

January 1997

Frank W. Nelte

THE SEDER OLAM

PART 1

GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE SEDER OLAM

In an attempt to support the use of the Jewish calendar, appeals have been made to the Jewish historic document known as "The Seder Olam".

The Hebrew word "seder" means "order, arrangement". It is used only once in the Bible, in the plural, in Job 10:22 where it is translated as "order".

The Hebrew word "olam" is used 439 times in the O.T. and translated in the KJV as "ever" 272 times, as "everlasting" 63 times, as "old" 22 times, as "evermore" 15 times, as "world" 4 times, etc.. In Gesenius' Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament "olam" is defined as: "what is hidden, specially hidden in time, long, the beginning or end of which is either uncertain or else not defined, eternity, perpetuity", etc.. Gesenius continues to point out that "olam" is used to refer to ... "the world, from the Chaldee and RABBINIC usage, like the Greek word 'aion'".

So the rabbinic expression "Seder Olam" basically means "THE ORDER OF THE WORLD".

There are TWO midrashic chronological works known as "Seder Olam". They are known as "Seder Olam Rabbah" ("The Great Seder Olam") and as "Seder Olam Zuta" ("The Small Seder Olam"). The Seder Olam Rabbah is the earlier one (2nd century A.D.) and the one on which the later Seder Olam Zuta (6th to 8th century A.D.) is based.

One more word we need to clarify is the word "Midrash", so we know what is meant by a "midrashic work". So here is what the Encarta 96 Encyclopedia has to say about "Midrash":

"Midrash (Hebrew darash, "interpretation"), term applied to Jewish expository and exegetical writings on the Scriptures. These writings consist of the INTERPRETATIONS BY DIFFERENT RABBIS of the laws and customs set forth in the Old Testament. The earliest elements of the Midrashic writings appear to have been produced before 100 BC by the scribes. The material contained in the Midrash is divided into three groups; the abstract Halakah, consisting of the traditional law; the Halakic Midrash, a deduction of the traditional law from the written law; and the Haggadic Midrash (see Haggada), consisting of LEGENDS, SERMONS, and INTERPRETATIONS of the narrative parts of the Bible and concerning ethics and theology rather than law. The forms and styles of these writings show considerable flexibility, ranging from parables to sermons to codifications of law." ("Midrash," Microsoft(R) Encarta(R) 96 Encyclopedia. (c) 1993-1995 Microsoft Corporation)

In plain terms: midrashic writings represent the INTERPRETATIONS of the Pharisees; the views and ideas of various pharisaic teachers. There is NOTHING inspired about the Midrash. Many of the views in the Midrash do in fact contradict biblical teachings. It represents the ideas of men.

So now let's look at the Seder Olam Rabbah.

While the authorship of this work is not totally certain, it is generally ascribed to the second-century "tanna" Jose b. Halaftha, on the strength of a comment by the third-century Palestinian teacher R. Johanan. Other scholars feel that R. Johanan himself may have been the author of the Seder Olam Rabbah. To us the authorship is of no consequence.

[COMMENT: "Tanna" is the singular form of the word "tannaim". The tannaim were "the masters of the ORAL law", i.e. the men who WROTE THE TALMUD. The tannaim made up their own rules and laws, creating the Mishnah, and claimed historical validity for the things they wrote. In effect these tannaim laid the foundation for rabbinic Judaism, devising a myriad of traditions. Judah ha-Nasi is considered to have been the last of the tannaim, dying around 220 A.D., some time after Jose b. Halaftha's time.]

The Seder Olam Rabbah first appeared in the city of Mantua, in Lombardy, northern Italy in the year 1514 A.D., together with the Seder Olam Zuta. In the Babylonian Talmud this chronicle is several times referred to directly (Shab. 88a; Yeb. 82b; Nazir 5a; Meg. 11b; Ab. Zarah 8b; Niddah 46b), and it is often alluded to under "tanya" (= we learned), "tana" (= he learned), "tanu rabbanan" (= our teachers learned), and "amar mar" (= the teacher said). It is NOT mentioned in the Jerusalem Talmud.

In 1577 the Seder Olam Rabbah was published in Paris, with a Latin translation by Gilbert Genebrard (also written as G. Genebara). Since then there have been other translations and editions. Through the centuries it was often altered at the hands of copyists, who very often added the names of later rabbis, where the copyists found that such rabbis agreed with the text of the Seder Olam. Many passages quoted in the Talmud are missing in the present edition of the Seder Olam, showing that it has not really been preserved very faithfully (as was the text of the O.T. for example).

The following information is based on two separate articles. They are the article "Seder Olam Rabbah" from The Jewish Encyclopedia, Volume 11, pages 147 - 149, copyright 1905, 1909 and 1912; and the article "Seder Olam" from the Encyclopedia Judaica, Volume 14, pages 1091 - 1093, copyright 1972. Source references for these two articles are abbreviated as follows:

- The Jewish Encyclopedia = "JE",
- Encyclopedia Judaica = "EJ".

Here are some FACTS about the "Seder Olam Rabbah":

- 1) It is a chronological record extending from Adam to the revolt of Bar Kokba in the reign of emperor Hadrian. (JE)
- 2) In its present form it consists of 30 chapters, each 10 chapters forming a section or "gate". (JE)
- 3) The chronicle is complete only up to the time of Alexander the Great; the period from Alexander to Hadrian occupies a very small portion of the work --- the end of the 30th chapter. (JE)
- 4) Part 1 (or section 1) enumerates the dates of major events from the creation of the world until the death of Moses and the crossing of the Jordan by the Israelites under Joshua. (EJ)
- 5) Part 2 gives the dates from the crossing of the Jordan to the murder of Zechariah, king of Israel (see 2 Kings 15:8-10). (EJ)
- 6) Part 3, chapters 21-27, gives the dates from the murder of Zechariah to the destruction of the Temple by Nebuchadnezzar. Chapter 28 goes from the destruction of the Temple to the conquest of Babylon by Cyrus. Chapter 29 and the first part of chapter 30 cover the Persian period. The larger part of chapter 30

contains a summary of events from the conquest of Persia by Alexander until the Bar Kokba revolt. (EJ)

7) A MAJOR FLAW in this work is that it claims that the Persian period covered only 34 years (EJ). In actual fact the Persian period was OVER 200 YEARS in length. This makes clear that this whole work is chronologically TOTALLY UNRELIABLE! How can we possibly give any credibility to a work which claims that the Persian period (from approximately the 530's B.C. to the 330's B.C.) was only 34 years in length?

8) The Encyclopedia Judaica states the following about the author of the Seder Olam Rabbah:

"The most significant confusion in Yosef's calculations is the compression of the Persian period, from the rebuilding of the Temple by Zerubbabel in 516 B.C.E. to the conquest of Persia by Alexander, to no more than 34 years. LIKE OTHER RABBINIC SCHOLARS, he believed that Zerubbabel (sixth century B.C.E.), Malachi, Ezra, Nehemiah (all fifth century B.C.E.) and Simon the Just (third century) were all contemporaries." (page 1092)

This admission clearly reveals that the author of Seder Olam Rabbah thought that people who lived over a period of about 300 years were all CONTEMPORANEOUS! You obviously cannot trust the dates provided by someone with such major flaws in his understanding!

9) On the same page the Encyclopedia Judaica also states:

"Utilizing the biblical chronology and reconstructing post-biblical history AS WELL AS HE COULD, the author arrived at the conclusion that the world was created 3828 years before the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans. According to this calculation the destruction took place in the year 68, WHICH IS IN CONTRADICTION TO THE ACCEPTED CHRONOLOGY that it took place in the year 70 C.E."

[COMMENT: In Jewish works "B.C." is represented as "B.C.E." for "Before Common Era", and "A.D." is represented as "C.E." for "Common Era".]

This is another admission that the Seder Olam Rabbah chronology is in conflict with historical dates as they are understood today. Now think about this: the Seder Olam Rabbah was written approximately 100 years after the destruction of the Second Temple ... and the author couldn't even date THAT event correctly. So how reliable is it likely to be when the dates go even further back into antiquity?

10) "The author probably designed the work for calendrical purposes, to determine the era of the Creation; his system, adopted as early as the third century is still followed." (JE)

NOTE! The chronology of THIS work underlies the epochal molad of the Jewish calendar.

11) "Adhering closely to the Bible texts, he endeavored not only to elucidate many passages, but also to determine certain dates WHICH ARE NOT INDICATED IN THE BIBLE, but which may be inferred by calculation. IN MANY CASES, HOWEVER, HE GAVE THE DATES ACCORDING TO TRADITION, and inserted, besides, the sayings and halakot of preceding rabbis and of his contemporaries." (JE)

NOTE! Here is the admission that IN MANY CASES (!) the Seder Olam Rabbah reflects dates "according to tradition". That's where the problem lies! In the chronology I have presented from Adam to the destruction of the Temple I have relied EXCLUSIVELY on Bible texts! Every single date in my presentation is based on the Scriptures. And that biblical presentation makes clear beyond any doubt

that 3760 B.C. simply does not fit for the time of the creation of Adam.

12) The author of the Seder Olam Rabbah also used the 70 weeks prophecy in his calculations. BUT AGAIN HE MADE A MISTAKE! He assumed that the 490 years of this prophecy go from the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians to the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans. (JE)

THIS IS TOTALLY WRONG!

The First Temple was destroyed in the 580's B.C. and the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 A.D. (or even 68 A.D., if you prefer). That period of time was approximately 650 years ... and there is no way to shoehorn that period into 490 years!

The author of the Seder Olam Rabbah lacked understanding ... and that is what happens when people rely on "tradition". In this case "tradition" is in conflict with the facts. And it ignores the clear statements of the Bible. The 70 weeks prophecy of Daniel chapter 9 does NOT start with the destruction of the First Temple. It starts with the decree to rebuild Jerusalem. And it does not conclude with the destruction of the Second Temple; it leads to the ministry of the Messiah. Notice ...

Know therefore and understand, [that] from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the Messiah the Prince [shall be] seven weeks, and threescore and two weeks: the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublous times. (Daniel 9:25)

The Messiah's ministry would start after 69 weeks. And then the 70th week was still to follow.

It should be quite clear by now that the Seder Olam Rabbah is not chronologically reliable at all! So when it comes to appealing to the Seder Olam Rabbah to claim authority for the Jewish calendar ... forget it! It is just as well that the calculations for the Jewish calendar are far more accurate than the calculations on which the Seder Olam Rabbah is based.

As a general comment: the Seder Olam Zuta is even WORSE when it comes to reliability! Amongst other things, this later work claims to give the lifetime of each of Jacob's 12 sons; it claims that Solomon became king at age 3 years (and therefore died as an OLD man at age 43 years?); it makes up lists of High Priests which are in clear conflict with the list in the Bible. The Seder Olam Zuta also has Zerubbabel returning to Babylon after EZRA had rebuilt the wall of Jerusalem ... but Zerubbabel was dead before Ezra ever went to Jerusalem. Ezra was much later than Zerubbabel. So there is another gross error in chronology.

[COMMENT: In 1 Chronicles 6:9 the High Priest Azariah is mentioned. In 1 Chronicles 6:12 Shallum is mentioned as High Priest. Between these two men 5 other men are mentioned ... Johanan, Azariah, Amariah, Ahitub and Zadok. But in the Seder Olam Zuta none of these 5 men are mentioned; instead 12 other names are mentioned, which are not found in the biblical account. (The Jewish Translation has a different chapter division at this point, and these verses are found in 1 Chronicles 5:35-38 in the JPS.) See The Jewish Encyclopedia for this information.]

To summarize: the facts show that the Seder Olam Rabbah is far from reliable when it comes to establishing an accurate chronology. It is filled with errors. And it certainly does NOT accurately pinpoint the time of the creation of Adam and Eve. There is no way that the Seder Olam's date of 3760 B.C. can possibly be reconciled with the internal evidence found in the Bible itself.

Thus there is no justification for bringing the Seder Olam Rabbah into a discussion about whether or not the Jewish calendar is "sacred" or "inspired by God". As a historical document it is interesting, but from a

chronological point of view it is totally unreliable.

PART 2:

3760 B.C. CREATION DATE OF THE SEDER OLAM

It should be quite clear to anyone who makes a study of the Bible that the year 3760 B.C. could not have been the year of the creation of Adam and Eve. However, since there are those who claim that the date 3760 B.C. is correct, therefore we need to look at all the evidence. The year 3760 B.C. for the creation of Adam and Eve originated with the "Seder Olam Rabbah".

Here is a presentation of BIBLICAL CHRONOLOGY, based on the ASSUMPTION that God created Adam and Eve in the year 3760 B.C. Every single date (except the starting date that is) in the following rundown is based on BIBLICAL EVIDENCE!

So this is what history would look like IF the Seder Olam's date for the creation of Adam was indeed correct.

THEORETICAL CHRONOLOGY:

- 1) 3760 B.C. = God created Adam and Eve.
- 2) Genesis chapter 5 = Adam to the birth of Noah = 1056 years.
- 3) 2704 B.C. = Noah is born.
- 4) Genesis 7:6 = Noah = 600 years old at the start of the Flood.
- 5) 2104 B.C. = Flood starts; lasts for over 1 year.
- 6) 2103 B.C. = Flood ends and Noah leaves the Ark.
- 7) Genesis 11:10 = Shem = 100 years old 2 years after the Flood.
- 8) 2101 B.C. = Shem = 100 years old; Arphaxad is born.
- 9) Genesis 11:12-32 = dates up to Terah's death.
- 10) 2066 B.C. = Arphaxad = 35 years; Salah is born.
- 11) 2036 B.C. = Salah = 30 years; Eber is born.
- 12) 2002 B.C. = Eber = 34 years; Peleg is born.
- 13) 1972 B.C. = Peleg = 30 years; Reu is born.
- 14) 1940 B.C. = Reu = 32 years; Serug is born.
- 15) 1910 B.C. = Serug = 30 years; Nahor is born.
- 16) 1881 B.C. = Nahor = 29 years; Terah is born.

- 17) 1811 B.C. = Terah = 70 years; has 3 sons from that age on.
- 18) 1676 B.C. = Terah = dies at age 205 years.
- 19) Acts 7:4 = Abraham left Haran after Terah's death.
- 20) Genesis 12:4 = Abraham = 75 years when he left Haran.
- 21) 1676 B.C. = Abraham = 75 years old.
- 22) 1651 B.C. = Abraham 100 years old; Isaac is born.
- 23) Genesis 25:26 = Isaac = 60 years when Esau & Jacob are born.
- 24) 1591 B.C. = Jacob is born.
- 25) Genesis 47:28 = Jacob to Egypt = 130 years; died = 147 years.
- 26) 1461 B.C. = Jacob went down to Egypt.
- 27) Genesis 41:46 = Joseph = 30 years old when promoted.
- 28) Genesis 45:6 = 9 years later (7 good years + 2 famine years).
- 29) 1461 B.C. = Joseph is 39 years old.
- 30) Genesis 50:26 = Joseph died at age 110 years.
- 31) 1390 B.C. = Joseph died.
- 32) Genesis 15:13 reads as follows:

And he said unto Abram, Know of a surety that THY SEED SHALL BE A STRANGER IN A LAND [that is] not theirs, and shall serve them; and THEY SHALL AFFLICT THEM FOUR HUNDRED YEARS; (Genesis 15:13)

The 400 years seem to clearly apply to Abraham's "SEED", implying that this period of 400 years would start with Abraham's DEATH. However, Ken Burrell claims, based on the "Seder Olam", that this period started with THE BIRTH OF ISAAC (i.e. 75 years BEFORE Abraham's death) and concluded at the Exodus. Let's accept that line of reasoning.

- 33) 1651 - 1251 B.C. = From the birth of Isaac to the Exodus.
- 34) 1251 B.C. = Exodus from Egypt.
- 35) There is a period of 480 years which bridges the time from the Exodus right through the entire period of the Judges and the kingships of Saul and David, unto the reign of Solomon. This is found in 1 Kings 6:1, which reads as follows:

And it came to pass in THE FOUR HUNDRED AND EIGHTIETH YEAR after the children of

Israel were come out of the land of Egypt, in THE FOURTH YEAR OF SOLOMON'S REIGN over Israel, in the month Zif, which [is] the second month, that he began to build the house of the LORD. (1 Kings 6:1)

Thus: from the Exodus to the 4th year of Solomon was exactly 480 years (i.e. from 1251 - 771 B.C.).

36) 771 B.C. = 4th year of Solomon.

37) 1 Kings 11:42 shows Solomon reigned 40 years.

38) 735 B.C. = Solomon dies after reigning 40 years.

39) 1 Kings 14:21 = Rehoboam reigned 17 years.

40) 718 B.C. = Rehoboam dies.

41) 1 Kings 15:1-2 = Abijam reigned 3 years.

42) 715 B.C. = Abijam dies.

43) 1 Kings 15:9-10 = Asa reigned 41 years.

44) 674 B.C. = Asa dies.

45) 1 Kings 22:41-42 = Jehoshaphat reigned 25 years.

46) 649 B.C. = Jehoshaphat dies.

47) 2 Kings 8:16-17 = Jehoram became co-regent with his father Jehoshaphat. Jehoram's total reign, including this co-regency was 8 years. He very likely only reigned on his own for 1 or 2 years after his father's death (a smaller number here is more favourable for those who believe in a 3760 B.C. creation).

48) 648 B.C. = Jehoram dies.

49) 2 Kings 8:26 = Ahaziah reigned 1 year.

50) 647 B.C. = Ahaziah dies.

51) 2 Kings 11:1-3 = Athaliah reigned as a usurper for 6 years.

52) 641 B.C. = Athaliah is killed; Joash made king.

53) 2 Kings 12:1 = Joash (or Jehoash) reigned 40 years.

54) 601 B.C. = Joash dies; Amaziah becomes king.

55) 2 Kings 14:1-2 = Amaziah reigned 29 years.

56) 572 B.C. = Amaziah dies; Azariah becomes king.

57) 2 Kings 15:1-2 = Azariah (or Uzziah) reigned 52 years.

58) 520 B.C. = Azariah dies.

59) 2 Kings 15:5 = Jotham had become co-regent before Azariah's death. At his father's death he became king.

60) 2 Kings 15:33 = Jotham reigned 16 years.

61) 504 B.C. = Jotham dies; Ahaz becomes king.

62) 2 Kings 16:1-2 = Ahaz reigned 16 years.

63) 488 B.C. = Ahaz dies; Hezekiah becomes king.

64) 2 Kings 18:1-2 = Hezekiah reigned 29 years.

65) 459 B.C. = Hezekiah dies; Manasseh becomes king.

66) 2 Kings 21:1 = Manasseh reigned 55 years.

67) 404 B.C. = Manasseh dies; Amon becomes king.

68) 2 Kings 21:19 = Amon reigned 2 years.

69) 402 B.C. = Amon dies; Josiah becomes king.

70) 2 Kings 22:1 = Josiah reigned 31 years.

71) 371 B.C. = Josiah dies; Jehoahaz becomes king.

72) 2 Kings 23:31 = Jehoahaz reigned only 3 months.

73) 2 Kings 23:34-36 = Jehoiakim reigned 11 years.

74) 360 B.C. = Jehoiakim dies; Jehoiachin becomes king.

75) 2 Kings 24:8 = Jehoiachin reigned only 3 months.

76) 360 B.C. = Zedekiah becomes king.

77) 2 Kings 24:17-18 = Zedekiah reigned 11 years.

78) 349 B.C. = JERUSALEM IS DESTROYED BY THE BABYLONIANS!

This conclusion is grossly at odds with the historical facts!

In the above calculations we have given the benefit of the doubt to those believe in a 3760 B.C. creation, by in questionable cases accepting THE LOWER FIGURES. Accepting figures that are more realistic than the lower figures we have used, would mean a still later date for the destruction of Jerusalem.

IF we claim that God created Adam and Eve in 3760 B.C., then this leads to claiming that the

Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 349 B.C.! But 349 B.C. is more than 200 years after Jerusalem was in fact destroyed! By 349 B.C. not only had the Babylonian Empire come and gone; but even the Medo-Persian Empire was ALMOST at its end ... it was less than two decades away from being conquered by Alexander the Great.

THE PURPOSE OF THE ABOVE CHRONOLOGY is to demonstrate the logical conclusion to which a 3760 B.C. creation date inevitably leads. And that conclusion is incompatible with the historical facts.

I grant that in some cases a year might be counted twice ... as the concluding year for one event and as the starting year for the next event. So in that sense there is the possibility of perhaps erring by a few years either way. But that does not in any way negate the clear picture which emerges, namely that 3760 B.C. could not possibly have been the date for the creation of Adam and Eve. THIS DATE IS IN ERROR BY MORE THAN 200 YEARS!

Therefore it has been PROVED from the Bible that 3760 B.C. is NOT the year of the creation of Adam and Eve. And the Seder Olam Rabbah has been shown to be in error by over 200 years, and there is no basis for the year 3760 B.C. or the year 3761 B.C. as the starting point in the calculation of the Jewish calendar.

Using the year 3761 B.C. for the starting molad of the Jewish calendar is based on a historical document that is GROSSLY FLAWED in the dating it presents for the creation of Adam and Eve.

Frank W. Nelte