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WHEN DID NEBUCHADREZZAR CONQUER JERUSALEM?

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In 1956, exactly twenty years ago, the Trustees of the British Museum published Chronicles of Chaldean Kings (626-556). No single volume is more important in establishing the historical relationship between ancient Israel and her imperial neighbors. Though incomplete, the chronicles provide accounts so specific that it is possible to date not only the year, but the season of the year for the battles of Megiddo (II Kings 23:29-30; II Chronicles 35:20-24) and Carchemish (Jeremiah 46). And to pinpoint the exact day of the month that king Jehoiachin surrendered Jerusalem to Nebuchadrezzar.

Today, twenty years later, controversy still surrounds the dating of the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians. Not fundamentally because the chronicles of Babylon are incomplete, but because disagreement exists in the scholarly world over the meaning and/or text of the parallel biblical records. The cause may be simply stated -- we human beings too often approach issues with preconceived notions as to what the solutions ought to be, rather than with the openmindedness, humility, clarity of thinking and respect for the Biblical text so imperative for resolving knotty problems. And if these very human traits exist among learned men and women trained to be disciplined thinkers, how much more will human weaknesses affect the conclusions of those not so disciplined?

So now we ask: When did Nebuchadrezzar overthrow Jerusalem and precipitate the destruction of the temple of Solomon? The world of scholarship has narrowed the possibilities to either of two dates: 587 B.C. or 585 B.C. The weight of evidence, prior to the publication of the Chronicles in 1956, was inclined toward the latter date. A shift in thinking has since occurred, but no consensus. In the nonscholarly world the proposed answers are as wide apart as the theories which underlie them. One group has adopted the year 607 B.C. for the fall of Jerusalem in Zedekiah's eleventh year (2:327, 328, 330). Another school of thought proposes 585 B.C. for the capture of Jerusalem in Zedekiah's last year (38:259). Biblical history, a third assures us, pinpoints the end of the final siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the First Temple to 477 B.C. (9:Appendixes 50 and 56). This reminds us of the traditional rabbinic view of world chronology which placed the destruction of the First Temple in 422 B.C. (11:X, 608). These diverse proposals involve rejection in part or in entirety of the evidence undergirding Babylonian and Persian history. And in place of that evidence one finds substituted interpretations of history and biblical prophecies unique to that particular school of thought.

Scholarly papers normally do not address these exotic proposals for dating the fall of Jerusalem and the First Temple. But since this Symposium is examining the very basis of human knowledge and understanding, we at least ought to remind ourselves of the nature of the evidence for Babylonian and Persian historical chronology. That evidence is solidly founded. It is rooted in the very movements of the solar system itself. Babylonian, Persian and Hellenistic chronology is fixed by cuneiform

evidence of the saros, an interval in astronomy of 18 years 11 1/3 days after which Earth, Sun and Moon return to nearly the same relative positions and a cycle of solar and lunar eclipses begins to repeat. Records of the saros are dated by the regnal years of kings from the Neo-Babylonian through the Persian to the late Hellenistic period (12:176-177; 28:11,ii,164).

Further, thousands of business and other documents dated in regnal years provide, for this period, an unassailable sequence of intercalary months in the Babylonian calendar (30:60-61; 28:187,211-214; 43:29,38-39; 37:4-9). These documents are not the work of late historians of the Greek and Roman period. They constitute contemporary evidence by which the chronology and calendar of Babylonia may be reconstructed from 626 B.C. to A.D. 75.

Most important of all, for our study, is the astronomical tablet for the thirty-seventh year of Nebuchadnezzar II (568-567 B.C.). The text was made known to the scholarly world in 1915 and is translated into German (36:34-38; 22:96-97). It contains observations of planetary positions of Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn throughout the year, the durations of first visibility of the new moons, the calendar dates and heights of the floodwaters of the Euphrates, the date of the summer solstice, and fluctuations in weather patterns. Modern astronomical science and computer technology confirm planetary and ~~linear~~ *linear* observations for the thirty-seventh year of Nebuchadnezzar II and for no other year. The state of astronomical knowledge in antiquity was sufficiently limited to absolutely preclude the invention by Hellenistic astronomers of these planetary and lunar observations by extrapolation into the past (1:33,36,41; 39:44,45,49). The 43-year reign of Nebuchadnezzar II -- also spelled Nebuchadnezzar -- is firmly dated and not subject to doubt. Equally firmly dated is the 2-year reign of his son Amel-Marduk (40:43-45) -- and spelled Evil-merodach in most Bibles -- in whose brief reign king Jehoiachin was released from captivity (Jeremiah 52:31-34).

The Chronicles of Chaldean Kings, when first published, caused significant scholarly rethinking of specific events, but in no way altered the chronology of the Babylonian kings known from antiquity (45:Appendix G; 26:221,223). The Chronicles (51:51-77) reveal that after the fall of Nineveh to the Babylonians and their allies in the month Ab (July/Aug.), 612 B.C., the Chaldean army marched west as far as Nisibin in northern Mesopotamia on the upper Habur river in the month of Elul (Aug./Sept.). The Assyrian king Assur-uballit set up a new temporary capital at the city of Harran. Not until November of 610 did the Babylonians and their Median allies move west to Harran. The Assyrians and an Egyptian army abandoned the city and retreated across the Euphrates, abandoning the whole of Mesopotamia. In the seventeenth year of Nabopolassar, in the early summer of 609, Assur-uballit and "a great Egyptian army" crossed the Euphrates and besieged Harran. The effort failed. Assyrians and Egyptians retired from the siege in Elul (Aug./Sept.) (3:29), and retreated across the Euphrates to Carchemish.

The Biblical background to the Egyptian show of strength on the Euphrates is the recorded march of Necho through Judah in the

thirty-first year of Josiah's reign. The King James Version inaccurately translates the Hebrew as if Necho were marching against the king of Assyria and against the city Carchemish (18: II Ki. 23:29; II Chr. 35:20). The correct rendering of the Hebrew is "Pharaoh Neco king of Egypt was on his way to the king of Assyria at the river Euphrates when King Josiah intercepted him" and "Neco king of Egypt came up to fight at Carchemish on the Euphrates" (25: II Ki. 23:29; I Chr. 35:20). The date of the encounter between Necho and Josiah is indisputable: late spring of 609 B.C. in the thirty-first year of Josiah.

The events of 609 B.C. were of major significance for the entire Biblical world. The Assyrian Empire which once ruled from the highlands of Persia to the southern borders of Egypt lay prostrate before the king of Akkad and his Median allies. The Egyptian armies found further hostilities in 609 futile. No encounter between Egyptians and the king of Akkad is recorded in the Chronicle from August 609 to August 607. And with the retreat of Assur-uballit across the Euphrates after the unsuccessful siege of Harran, all reference to the Assyrian king ceases. The fact that the armies of Akkad were free to march northward against southwestern Armenia in 609 and, in the years 608 and 607, continue the conquest of the mountainous country north of northwestern Mesopotamia indicates an agreement was reached with Neco at the expense of Assur-uballit. The nature of this agreement between Nabopolassar, king of Akkad, and the Egyptian Necho, former client-king of Assyria, is clarified by a quotation from Berossos, cited in Josephus (26:217). Necho is recognized as satrap of the newly born neo-Babylonian empire in charge of Egypt, Coele-Syria and Phoenicia. Necho had no intention of remaining in this subordinate position.

We now read of the king's eldest son Nebuchadrezzar in the year 607. He musters his own army for the first time and subdues the entire mountainous region fringing northern Mesopotamia. In the month of Elul (Aug.) in 607, Nabopolassar marches to the Euphrates while his son remains at Babylon with his army. The next year (606 B.C.) the Chronicle is silent about the movements of Nebuchadrezzar. We shall notice later the unrecorded movements of the crown-prince when we turn to the Bible again. Meanwhile, Necho moves his troops eastward and crosses the Euphrates at Carchemish. As spring came round in the twenty-first year of Nabopolassar, the aging king remains at home. Nebuchadrezzar takes command of his troops, marches to Carchemish, brilliantly attacks the Egyptians in the spring of 605 B.C. and utterly defeats them. Those who had momentarily escaped defeat were trapped in the district of Hamath -- not a single man escaped to his own country (51:68-69).

The Biblical reference to this defeat of Necho at Carchemish is found in Jeremiah 46. "The word of the Lord which came to Jeremiah the prophet concerning the nations. About Egypt. Concerning the army of Pharaoh Neco, king of Egypt, which was by the river Euphrates at Carchemish and which Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon defeated in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah" (19:Jer. 46:1-2). The date of this prophecy is of major importance. The Babylonian Chronicle assigns

it to 605 B.C. the last year of Nabopolassar. The Bible assigns it to the fourth year of Jehoiakim.

We are now prepared to begin a construction of the interrelated chronology for this period. Necho's army slew Josiah in the spring of 609, enroute to the Euphrates. This event is in the seventeenth year (609-608) of Nabopolassar. It is the thirty-first year of Josiah. The crushing defeat of Necho at Carchemish in the spring of 605 occurred in the twenty-first year (605-604) of Nabopolassar and the fourth of Jehoiakim. The Babylonian years, all agree, begin with Nisan (Mar./Apr.). Scholars are divided as to whether the years of the kings of Judah begin with Nisan or with Tisri (Sept./Oct.). It is this problem that is at the root of the controversy over the dating of the fall of Judah and the burning of the First Temple. If Tisri is the month with which regnal years in Judah commence, they could be either a half year earlier or later than the Chaldean regnal years. If Nisan is the month with which regnal years in Judah commence, there will be correspondence. Before we can arrive at an answer, we must quickly skim the account of the Chronicle.

Immediately following the victory at Carchemish in the spring of 605, the Chronicle notes: "At that time Nebuchadrezzar conquered the whole area of the Hatti-country" (51:69). The term Hatti refers to the western lands beyond Euphrates and bordering on the eastern Mediterranean. On the eighth of Ab (Aug. 15) Nabopolassar died. Nebuchadrezzar rushed back to Babylon and ascended the throne. Year 605-604, heretofore designated the twenty-first year of Nabopolassar, is now referred to in business documents and in the Chronicle as the "accession year" of ⁶⁰⁵ Nebuchadrezzar. The new king immediately marched west, obtained heavy tribute from Hatti and returned to Babylon. The following year, ~~604~~⁶⁰³ B.C., the first official year of Nebuchadrezzar's rule at Babylon, the king ordered all the kings of the western lands to appear before him in Hatti in the month Kislev (Nov./Dec.) with tribute. The second year a major city (the name is broken from the document) in the land of Hatti is besieged and punished. Tribute is again collected in the third year. In the fourth year in Kislev (Nov./Dec.) Nebuchadrezzar leads an army to Egypt. The armies "inflicted great havoc on each other" (51:71). No tribute is reported taken, and Nebuchadrezzar is required to spend the next year regrouping his forces. The sixth year (599-598), Nebuchadrezzar marches to Hatti and sends out "companies" to scour the desert and plunder the Arabs.

We have now reached the critical seventh year of Nebuchadrezzar. "In the seventh year, the month Kislev, the king of Akkad mustered his troops, marched to the Hatti land, and encamped against (i.e. besieged) the city of Judah and on the second day of the month of Adar he seized the city and captured the king. He appointed there a king of his own choice (lit. heart), received its heavy tribute and sent (them) to Babylon" (51:73). There can be no mistaking this event. The city of Judah is Jerusalem. The besieged king is Jehoiachin. He is captured on Adar 2 (March 16, 597) and sent to Babylon. The Biblical parallels are found in II Kings 24:8-16 and II Chronicles 36:9-10. Of special impor-

ance is verse 10. The Hebrew designates the time when the king was sent off to Babylon as "at the turn of the year" (35:218; 34:31). The Hebrew expression "turn of the year" refers to a seasonal change. The capture of Jehoiachin was eleven days before the spring equinox (March 27 and in 597 B.C.). This important account of the capture of Jehoiachin and the appointment of Zedekiah as king is the critical piece of evidence needed to resolve the question of the dating of the regnal years of the kings of Judah. Jehoiakim reigned eleven years. He died three months prior to the capture of his son Jehoiachin (II Kings 24:8). The death of Jehoiakim is not referred to in the Babylonian record. But Jeremiah and Josephus combine to give a gruesome account (Jer. 22:18-19; 27:209-211). If the reigns of the kings of Judah for this period are reckoned commencing with Tisri, then the eleventh year of Jehoiakim, in which he died, would be Sept. to Sept. 598 to 597. And his first year, following his accession, would begin in September 608. Is this a viable solution? It is proposed by Morgenstern (33:15), Thiele (46:25-26), Malamat (31:141, 146), Horn (21:19, 22; 42:III, 95), Freedy and Rufford (16:467).

First, we must consider the fact that the last year of Josiah's reign, in which he died, included the date of the battle of Megiddo, probably sometime in the late spring of 609 B.C. -- and not, as Gadd suggested, in 608 (17). His last regnal year therefore would end with Elul (Sept.) 609 B.C. An entire year is unaccounted for -- 609-608 B.C. It is not necessary to involve ourselves with the intricate solutions proposed. None explain the statement of Jeremiah: "The word that came to Jeremiah... in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah... From the thirteenth year of Josiah... even unto this day, these three and twenty years, the word of the Lord hath come unto me" (20:Jer. 25:2,3). The ministry of Jeremiah began with year thirteen of Josiah's reign and continued through year thirty-one of the reign of Josiah -- that is nineteen years -- and continued (at the time of this account) into the fourth year of Jehoiakim -- twenty-three years in all. But if an extra year is inserted between Josiah and his son Jehoiakim, then Jeremiah would have said "these four and twenty years." But he did not. Jeremiah 25:1-2 is conclusive evidence -- despite comments to the contrary (31:147) -- that no additional 12-month accession year elapsed between the end of the reign of Josiah and the first year of Jehoiakim. The conclusion we are forced to come to is inevitable. The regnal years for the kings of Judah during this period commence with Nisan (8:38). Josiah's thirteenth year is 627-626. His thirty-first year is 609-608. During this year the battle of Megiddo occurred; the king died and was succeeded by his son Jehoahaz (II Chr. 36:1-3) for three months, then deposed; and finally Jehoiakim ascended to the throne. The following spring, Nisan 608, his official first year began.

Again, let us suppose a Tisri reckoning is in vogue in Judah during the eleven-year reign of Jehoiakim. His official first year, if we reckon from Tisri, would have to begin in 608 because the eleventh year would be no other than 598-597. This date we have already established from the Babylonian Chronicle. Supposing his first year to be Tisri 608-607,

his fourth year during which the battle of Carchemish occurred would begin 609 in September and extend to September 604. But this again is impossible, because the battle of Carchemish occurred in the early spring of 605. To obviate this problem, Horn suggests that the date of the prophecy is the fourth year, not the battle (21:26). Malamat seems compelled to accept this same solution (31:147; 32:250). Yet Horn admits that his proposal is "an artificial and unnatural grammatical construction, for which reason this interpretation may not appeal to many scholars" (21:26).

The alternative -- a regnal year reckoned from Nisan to Nisan -- would immediately resolve the problem and be in full agreement with both Bible and Babylonian Chronicle. That is, the reign of Jehoiakim commenced in Nisan (Mar.) 608 and his eleventh and last year ended the spring of 597. The fourth year began in April 605 and properly included the battle of Carchemish that spring. A Nisan-to-Nisan reckoning for kings during this period in the history of Judah is supported by a large body of scholars who recognize that no viable alternative is possible for the reign of Jehoiakim (Freedman, 15:55; Finegan 14:204; 13:203; Hyatt, 23:278; Tadmor, 44:226-227; Auerbach, 4:336; 5:128-136; 6:121; Jepsen, 24:24; Vogt, 47:95).

We are now in a position to take a quick look at the internal events in the reign of Jehoiakim. II Kings 24:1 records that Jehoiakim paid tribute for three years and then rebelled. The Babylonian Chronicle, as we already noted, mentions receipt of spoils during three years -- from 605-602 B.C. (51:69-71). The rebellion was precipitated by the havoc wrought on the Babylonian army by the battle on the border of Egypt in the early winter of 601-600. No tribute was carried back according to the Chronicle. The Biblical account then proceeds with the punishment visited on Jehoiakim after his rebellion: "And the Lord sent against him bands of the Chaldeans, and bands of the Arameans, and bands of the Moabites, and bands of the children of Ammon, and sent them against Judah to destroy it" (20:II Ki. 24:2). The Babylonian Chronicle reports of the king of Akkad: "From the Hatti-land he sent out his companies" in the late autumn of 599 B.C. and scoured the desert for plunder. These companies could hardly be other than the bands mentioned in II Kings 24:2.

The Babylonian Chronicle does not report anything of the voluntary surrender of Jehoiakim without a siege in the beginning of December 598, the latter half of his eleventh year. The Biblical account reads: "Against him came up Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and bound him in fetters, to carry him to Babylon" (20: II Chr. 36:6). The Babylonian king changed his mind and slew him. During the following three months, Jehoiachin ruled Judah. Nebuchadnezzar deposed him and set Zedekiah on the throne in the month of Adar (51:73). Year one of Zedekiah's reign officially began with Nisan (April) 597. His eleventh year therefore extended from Nisan 587-586. For the later years of the reign of Zedekiah we have no contemporary account in the Babylonian Chronicle. But in the Bible we have the record that Zedekiah, too, rebelled. Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem in the ninth year of Zedekiah, beginning the tenth day of the tenth month, i.e. January 15, 588 B.C. The siege lasted a year and six months (27:221). In the eleventh year of Zedekiah, the ninth day of the fourth month (July 29, 587) the resistance collapsed.

(Anti. Bk. 10, ch. 11, 12)

The following month, Ab, the Babylonians came to Jerusalem and razed the temple, the palace and all other important buildings over a four-day period (II Kings 25:8-9 and Jeremiah 52:12-13). The Jewish community memorializes this event on the ninth of Ab. According to the Talmud the ninth of Ab fell on a Sunday in the year the First Temple was destroyed (7:Arakin 12b and Taanith 29a). This was Sunday August 27 (37:28). In the year 586 B.C. the ninth of Ab did not fall on a Sunday.

Thusfar we have examined the dating of events in terms of the regnal years of the kings of Judah. The question is, how does the Bible equate the regnal years of Nebuchadrezzar with those of Judah? The first year of Nebuchadrezzar is equated with the fourth of Jehoiakim (Jer. 25:1). The eighteenth year of Nebuchadrezzar is equated with the tenth of Zedekiah (Jer. 32:1). And the nineteenth of Nebuchadrezzar is equivalent to the eleventh year of Zedekiah (II Kings 25:8). These dates are internally consistent. There is no Biblical grounds for interpreting Jeremiah 25:1 to mean that the fourth year of Jehoiakim is equivalent to the "accession year" of Nebuchadrezzar, thus naming the fifth year be equivalent to year one, (44:226 and 16:465 n.19). This translation has been suggested in order to retain the date 586 for the fall of Jerusalem. It necessitates the adding of an entire accession year (Nisan 597 to Nisan 596) between the last regnal year of Jehoiakim and the first regnal year of Zedekiah. It furthermore presumes Zedekiah came to the throne shortly after Nisan in 597 so that the remainder of the year is to be counted an accession year preceding his first year. The Babylonian Chronicle indicates accession prior to Nisan. The first year consequently began in the spring of 597, not 596.

All of these Biblical dates for the regnal years of Nebuchadrezzar are one year earlier than the usage in Babylon. That is, the king's accession year in Babylon (605-604) is the first year of Jeremiah 25:1. That the Bible is consistent in this different mode of dating is proved by II Kings 24:12. Here the Biblical record declares the young Jewish king Jehoiachin surrendered to the king of Babylon in the latter's eighth year. And this event of the eighth year, remember, is the surrender of Jehoiachin in Adar, 597. It is not the date of the long march to Babylonia. That is not mentioned until verse 15. The surrender of the king of Judah is dated in the Babylonian Chronicle to the seventh year (51:73). The evidence is, therefore, that the regnal years of Nebuchadrezzar are dated one year earlier in Judah than in Babylon. The custom apparently arose from the fact that Nebuchadrezzar "took command" of the entire Babylonian army beginning with the twenty-first year of his father -- 605-604 B.C. (51:67; 13:198-210).

Josephus, by contrast, uses the Babylonian reckoning consistently (27:205,221). Should additional tablets of the Babylonian Chronicle be recovered, they would be in agreement with Josephus, and would differ from the Biblical record by one year as is already apparent in the case of the surrender of Jehoiachin, where the Biblical record mentions the eighth year and the Babylonian record the seventh.

A minor point of interest is Ezekiel 1:1-2. The fifth year of the captivity of king Jehoiachin, the fourth month, falls in the "thirtieth year." The original Hebrew expression is not a reference to the age of the prophet Ezekiel (10:3-7; 50:327). But the fifth year of the captivity of the king (593-592) would clearly be the thirtieth year of the renewal of the covenant which occurred in the eighteenth year (622-621 B.C.) of Josiah (II Chr. 34:8-33).

Some have queried whether the seventh and eighteenth years of Nebuchadrezzar (Jer. 52:28-29) are Babylonian equivalents of the Biblical eighth and nineteenth years of the king elsewhere mentioned. This is highly unlikely as the nineteenth year is also mentioned in Jeremiah 52:12. The Biblical seventh year is the Babylonian sixth year. It is the year the king of Babylon sent out bands or companies to ravage the desert countryside. The eighteenth is the tenth year of Zedekiah, during which the Babylonians captured a few hundred who sought to escape from Jerusalem during the brief period the siege was lifted at the approach of the Egyptian army (Jer. 37:11-12).

An enigma in the chronology for this period is Daniel 1:1. The verse is usually ignored as unhistorical or in need of emendation (31:142). A look at the Babylonian Chronicle provides a clue to what happened in the third year of Jehoiakim. "In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah came Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon unto Jerusalem, and besieged it." This is the only Biblical account that tells of the initial attack on the city. The date is 606-605 B.C., the twentieth year of the reign of Nabopolassar. In that year the whereabouts of the crown-prince Nebuchadnezzar is missing from the Babylonian Chronicle (51:67). The previous year he is mustering his army, and the following year he takes command of the Babylonian army in place of his father. The account in Daniel 1:1 is illustrative of a secondary campaign that occurred in the year immediately preceding the onslaught on Carchemish. While Nabopolassar covered the front along the Euphrates in Northern Syria, the crown-prince cut southward into the hill country along the Egyptian lifeline. He picked the weakest link in the Egyptian chain -- it was, after all, Judah that at first stood up against Necho in the last year of Josiah! From a strategic view it was a brilliant move. It is further corroborated by Josephus who writes that in 605 B.C., after the battle at Carchemish, "the Babylonian king crossed Euphrates and occupied all Syria, with the exception of Judaea, as far as Pelusium" (27:205). It would have been military folly to have occupied the whole of the Hatti-territory to the border of Egypt except Judaea -- unless, that is, it had been occupied on a previous campaign and its king had now become a Babylonian ally.

A criticism of the Nisan reckoning of regnal years at the close of Judaeen history has been based on Ezekiel 33:21. The proper reading of this verse is "twelfth year," not "eleventh" (16:466 n.25). With this the Septuagint agrees (41:Ezekiel 33:21) despite its sometimes variable

text (49:4,5). It is soundly argued and it is more logical that only six months -- not eighteen months -- elapsed between the fall of Jerusalem and the arrival of an escapee in Mesopotamia to bring word to Ezekiel. It has been proposed that a new year with Tisri began two months after the collapse of Jerusalem in July and that this new year is the twelfth of the captivity. If, on the other hand, a Nisan dating were used, a year and six months would have elapsed between the fall of Jerusalem in the fourth month of the eleventh year and the arrival of an escapee in the twelfth year, the tenth month. The criticism is valid, and that is the very reason some who hold to a Nisan reckoning propose altering the text: But the answer is in the text itself. Up to this point in time Ezekiel reckons by the captivity of Jehoiachin. Here and in Ezekiel 40:1 however, he uses a different expression: "our captivity." Now Ezekiel was taken captive three months earlier than Jehoiachin, at the time of the death of Jehoiakim (27:21). Kislev 3 is a traditional date commemorating this event on the Hebrew calendar (29:29). Ezekiel chose to date events by his captivity, rather than by king Jehoiachin's captivity, as there were now two Jewish kings in captivity at Babylon -- Jehoiachin and Zedekiah. The twelfth year of Ezekiel's captivity commenced with the ninth month -- Kislev 3. So a date in the tenth month would be in the succeeding or twelfth year. Hence the escapee was only six months in reaching Ezekiel.

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