chaldean supremacy over Judah." Keil counts the seventy years from 606 BCE to 536 BCE, for the full seventy years. But he also believes that Babylon fell in 538 BCE, which would put the fulfillment of the prophecy of servitude and Babylon's judgment two years prior to the end of the seventy years. Keil explains:

[A]lthough this number [seventy years] corresponds so exactly with history, it is less its arithmetical value that is of account in Jeremiah; it is rather its symbolical significance as the number of perfection for God's works. This significance lies in the contrast of seven, as the characteristic number for works of God, with ten, the number that marks earthly completeness; and hereby prophecy makes good its distinguishing character as contrasted with soothsaying, or the prediction of contingent matters. The symbolical value of the number comes clearly out in the following verses, where the fall of Babylon is announced to come in seventy years, although it took place two years earlier.

Of course, Keil's interpretation does not correspond with the facts of history, but the point I am making here is that others have faced problems similar to the Watchtower Society in accepting a literal 70 year period, though they have been able to account for more or less time in relation to the events said to be in fulfillment of the prophecy. In Keil's case, he attempted to solve the apparent dilemma of ending the actual number of years in 536 BCE, when in fact the events fulfilling the prophecy occurred earlier, in 538 BCE (according to Keil's view). Similarly, I could argue that the Society might accept a similar situation and say that while the exact fulfillment of years occurred in 537 BCE, the events of the prophecy occurred or began to occur two years earlier in 539 BCE. I could go further and say that the imperfect form of *paqad* (see discussion in the main text) supports this view because it shows that the events in fulfillment of the prophecy of 70 years may have *started* two years prior to the date chosen by the Society but *continued* in some sense up until 537 BCE. It is in defining this continuing sense that would be a challenge for those who take this position.

¹² In email correspondence, Jonsson responded to this point by noting:

As shown by the contemporary documents (including the *Nabonidus Chronicle* and the *Cyrus Cylinder*), [Cyrus] was remarkably tolerant towards the religions of other people. One of his first deeds after the fall of Babylon was to return the statues of the gods which Nabonidus had brought to Babylon (cf. *Gentile Times Reconsidered*, 3d ed., pages 138-139) to their respective cities and sanctuaries. Further, very soon after the capture of Babylon Cyrus issued decrees that allowed the different peoples that had been deported to Babylonia to return to their respective home cities to rebuild their sanctuaries. As to Babylon itself, there is no indication whatsoever that Cyrus removed national and religious monuments. On the contrary, he supported the religious cults of the city and even claimed to be acting on the command of its chief god, Marduk. The *Nabonidus Chronicle* explicitly states that, after the fall of Babylon, Marduk's temple in Babylon, Esagila, was protected by the Gutian troupes, and that "the correct time (for a ceremony) was not missed."

The same policy was reflected in Cyrus' treatment of the Babylonian politicians and officers. Instead of imprisoning them and killing them, as you suggest, he showed them great respect and we know that, at least in some cases, he continued to use them in his administration. Previous to the conquest, the Neo-Babylonian empire had been divided into satrapies or provinces. When Cyrus in 539 BCE reorganized the administration of the vast Persian empire (Daniel 6:1 and the *Nabonidus Chronicle*), he allowed some of the Neo-Babylonian satraps to remain in their offices, as shown by the cuneiform inscriptions. This held true, for example, of Nabu-ahhe-bullit, the Babylonian governor under Nabonidus, who continued in this office under Cyrus until 535 BCE (M. Dandamayev, *Iranians in Achaemenid Babylonia*, 1992, page 3). Even Nabonidus himself was treated "in a gracious manner," if we are to believe Berossus, who goes on to tell that "Cyrus granted him Carmania [a province in the eastern part of the Persian empire] as his residence and sent him out of Babylonia."

¹³ Jonsson, *The Gentile Times Reconsidered*, page 210.

¹⁴ Quoted in Jonsson, *The Gentile Times Reconsidered*, page 211, note 26. The quote is from Bruce Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1990), pages 192 and 205.

¹⁵ Waltke and O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, page 205. The first example is 1 Kings 2:19, where Solomon made a throne for his mother so she could "sit down at his right hand." Here *le* indicates the location where the person was to sit. Any sense of "motion" comes, not from *le*, but from the verb *yashav* ("sit," or "sit down"). The second example is Genesis 4:7, where the imagery of "sin" waiting "at" the door is presented, as it waits to "pounce" on Cain, figuratively speaking. It seems clear that the emphasis is on sin waiting *somewhere* for Cain, not on sin's crouching *towards* the door.

¹⁶ According to Jonsson, Dr. Amble does not deny that *le* "in a few fixed expressions" has a locative sense. But he does not believe that this is the case in Jeremiah 29:10.

¹⁷ Jonsson, *The Gentile Times Reconsidered*, page 214.

¹⁸ Translation of Dr. Erlandsson's comments to Carl Olof Jonsson, November 7, 2001.

¹⁹ See Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles Briggs, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1979), pages 162-163; *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, vol. 2, ed. David J. A. Clines (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pages 348-352; C. Westermann and R. Albertz, "גלה," in Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1997), pages 314-320; David M. Howard, Jr., "גלה," in Willem A. VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), pages 861-864; Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, revised by Walter Baumgartner and Johann Jakob Stamm, trans. M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden: Brill, 1994), pages 191-193.

²⁰ Nicole's comments were supplied to me by Jonsson, and are translated from the *Bulletin du Club des Hébraïsants* 16.2 (1999).

²¹ *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, vol. 4, ed. David J. A. Clines (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), pages 479-481.

²² Jonsson, *The Gentile Times Reconsidered*, page 216.

²³ Jonsson, *The Gentile Times Reconsidered*, page 218.

²⁴ Jonsson, *The Gentile Times Reconsidered*, page 219.

²⁵ Jonsson, *The Gentile Times Reconsidered*, pages 221-222.

²⁶ As quoted in "*Let Your Kingdom Come*," page 188.

²⁷ Compare Jonsson, *The Gentile Times Reconsidered*, pages 298-299.