Chapter Four

Ahasuerus' Calculations

"His Mind Became Settled"

[11b] "In those days, when the king Ahasuerus sat..." (Esther 1:2).

And it is also written: "In the third year of his reign" (Esther 1:3)!

—Says Rava:3 What is [the meaning of] "when the king Ahasuerus sat"?4 —When5 his mind became settled.

He6 said: Belshazzar counted7 and made an error. I shall count8 and not make an error.

The textual stimulus to this midrash is the apparent redundancy9 of the phrase "when the king Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his majesty." Under other circumstances the Talmud's expected response might have been to understand the verse as saying that this was the first time that he sat on the throne; i.e., at the start of his reign. In this case however such an interpretation is impossible, since the text itself goes

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1 "And it...'reign'" — ~ in MSS B and Mf, and filled in in B*.
2 MS G adds: "What is [the meaning of] 'when [the king] sat'?
3 "Rava" — MS N: "Rabbah."
4 "When... 'sat?'" — ~ in MS G.
5 "When" — Spanish family, Printings: "After."
6 "He"—MS W, HgT: "Ahasuerus."
7 “counted” — AgE, Spanish family and MS W: “calculated.”
8 “count” — AgE, Spanish family and MS W: “calculate.”
9 The difficulty is not a contrived one, and has been discussed by biblical scholars. See Carey A. Moore, Esther, The Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971), 5: "Many scholars of the past and present see the word as meaning 'when he sat securely,' thereby alluding to the fact that Xerxes had to put down uprisings in Egypt...and in Babylon"; Paton, 124–9; Cf. Rashi to the verse: "When his kingdom became secure in his hands"; and midrashic sources cited in notes below.
on to state explicitly that this was the third year of his monarchy. Hence Rava’s reading that the verb “sat” should be read not in the sense of physical sitting, but of mental settling.

It is not clear that Rava himself had in mind the explanation that the Talmud goes on to supply, about the king’s conviction that the seventy-years prophesied by Jeremiah for the redemption of Israel had expired. Rabbinic literature supplies a number of different variations of why Ahasuerus would have become secure in his reign or settled in his mind. For example, there are traditions that explain that following his futile attempts to seat himself upon the miraculous throne of Solomon he commissioned an inferior imitation which, after three years, was now ready; or that he convened his feast in order to celebrate the suppression of a rebellion. The Bavli however, consistent with its thematic reading of Esther, opts for an interpretation that would assert the centrality of the fate of the Temple and Ahasuerus’ role in obstructing its reconstruction.

Belshazzar’s Error

The midrash assumes that Belshazzar and Ahasuerus were familiar with Jeremiah’s prophecy (29:10) that Israel would be “visited” after seventy years were “accomplished for Babylon.” Both monarchs took Jeremiah’s words seriously enough to refrain from tampering with the Temple’s vessels before they had satisfied themselves that the promise was not going to be carried out.

10 Abba gorion, 8; Panim aherim A (55) and B (58); Esther rabbah, 1:12; both Targums to Esther; see L. Ginzberg, Legends, 6:451, n. 5; Paton, 129.

11 Abba gorion, 8, Panim aherim, B 58 and both Targums (the interpretation is not connected there to the sitting / settling on the throne, but proposed as an occasion for the feast); Ginzberg, ibid., 6:452, n. 6. The danger of rebellion is alluded to later on in the Esther-Midrash. See Ibn Ezra’s (first) commentary and B. Walfish, “The Two Commentaries of Abraham Ibn Ezra on the Book of Esther,” 337-8.

Esther rabbah 1:11 takes a different approach, emphasizing that “as he sat” (רוֹעָה) indicates less permanence than would “when he sat,” and hence inspiring a homiletical contrast between the ephemeral nature of heathen rule and the permanence of Jewish settlement (On the passage see commentaries of Luria and Yefeh ‘anaf).

12 Rashi: “At first he was worried that the Jews might be freed from his control upon the conclusion of the seventy years of the Babylonian captivity. Now however his

Continued on next page...
The notion that gentle kings would be learned in the words of the Hebrew prophets is of course a commonplace in the midrashic perception of history, deriving at least in part from the ethnocentric certainty that world history is a mere by-product of Jewish history, and that Jewish history itself takes on significance as the embodiment of the divine plan and covenantal relationships described in scriptural prophecy.

[11b] What is this? That which is written: "For thus saith the Lord, That after seventy years be accomplished for Babylon I will visit you" (Jeremiah 29:10).

What is "for Babylon"? —To the reign of Babylon.

Subtract forty-five of Nebuchadnezzar, twenty-three of Evil-merodach and two of his own—Behold: seventy.

...Continued from previous page

mind was put at rest." According to Rashi’s explanation the king’s antipathy towards the Temple was pragmatic and selfish, rather than religious or simply malicious, as appears more likely from the midrashic sources.

13 Isaac Heinemann, Darkhei ha-'aggadah, 40, brings a wealth of examples (including our own passage, mentioned on p. 212, n. 55), noting that the phenomenon is just as likely to occur in anachronistic contexts; (i.e., where the citation is of a biblical text that has supposedly not been written yet), and that the assumption is utilized to produce dramatic literary effects.

14 On the midrashic assumption that it is the Bible and its concepts that bestow meaning on history, see the perceptive observations of: James Kugel, "Two Introductions to Midrash," especially 84-90.

15 "What...this" —MS N*: "What did Belshazzar count?" MS B adds: "which Belshazzar calculated and made an error?"

16 MS M and Printings add: "And it is written: 'That he would accomplish for the desolations of Jerusalem seventy'" (Daniel 9:2).

17 "What...reign of Babylon" —Found only in MSS Y and W and AgE; MS N: "How long did Nebuchadnezzar rule? Forty-five years"; MS B: "He took out the sacred vessels and made use of them. He calculated:".

18 "Subtract" —only in MS Y and AgE; Most witnesses: "The calculated."

19 MSS N and W, AgE and EY add: "years."

20 Several texts add: "and."
Immediately\textsuperscript{21} he took out the vessels of the Holy Temple and made use of them.\textsuperscript{22}

In order to understand the calculations described in this passage we must appreciate the traditional chronology of the post-exilic era, as modified in the book of Daniel and systematized in the Tannaitic \textit{Seder olam}. This chronology differs in several important respects from that of the conventional histories. Thus, according to the accepted scholarly reading of the evidence Nebuchadnezzar began his rule in 605/4 B.C.E., while Belshazzar was left as temporary ruler of Babylon during the absence of his father, the usurper Nabonidus, beginning in 552; with the reigns of two other Neo-Babylonian emperors intervening between Nebuchadnezzar’s son Evil-merodach and the accession of Nabonidus.\textsuperscript{23} The author of Daniel,\textsuperscript{24} on the other hand, treats Belshazzar as the son of Nebuchadnezzar. Aware that Evil-merodach, the real son of Nebuchadnezzar, is mentioned in Jeremiah 52:31 and 2 Kings 25:27,\textsuperscript{25} the \textit{Seder olam}\textsuperscript{26} turns Belshazzar into Nebuchadnezzar’s grandson.

Accordingly, from Belshazzar’s perspective there would have been three reigns to be accounted for in order to fill in Jeremiah’s seventy years from the beginning of the Babylonian empire. The Talmud now proceeds to demonstrate its reasons for assigning the

\textsuperscript{21} “Immediately” — only in MS Y and AgE. MS W adds: “Now that he saw that seventy years had expired and they had not been redeemed he said: Since they have not been redeemed now, they will no longer be redeemed.”


\textsuperscript{22} “Immediately...them” — ~ in MS B.


\textsuperscript{24} 5:2,11, 18, 22.


\textsuperscript{26} Ed. Ratner, Ch. 28, p. 126 (see note 15 there); ed. Milikowsky, 422, 537
respective lengths of the reigns of each king. It begins with Nebuchadnezzar:

[11b] Whence do we know that Nebuchadnezzar ruled for forty-five years?

—Because the master says: They were exiled in the seventh. They were exiled in the eighth. And they were exiled in the eighteenth. And they were exiled in the nineteenth.27

“They were exiled in the seventh” —after the conquest of Jehoiakim,28 which is “the eighth”29 to the reign of30 Nebuchadnezzar.31 “They were exiled in the eighteenth” of the conquest32 of Jehoiakim,33 which is the nineteenth year34 of the reign of35 Nebuchadnezzar; as the master says:36

The reference introduced here by the formula “the master says”37 appears to be (at least its first part) from Seder ‘olam Chapter 25,38 which reads as follows:

27 Spanish family add: “But were there four [MS B*: three] exiles? There were two exiles! Rather:” The reading in MS B* is cited by the ‘Arukh (Kohut, 2:279) in the name of both the Megillah and ‘Arakhin passages.

28 “Jehoiakim”—MS N (after emendation) and Printings: “Jehoiachin.”

29 MSS O and B* add: “year.”

30 “the reign of”—~ in Spanish family, MS L, Printings, YS.

31 MS M adds: “And similarly:.”

32 “conquest” — MS O: “exile.” MS B adds: “of the land, which is the exile of.”

33 “Jehoiakim” — Printings: “Zedekiah.”

34 “year” — ~ in MSS G, N, W, M, R, HgT, YS, AgE.

35 “of the reign of” — ~ in MS M, Printings, YS.

36 “as...says” — MS N: “And this is as...says”; MS B: “Does not the master say”; MS O: “and...says.”

37 On this citation formula in the Babylonian Talmud see: Abraham Weiss, Leqorot hit-havvut ha-bavli, Publications of the Institute of Jewish Studies in Warsaw (Warsaw: Institute of Jewish Studies in Poland, 1929). The usage here is non-standard, by Weiss’s definition, since the baraita has not yet been quoted in our passage. It is possible that the citation is from TB ‘Arakhin 12a.

38 Ed. Ratner, p. 110; ed. Milikowsky, 394, 525. On the whole passage, see also Pirqei derabbi eli’ezer, Ch. 49 (transl. Friedlander, 391-5, and notes).
And he came to Jerusalem “in the seventh year” (Jeremiah 52:28).

But in another verse it says: “[And the king of Babylon took him [in the eighth year of his reign]]” (2 Kings 24:12).

What is the meaning of “in the seventh year” and what is the meaning of “in the eighth year”?

—“In the eighth year” of his reign, and “in the seventh year” from when he conquered Jehoiakim.

The contradictory scriptural passages in question describe the same event, the captivity of the young King Jehoiachin, who ruled only three months before Nebuchadnezzar had him exiled to Babylon along with his family and court and the spoils of Jerusalem. Seder ‘olam resolves the contradiction by positing a dual use of the term “reign”: In the one case it refers to the actual beginning of Nebuchadnezzar’s rule, while in the other it refers to his reign over Judæa, which he subjugated in the second year after coming to power.

The second difficulty hinted at by the baraita concerns two descriptions of the captivity of Zedekiah and the final destruction of Jerusalem. On the one hand both 2 Kings 25:8-9 and Jeremiah 52:12-3 state: “Now in the fifth month, in the tenth day of the month, which was the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, came Nebuzaradan, captain of the guard, which served the king of Babylon, unto Jerusalem, and he burned the house of the Lord, etc.” However according to Jeremiah 52:29: “In the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar he carried away captive from Jerusalem, etc.”

Here again the Talmud appears to be offering an abbreviated allusion to a passage from Seder ‘olam (Chapter 27), which dealt with the same problem:

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39 See Milikowsky’s apparatus.
42 Ed. Ratner, p. 121; ed. Milikowsky, 414-5, 534.
So it says: 43 "...the nineteenth year..." but in another place it states "...the eighteenth year..."

What is the meaning of "eighteenth" and what is the meaning of "nineteenth"?

—Rather, "the nineteenth" of his reign, and "the eighteenth" from when he conquered Jehoiakim.

The Talmud, or the source which it is using, appears to have combined these two separate baraitot from Seder 'olam44 into a single cryptic baraita, which it utilized in order to establish that eight years elapsed between the beginning of Nebuchadnezzar’s empire and the captivity of Jehoiakim.

[11b] In the first year he conquered Nineveh. In the second he45 conquered Jehoiakim.

The Talmud is again citing Seder 'olam (end of Chapter 24)46 in support of its claim that Jehoiakim was vanquished in Nebuchadnezzar’s second year. The passage of Seder 'olam reads as follows:

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43 See Milikowsky’s apparatus; cf. Ratner’s note 7.

44 This is the view of Ratner, ibid. n. 7 and in his Introduction pp. 94-5. In the latter reference he calls our attention to the interesting passage in TB 4Arakhin 12a where the same baraita is cited. As distinct from our pericope in Megillah, where the Talmud entertains no doubts as to the proper interpretation of the baraita, the Arakhin passage goes through several objections before Rabina arrives at the correct explanation. This phenomenon is open to several possible interpretations: e.g., it might teach us that the Megillah passage derives from a later redactional stratum which was already familiar with the conclusions of the Arakhin passage; alternatively, it could indicate that the redactors of Megillah were familiar with the full contexts of Seder 'olam, whereas those of Arakhin were not. It is likely however that the “ignorance” of the Arakhin pericope is feigned, a typical talmudic literary ploy designed to produce a suitably dialectical sugya. Note however that the Spanish family of witnesses, cited in our notes above to the talmudic text, incorporate some of the dialectics of the Arakhin passage into Megillah.

45 MS B and AgE add: “went up and.” This is identical to the reading in the good manuscripts of Seder 'olam; see Ratner 109 (n. 40); Milikowsky’s apparatus (392).

46 Ed. Ratner, ibid.; Milikowsky, 392, 542. The preceding passage claims to relate a number of events that took place in the “beginning” of Jehoiakim’s reign, based on the ascriptions of Jeremiah Chaps. 23-27. Note however the discrepancy between p. 108 and Jeremiah 25:1 (noted by Ratner, n. 28; no variant to this reading is cited by Milikowsky, 389-90); cf. Jeremiah 46:2.
"The word of the Lord which came to Jeremiah the prophet against the Gentiles; against Egypt, against the army of Pharaoh-necho king of Egypt, which was by the river Euphrates in Carchemish, which Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon smote in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah king of Judah" (Jeremiah 46:1-2).

It was the first year of Nebuchadnezzar; that year he went up and conquered Nineveh. In the second he went up and conquered Jehoiakim.

This tradition does not appear to be based on any biblical source, nor is it historically accurate. The destruction of Nineveh was carried out by Nebuchadnezzar's father Nabopolassar in 612 B.C.E. together with the Median Cyaxares, seven years before Nebuchadnezzar's accession to the throne. The chronology of Jehoiakim's submission to Babylonia is somewhat more problematic. Nebuchadnezzar did invade Philistia in 604, overrunning it by 603/2 and bringing Jehoiakim under Babylonian vassalage. However the precise dating, and the nature of the transition from vassalage to subjugation, are not at all clear. According to the traditional commentators to the Talmud, Seder olam's certainty that the conquest came in Nebuchadnezzar's second year is derived from a midrashic exposition that appears at the beginning of Chapter 25:

"In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah came Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon unto Jerusalem and besieged it" (Daniel 1:1).


48 Bright, op. cit., 326; Noth, 280-1.

49 Ed. Ratner, 110; ed. Milikowsky, 394, 525; cited by the ‘Arukh (Kohut, 2:279) and Rashi to the Megillah and ‘Arakhin passages.
Is it possible to say such a thing? Did he not rule "in the fourth year of Jehoiakim" (Jeremiah 25:1)?

What then is the meaning of "In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim"?

—Since his rebellion.

The baraita is claiming that the event being referred to in Daniel is not Nebuchadnezzar’s first capture of Jerusalem, which did not take place until Jehoiakim’s fifth year, but rather the siege of Jerusalem that occurred in the eleventh and final year of Jehoiakim’s reign; i.e., in the third year of the rebellion which began in Jehoiakim’s eighth year. Jehoiakim’s eleventh year is the seventh after the Babylonian occupation (which commenced, as we have seen, in his fourth year). Now the Talmud has already demonstrated that the seventh year of the conquest of Jerusalem is also designated the eighth year of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign (with reference to the captivity of Jehoiachin, which occurred later that same year). From this we deduce that there is a one-year interval between Nebuchadnezzar’s accession to power and his subjugation of Jerusalem; which is equivalent to saying that the occupation of Jerusalem took place in his second year.

The calculations thus far are summarized in the following chart.

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50 The date in Daniel is truly problematic; see the discussion in Hartmann’s commentary (128-9).

51 2 Kings 24:1: "In his days Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up, and Jehoiakim became his servant three years; then he turned and rebelled against him."
The Babylonian Esther Midrash

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>From beginning of Jehoiakim's reign</th>
<th>From beginning of Nebuchadnezzar's reign</th>
<th>From Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of Jerusalem (Jehoiakim)</th>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Beginning of Nebuchadnezzar's reign, conquest of Nineveh</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Nebuchadnezzar conquers Jehoiakim</td>
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<tr>
<td>7 (2 Kings 24:1)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Jehoiakim rebels against Nebuchadnezzar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 (2 Kings 23:36)</td>
<td>8 (2 Kings 24:2)</td>
<td>Death of Jehoiakim; 1st Captivity (Jehoiachin)</td>
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<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>19 (2 Kings 25:8)</td>
<td>2nd Captivity: (Zedekiah)</td>
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The Esther-Midrash continues:

[11b] And it is written: "And it came to pass in the seven and thirtieth year of the captivity of Jehoiachin king of Judah, in the twelfth month, on the seven and twentieth of the month, that Evilmerodach king of Babylon in the year that he began to reign did lift

52 MSS B* and O add: "this is."

53 "and" — MSS N, B, O, M* and R: "as."
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up the head of Jehoiachin king of Judah and brought him forth out of prison” (2 Kings 25:27).54

Eight and thirty-seven make forty-five.

The calculation is a simple one, demonstrating that within forty five years of the rise of Nebuchadnezzar (which was eight years prior to the captivity of Jehoiachin), Evil-merodach was enjoying his first year on the throne.55

[11b] The twenty-three of Evil-merodach are a tradition [gemara].56 And his57 own two make seventy.

As noted above, the chronological scheme shared by Daniel and the talmudic sources ignores the reigns of Neriglissar and Nabonidus,

54 Maharsha observes astutely that if the Talmud were concerned strictly with proving that Nebuchadnezzar ruled for forty-five years, it would have been sufficient to skip to this passage. Instead, following its normal associative patterns of presentation, it chose to resolve the various problems and contradictions presented by the intervening material.

55 Noth, 282: “Jehoiachin was probably brought to the royal court and treated with honour as part of an act of amnesty.” In fact, Nebuchadnezzar’s reign lasted no more than forty-three years (605/4-562), as stated explicitly by the Babylonian priest Berosus, cited in Josephus’ Against Apion 1:146 [H. St. J. Thackeray, transl., Josephus Vol. 1, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press and William Heineman Ltd., 1966), pp. 220-1]; Jewish Antiquities 10:219 [R. Marcus, transl., Josephus Vol. 6, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press and William Heineman Ltd., 1958), pp. 278-9]. Leviticus rabbah, 20:1 (444) also has Nebuchadnezzar ruling for forty-five years, but see the critical apparatus and notes there, which mention a tradition that read “forty” (e.g., Ecclesiastes rabbah, 2:15:3; [so also in Ratner’s citation of Leviticus rabbah, based on printed editions]); Pesiqa derav kahana, 26:1 [ed. Mandelbaum, 384 (and apparatus); transl. Braude and Kapstein, 393].

According to Seder olam Chapter 28 (ed. Ratner, 125; ed. Milikowsky, 419-21, 536), the reinstatement of Jehoiachin took place within two days of Nebuchadnezzar’s death, a tradition which is deduced midrashically from the contradictory dates given by 2 Kings 25:27 (twenty-seventh day of twelfth month) and Jeremiah 52:31 (twenty-fifth day). Cf. L. Ginzberg, Legends, 6:380, n. 134. Josephus Antiquities (10:229, pp. 284-5) also emphasizes that Evil-merodach released Jehoiachin immediately (e'ouboz).

56 “are a tradition” — in MSS B and Mf, and filled in in B*.

57 “his” — MSS B* and O: “Belshazzar’s.”
who ruled from 560 until 539 when Babylonia fell to Cyrus the Mede. Evil-merodach actually reigned for only two years (662-560).\textsuperscript{58} Thus the total number of years between Nebuchadnezzar's death and the fall of Babylon was actually twenty-three. Nabonidus' son Belshazzar was never more than an interim co-regent for about eleven years (549-39) during his father's temporary absence from the capital.\textsuperscript{59}

The above passage from the Talmud is essentially an Aramaic paraphrase of the Hebrew text of \textit{Seder \text{c}olam} Chapter 28:\textsuperscript{60}

Nebuchadnezzar reigned for forty-five years, Evil-merodach his son for twenty-three, and Belshazzar his son for three years.

The Talmud's characterization of Evil-merodach's twenty-three-year reign as a "gemara" refers to the fact that, unlike those of Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar, its duration is not derived either directly or indirectly from scriptural evidence.\textsuperscript{61} From our perspective, we can surmise simply that the number was necessary in order for the three reigns to total seventy, so that it would be possible to introduce the homiletical motif of Belshazzar's calculation of Jeremiah's

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{58} Thus in the excerpt from Berosus in Josephus' \textit{Against Apion} 1:147, pp. 222-3. However in the \textit{Antiquities} 10:231 (pp. 284-7), Josephus gives the length of his reign as eighteen years! See Marcus' notes to the passage, and Ginzberg, \textit{Legends}, 6:430, n. 2.
\item \textsuperscript{59} See Noth, 299-300; Bright, 353-4, 360-1; M. J. Gruenthaner, "The Last King of Babylon," \textit{CBQ} 11 (1949), 406-427; Hartmann's commentary on Daniel, 34-5, 50, 185-6.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Ed. Ratner, 126; ed. Milikowsky, 422, 537.
\item \textsuperscript{61} I emphasize this in contrast to Ratner's claim (p. 126, n. 15; Introduction, p. 28) that "gemara" is being employed here as a formula for the citation of \textit{Seder \text{c}olam} itself. The "tradition" being cited is not the \textit{Seder \text{c}olam}, but the source of the latter's information. On the usages of the expression "gemara" in the Babylonian Talmud (it does not appear in Palestinian sources), see Ch. Albeck, "Sof hora'ah vesiyyum hattalmud," in \textit{Sinai sefer yovel}, ed. J. L. Maimon, 73-79 (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1958), 78, n. 11; \textit{Idem, Introduction to the Talmud}, 4-7, where he adduces ample evidence that the term refers to received (as distinct from logically derived) tradition; E. Z. Melammed, \textit{An Introduction to Talmudic Literature} (Jerusalem: Galor, 1973), 326-30.
\end{itemize}
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prophecy. The Talmud prefers to deal with a fixed series of numbers that “happen” to add up to seventy.62

The Esther-Midrash now resumes the narrative thread, thereby setting Belshazzar’s actions in Daniel Chapter 5 in a new perspective. The remarkable similarities between the descriptions of Belshazzar’s and Ahasuerus’ feasts do indeed invite the sort of midrashic parallelism that underlies our passage:63

When he64 saw that65 seventy years66 had elapsed and they had not been redeemed67 he said:68 Seeing as they have not been redeemed,69 now70 they will no longer be redeemed.

He took out71 the vessels of the Holy Temple and made use of them.

And72 this is what Daniel told him:73 “But thou hast lifted up thyself against the Lord of heaven; and have brought the vessels of his house

62 Cf. Leqah tov to Esther [in: Salomon Buber, ed., Sifre de-aggadeta al megillat ester (Vilna: Romm, 1886)], p. 86: “There remained twenty-three years for the rule of Evil-merodach....” Ratner’s reliance on this passage to prove his interpretation of gemara (see above note) is puzzling, since it seems to clearly support the opposite position. It should be noted that Seder olam does not connect Belshazzar’s feast with the calculation of the seventy years, but is concerned with placing Cyrus (whose reign began within the same year) at the end of that period.


64 “he” — MS M: “they.”

65 “he saw that” — ~ in MS O.

66 “years” — ~ in MSS O, M, EY, HgT1, YS, AgE.

67 “When...redeemed” — ~ in Printings.

68 MSS R and Mf add: “certainly”; MS W adds: “now”; MS N adds: “Now certainly.”

69 “Seeing...redeemed” — ~ in MS Mf.

70 “now” — ~ in MSS G, N, B, O, L, M and Mf; HgT2, Printings and YS add: “certainly.”

71 Spanish family and MS N add: “and brought.”

72 “And” — ~ in MSS L, M and Mf, Printings and YS.

before thee, and thou, and thy lords, thy wives, and thy concubines, have drunk wine in them” (Daniel 5:23).

And it is written:74 “In that night was Belshazzar the king of the Chaldeans slain75 and Darius the Median took the throne, being about three-score and two years old” (Daniel 5:30-1).

The midrash has added relatively little to the explicit themes of Daniel: The king’s brazen profanation of the sacred Temple vessels inspires a divine punishment, as the end of Belshazzar’s reign and of Babylonian rule are announced through the “writing on the wall” and executed forthwith. The Biblical account, while emphasizing the connection to Nebuchadnezzar (5:2), does not dwell on the occasion for the feast, even as it does not provide a reason for Ahasuerus’ banquet.76 Such reasons are supplied by the midrash in its introduction of the calculation motif.77

The midrash has not yet explained the nature of Belshazzar’s miscalculation. It now returns us to the court of Ahasuerus whose own feast, which is painted in colors very similar to those of Belshazzar’s, is also ascribed to a celebration of the expiry of Jeremiah’s seventy years.

74 “And...written” — ~ in MS B.
75 MSS B*, O, L, M, Mf, Printings and YS add: “And it is written.”
76 Some medieval Jewish sources (Yosippon Ch. 3, etc.) claim that the feast was in celebration of a military victory over the Medes and Persians; see Ginzberg, Legends, 4:343 and 6:430, n. 2; I. S. Lange and S. Schwartz, ed., Midraš Daniel et Midraš Ezra (Jerusalem: Mikitez Nirdamim, 1968), 51.
77 The author of Daniel was of course very familiar with Jeremiah’s prophecy, whose exposition becomes the central topic of Ch. 9. However the whole point of that episode is to turn the seventy weeks into weeks of years, defining an era of 490 years that would conclude in the time of its author, an interpretation which was presumably intended to replace the simple seventy-year projection. See Hartmann’s commentary to Daniel, 426-50. To judge from Ginzberg, Legends, 6:430, n. 3, our Esther-Midrash is the only rabbinic source which ascribes Belshazzar’s feast to the expiration of the seventy years. This tradition is recorded by Jerome in his Commentary to Daniel; see Jay Braverman, Jerome’s Commentary on Daniel, 79: “The Hebrews hand down a story of this sort: Belshazzar, thinking that God’s promise had remained without effect until the seventieth year, by which Jeremiah had said that the captivity of the Jewish people would have to be ended … and turning the occasion of the failed promise into a celebration, gave a great banquet, by way of scoffing at the expectation of the Jews and at the vessels of the Temple of God.”
Remember that the entire preceding section about Belshazzar is being presented by the Esther-Midrash from the perspective of an extended indirect report of Ahasuerus’ thoughts.

[11b] He said: He counted and made an error; I shall count and not make an error.

Is it written "for the reign of Babylon?" “For Babylon” is written to the captivity of Babylon!

78 “He” — HgT: “Belshazzar”; MS W: “Ahasuerus.”
79 “counted” — Genizah fragment: “calculated.”
80 “He said…error” — in AgE.
81 “count” — MSS O, L, Mf, HgT, Printings and YS: “calculate.”
82 “It is written” — MS N: “What is ‘for Babylon?’”
83 MS Mf, HgT and EY add: “accomplished.”
84 MSS B* and O, HgT add: “(as it says:) ‘That after seventy years be accomplished for Babylon.’ In the end.”
85 MS B* adds: “In the end.” MS O adds: “which is the captivity of Jehoiachin. In the end”; EY adds: “which is Jehoiachin.”
How many are missing? — Eight. Put in eight in their stead: One of Belshazzar and (five) [two] of Darius, and three of Cyrus, two of his own — make seventy.

Ahasuerus has decided that Belshazzar began his count too early. Jeremiah’s vague phrase “for Babylon” was not intended to refer to the beginning of Nebuchadnezzar’s rule (i.e., the conquest of Nineveh), but to the Babylonian subjugation of Jehoiachin which took place, according to our calculations, in the eighth year of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign. This pushes forward the expiry date by eight years, which the midrash fills in according to the chronology of Daniel and Seder ‘olam:

• One more year of Belshazzar, referring to Daniel 8:1: “In the third year of the reign of king Belshazzar.” The understanding is that the calculation of the expiry of the seventy years had been in the second year.

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86 “How...missing” — Genizah fragment: “Take out.”
87 “missing” — MS Y* and AgE: “left over.”
89 “eight” — in Printings. MS M adds: “years.”
90 HgT1 adds: “year.”
91 “five” — in AgE.
92 “five...Cyrus” — G, W, Ashkenazic family, Mf, HgT2: “five of Darius and Cyrus”; MSS N, B, O, EY, HgT1, Genizah fragment: “two of Darius and three of Cyrus.”
93 “One...[two]” — in Genizah fragment. MS M adds: “the Mede.”
94 MS M adds: “the First.”
95 “and” — in MS N and AgE. HgT1 adds: “One year of Belshazzar and two of Darius and three of Cyrus and two of Ahasuerus; calculate forty-five of Nebuchadnezzar and three of Evil-merodach.”
96 MS W adds: “years.” HgT1 adds: “He took out the vessels of the Holy Temple and made use of them.
97 Cf. Braverman, Jerome’s Commentary on Daniel, 80, n. 5, who observes that the biblical text “makes no mention of the year of Belshazzar’s reign when the feast took place. Seder Olam Rabbah explicitly states that it was in the third year, obviously based on tradition.”
The two years of "Darius the Mede" are not enumerated explicitly in scripture. Given that Cyrus (see below) ruled for at least three years, two years is the largest time-period that can be assigned him if we wish to keep our total within the seventy-year limit. A two-year reign (at least) is also ascribed to Cyrus in the following midrash from *Seder 'olam* Ch. 28, based on Jeremiah 51:46, part of a chapter which prophesies the downfall of Babylon at the hand of the Medes:

...You do not find another year for Media in scripture, other than this one alone. And thus did Jeremiah say to them: "And lest your heart faint, and ye fear for the rumor that shall be heard in the land" —This is of Belshazzar.

"A rumor shall both come one year" —This is of Darius.

"And after that in another year shall come a rumor" —"And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldees' excellency, shall be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah" (Isaiah 13:19)... 

"And violence in the land, ruler against ruler" — This is Cyrus the Persian.

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98 As is well known the existence of such a king, mentioned only in Daniel, is not acknowledged by historians; see Hartmann's commentary to Daniel, 35-6, 50-2, 191, etc. An interesting attempt to reconstruct the origins of the tradition from within the logic of Jewish religious thinking may be found in Charles Torrey, "'Medes and Persians,'" *JAOS* 66 (1946), 1-15. It seems to be widely accepted that the necessity for a Median overower of the Babylonian empire was created by prophecies such as those of Isaiah 13:17 ff. and Jeremiah 51:11, 28:11, 28; which predict that it will be Media that will overthrow Babylonia (a belief which, as suggested by Torrey, was likely inspired by the Median victory against that earlier oppressive empire, Assyria).


100 Ed. Ratner 129; ed. Milikowsky 425, 538.

101 Rashi to Isaiah 13:19 (cited by Ratner): "Two punishments befell [Babylon] during two years: [1] Darius killed Belshazzar and ruled for one year; and [2] in the second year it was overturned from heaven like Sodom and Gomorrah, as we learned in *Seder 'olam* ..." Cf. his commentary to Isaiah 21:9 and Qimhi to 13:19.
As regards Cyrus, though there is no biblical source that explicitly defines the length of his rule, Daniel Chapter 10 is dated "in the third year of Cyrus king of Persia." Seder ʿolam Chapter 29 states that "Cyrus reigned for three partial (ת澁ך) years."

As in the case of Evil-merodach above, it is likely that the total of five years assigned to Darius and Cyrus was arrived at in order to achieve the desired total of seventy years in the third year of Ahasuerus' reign. The textual traditions are at variance over whether to treat the two reigns as a single unit of five years, or to divide it up into separate periods of two and three years apiece. This confusion likely reflects the dubious status of the midrashic support for Darius' two-year rule, whose source was the Seder ʿolam, in a passage which was not cited explicitly by the Talmud.

The assertion that Ahasuerus (Xerxes) was the immediate successor of Cyrus is another invention (albeit a venerable one) of the traditional Jewish historiography, found in Seder ʿolam Chapter 28:

"Also I in the first year of Darius the Mede, even I, stood to confirm and to strengthen him. And now I will shew thee the truth. Behold, there shall stand up yet three kings in Persia..." (Daniel 11:1-2).

—This is: Cyrus and Ahasuerus and Darius who built the Temple.

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102 Actually Cyrus ruled as emperor for ten years, from 539 (when he captured Babylon) until his death in 530, when he was succeeded by his son Cambyses. See Noth, 304; Bright, 362-4.


104 As we shall note below, in the conclusion of our pericope the Talmud seems to favor a division of one and three years. A widespread midrashic tradition, apparently not utilized either in Seder ʿolam or in our current passage, treats Darius and Cyrus as virtual co-regents ruling by rotation; cf. Ginzberg, Legends, 4:344-9, 6:430-2.

The identification of the third year of Ahasuerus' reign as the date of the feast is of course explicitly spelled out in Esther 1:2. The equation of the occasion for this feast with that of Belshazzar's—the removal of the Temple vessels and the calculations that justified it—is the invention of the midrashic authors and ties in with the central thematic concerns of the midrash.

Our midrashic narrative now continues, applying to Ahasuerus the phraseology that was employed previously with respect to Belshazzar:

[11b] When he saw that seventy years had elapsed and they had not been redeemed he said: Since now they will no longer be redeemed. He took out the vessels of the Holy Temple and made use of them. Satan came and danced among them and he killed Vashti.

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107 "he" — Printings and YS: "they."
108 "he saw that" — in MSS G and M.
109 "years" — in MSS G, O, M, Printings, EY, AgE.
110 "seventy...and" — in Genizah fragment.
111 MS N adds: "now certainly."
112 "now" — in Spanish family.
113 "Since...redeemed" — MS G: "certainly"; MS W: "now"; MSS N, B, Ashkenazic family, Mf, AgE: "now certainly"; ~ in Genizah fragment.
114 Spanish family add: "now."
115 Spanish family, AgE and Genizah fragment add: "and brought."
116 "came" — in Aramaic in MSS Y, L, HgT; all other witnesses word it in Hebrew.
117 Satan appears here in his function as executor of divine punishment; cf. E. Urbach, The Sages, 169-70. Similar images appear elsewhere in rabbinic literature; see e.g.: TB Pesahim 112b: "Do not stand in front of an ox that is coming up from the meadow because Satan is dancing between its horns"; Numbers rabbah, 20:11: "When a man goes to commit a sin Satan dances for him until he completes the transgression; once he has destroyed him he informs him..." In passages of this sort Satan is functioning

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The parallelism between the actions and fates of Belshazzar and Ahasuerus would not be complete unless both suffered equivalent punishments for their desecrations of the sacred vessels. Working from the scriptural sources alone, Ahasuerus appears to live out his reign none the worse for his blasphemy. Our anonymous commentator tries to furnish the story with some appearance of divine justice through his assertion that the Vashti incident (which, as our midrash will say, would eventually be regretted by the sobered king) was intended to fulfill that purpose.¹¹⁹

[11b] But did he not calculate correctly?

— He¹²⁰ also erred, because he should have counted to “the desolations of Jerusalem” (Daniel 9:2).

The preceding computations were so convincing that the Talmud is initially unable to fault them. Why indeed did the redemption foretold by Jeremiah not come to pass by Ahasuerus’ third year? The solution follows the lines of the previous passage: Just as Ahasuerus demonstrated above that Belshazzar had erred in beginning his count too early, so does the Talmud assert now that Ahasuerus himself should not have started counting from the captivity of Jehoiachin, but from the actual destruction of Jerusalem during the reign of Zedekiah, which we have dated to Nebuchadnezzar’s nineteenth year. Daniel 9:2, upon which this revised interpretation of Jeremiah is based, is explicitly

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less as a theological being than as a casual metaphor for a human who has put himself in a dangerous situation.

¹¹² The execution of Vashti is not spelled out in the biblical account; cf. Ginzberg, Legends, 4:378, 6:456-7, n. 42, and Chapter 6 below.

¹¹³ Midrashic literature supplies other ways in which Ahasuerus was punished for his sins (generally identified as his obstruction of the reconstruction of the Temple), notably through the diminution of his empire. See Ginzberg, Legends, 4:379, 6:457, nn. 47-8.

¹²⁰ “He” — MS O: “They.”
intended as an interpretation of Jeremiah's prediction.\textsuperscript{121} This new date is eleven years later than our previous one.

In the end\textsuperscript{122} how many are missing?\textsuperscript{123}—Eleven.

And how many did he\textsuperscript{124} reign?—Fourteen.

The chronology of the first fourteen years of Ahasuerus' reign is spelled out explicitly in Esther, and summarized in \textit{Seder olam} Chapter 29\textsuperscript{125} in a passage which was evidently being used by the author of our midrash:

\begin{quote}
"And\textsuperscript{126} in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem" (Ezra 4:6). "Then ceased the work of the house of God which is in Jerusalem. So it ceased unto the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia" (4:24).

"In the third year of his reign, he made a feast, etc." (Esther 1:3).
\end{quote}

For four years Esther remained hidden in Shushan the palace.\textsuperscript{127} "Esther was brought also unto the king's house in the tenth month, which is the month of Tevet, in the seventh year of his reign" (Esther

\textsuperscript{121}See Hartmann's concise summary of the various biblical authors' (including Zechariah and Chronicles) understandings of Jeremiah's prophecy on pp. 246-7 of his commentary to Daniel.

\textsuperscript{122}"In the end"—\textbf{Ashkenazi family}: "And in the end." MS N adds: "you find"; MS L and YS add: "when you calculate"; MS Mf adds: "what do you find?"

\textsuperscript{123}"missing"—MS Y*: "Alternate reading: left."

\textsuperscript{124}MS R adds: "also."

\textsuperscript{125}Ed. Ratner 132-5; ed. Milikowsky 431-2, 542-3.

\textsuperscript{126}The various additions mentioned in Ratner's n. 10 are not attested by the witnesses recorded in Milikowsky's apparatus.

\textsuperscript{127}This tradition is used in midrashic sources to exemplify Esther's modesty in trying (unlike her Gentile compatriots) to avoid being brought before the king. See for example \textit{Panim aherim} B, 63-4 (which is evidently citing \textit{Seder olam}). The Second Targum to Esther 2:8 elaborates: "And when Mordecai heard that virgins were being sought, he took Esther and hid her... so that they would not take her, and he placed her in a room inside a room so that the royal messengers would not see her; however the Gentile girls, when the messengers would pass through, would dance and show off their beauty, etc." (See also AgE, 20). See Ginzberg, \textit{Legends}, 4:389, 6:458, n. 55 (which does not cite \textit{Seder olam}). Ratner (n. 13) also refers us \textit{Genesis rabbah}, 1:1 (p. 1, and note Albeck's reference to the Kalir).
2:8). And for all five128 years Haman was amassing the spoils for Mordecai.129

"In the first month, that is, the month Nisan, in the twelfth year of king Ahasuerus, they cast Pur, etc." (Esther 3:7). On the thirteenth of Nisan130 Haman wrote the letters "to destroy, to kill, to cause to perish, all Jews" (Esther 3:13).

[On the fifteenth of Nisan Esther came before the king].131

On the sixteenth of Nisan they hanged Haman on the gallows.132

On the twenty-third of Sivan Mordecai wrote letters to revoke Haman’s letters.133

On the thirteenth of Adar134 "the Jews...slew and destroyed five hundred men" (Esther 9:5-6), and they hanged Haman’s ten sons (9:14) who "wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem" (Ezra 4:6).135 On the thirteenth of Adar, "on that day136 the number of those that were slain in Shushan the palace was brought before the king" (Esther 9:11).

At the same date in the next year: "Then Esther the queen, the daughter of Abihail, and Mordecai the Jew, wrote with all authority, to confirm this second letter of Purim" (9:29).

The points that are of direct relevance for our calculation are:

(1) Haman’s lot was cast in the twelfth year of Ahasuerus’ reign. (2) The actual events occurred during the following (i.e., thirteenth) year.

128 See Milikowsky’s apparatus; Ratner’s n. 15.

129 The meaning is apparently that Haman was amassing a personal fortune, which would eventually be taken over by Mordecai; see our analysis of Proem #4 in Chapter 2 above.

130 According to Esther 3:12.

131 This line is missing from MS N (Antonin), which forms the basis of Milikowsky’s edition; but is found in several other manuscripts cited in his critical apparatus. The date is not spelled out in the biblical text; see our analysis of TB Megillah 15a below. See Ginzberg, 4:423, 6:471-2, n. 142.

132 This follows from the tradition used in the previous note.

133 This is specified in Esther 8:9.

134 Esther 9:1.

135 See references in Ratner’s n. 20; Ginzberg, 6:463, n. 95.

136 I.e., “in the twelfth month...on the thirteenth day of the same” (9:1).
(3) Esther's "second letter" is presumed to have been sent a year later;\(^{137}\) giving us a minimum of fourteen years.

Now to resume the main thread of our discussion: We have successfully explained the error of Ahasuerus' calculations of why the redemption did not occur by the third year of his rule. This however raises a more serious difficulty: Even according to the latest revision of the starting date, which pushes it ahead by eleven years, the expiry of the seventy years should have occurred in the final year of Ahasuerus' reign. Does this not count as a refutation of Jeremiah's oracle? And thus does the Talmud object:

\[^{11b}\] In\(^{138}\) his\(^{139}\) fourteenth he ought to have built the Holy Temple.\(^{140}\) So why is it written "Then ceased the work of the house of God which is at Jerusalem. So it ceased unto the second year of the reign of Darius of Persia" (Ezra 4:24)?

Says Rava:\(^{141}\) They were partial years.

Rava is apparently claiming that the number of years in our calculations was artificially inflated, due to the fact that when kings succeeded one another within a single year that year would be counted for both the outgoing and incoming monarchs.\(^{142}\) This allows us to push the conclusion of the seventy years forward up to two years, into the reign of Darius "II" son of Ahasuerus, when the rebuilding of the Temple was actually completed.

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\(^{137}\) So also in Leqah tov 88: "And the Megillah was established in Ahasuerus' fourteenth year, as it says: 'to confirm this second letter of Purim' —In the second year it gained wide acceptance among the entire nation." See also Rashi here and to Esther 9:29; sources cited by Ratner, 134, n. 26. Cf. Moore's commentary to Esther, 95: "Exactly when her letter was written is not stated; it could have been ten days or ten years after Mordecai's."

\(^{138}\) "In" —MSS N, O, L, EY: "And in."

\(^{139}\) "his" — in MS M.

\(^{140}\) "Holy Temple" — HgT\(^2\): "House of God." The usage is taken from Ezra 4:24, cited below.

\(^{141}\) "Rava" — MS Mf: "Rabbah."

\(^{142}\) See Rashi.
Rava's dictum is based on a passage in *Seder Œlam* Chapter 29: “Cyrus reigned three partial years,” a phrase which is open to several interpretations. However we choose to divide up the reigns, the text seems to be saying that the total years of Darius and Cyrus now add up to four, rather than five years as we had previously estimated.

[12a] This was also taught (in a *baraita*): There was one year more to Babylon, Darius came up and completed it.

This *baraita* also derives from *Seder Œlam* (Chapter 28), where it appears as part of Daniel’s calculation that the seventy years

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144 Cf. Ratner’s n. 9; Milikowsky records no variants to the reading “three.”
145 Rashi understands this to mean that Darius ruled one and Cyrus three years. He bases himself on *Seder Œlam* Ch. 28 (Ratner 129): “You do not find a year of Media[n rule] in scripture, other than this one only,” implying that Darius’ reign was limited to one year, the second one overlapping Cyrus. Cyrus’ third year is recorded explicitly (Daniel 10:1). If we accept the reading according to which the Talmud’s original assumption was that Darius ruled two and Cyrus three years, then it is Darius’ years that are being counted as “partial,” as two rather than one. Hence Ratner observes (n. 9) that for the Talmud to make sense, *Seder Œlam* should have read “four” instead of three.
146 Note that the traditional commentators are in disagreement about where to introduce the “partial years.” Rashi places them between Darius the Mede and Cyrus (basing himself on *Seder Œlam*’s reference to Cyrus’ partial years) and between Nebuchadnezzar [Belshazzar? The reading in Rashi is problematic; see sources cited by Ratner] and Evil-merodach, with the conclusion of the seventy years not occurring until the completion of the Second Temple under Darius II. The “Rid” [Ditrani, Isaiah, *Tosefot rid*, reprint ed. (Jerusalem: 1974)] disputes this, arguing that if we take the language of *Seder Œlam* literally, Darius was the one who completed the full seventy years, adding one year to the total, after Belshazzar had already ruled for a further year following his own calculation. Hence the two-year discrepancy must have already been introduced prior to the start of Belshazzar’s reign, somewhere between Nebuchadnezzar, Evil-merodach and Belshazzar.
147 “was” — Thus in *AgE*; MSS *B* and *O*: “is”; ~ in other witnesses.
148 “one” — *G*, *O*, *M*, *EY*, *Printings*, *AgE*: “another.”
149 “Babylon” — MSS *B* and *O*: “Belshazzar.”
150 MSS *G*, *W*, *M*, *Mf*, *EY*, *HgT*, *Printings*, *AgE* add: “and.”
151 “came up” — Only in MS *Y*; all other witnesses: “stood.”
152 Ed. Ratner, 128-9; ed. Milikowsky, 425, 538.
expired in the first year of Darius the Mede. The Talmud is implicitly contrasting this tradition with our previous assumption that the period had already expired in Belshazzar's third year. This proves that a "partial" year had been counted sometime previous to this.\textsuperscript{153}

Rava's\textsuperscript{154} dictum raises some interesting questions about the relationship between the Talmud and \textit{Seder olam}. Why does he not simply cite the \textit{baraita} as such instead of seemingly trying to pass it off as his own dictum. A number of possibilities, some more likely than others, suggest themselves:

- Rava was not familiar with \textit{Seder olam} and arrived at the same solution independently. —Highly unlikely in light of the generally close dependence of our passage on \textit{Seder olam}.\textsuperscript{155}
- The word "partial" is not authentic to \textit{Seder olam}, but is a late scribal gloss based on the Rava's dictum in the Talmud.\textsuperscript{156}
- Rava's statement was intended as a quotation from \textit{Seder olam}.
- Rava was intentionally going beyond the scope of \textit{Seder olam}, as if to say: \textit{Seder olam} is speaking only of Cyrus, but the rule should be applied [also, or instead] to other kings.

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{153} Cf. Maharsha.
\textsuperscript{154} It is possible that "Rava" is not to be taken here as a literal attribution, but merely as a hypothetical reference to the author of the pericope, all of which is an elaboration of Rava's original dictum: "What is (the meaning of) 'when the king Ahasuerus sat' —When his mind became settled" [See our remarks at the beginning of the present chapter]. The Talmud is then saying, in effect: "This is how Rava \textit{would} have resolved the difficulty in conformity with his interpretation."
\textsuperscript{155} Pp. 19-68 of Ratner's Introduction consists of an investigation into this question. He concludes that \textit{Seder olam} was known to many, but not all, the Amoraim. On p. 65 there he mentions the explicit citation of the \textit{baraita} as evidence of Rava's familiarity with \textit{Seder olam} [in spite of the fact that that quote is most likely from the "anonymous Talmud"], ignoring our problem of Rava's bringing the \textit{baraita} in his own name. For an instructive attempt to deal with an analogous problem, see: Chaim Milikowsky, "\textit{Seder Olam} and the Tosefta," \textit{Tarbiy} 49 (3-4 1980), 246-263; \textit{Idem.}, \textit{Seder Olam: A Rabbinic Chronography}, 1:12-24.
\textsuperscript{156} It is however found in all Ratner's texts, and in several medieval from Rashi onwards.
\end{footnotesize}
Daniel's Miscalculation

Our Midrash has already succeeded in making its basic point, of demonstrating that Ahasuerus' feast was occasioned by the king's conviction that the seventy years allotted for the redemption of Israel had elapsed and that he could now with impunity continue to obstruct the construction of the Temple and to profane its vessels. The midrash now appends some assorted comments on related themes, brought here either by virtue of thematic associations, or with a view to tying up "loose ends."

[12a] Says Rava:157 And158 Daniel also159 erred in this calculation.160

As it is written: "In the first year of his reign I Daniel understood by books the number of the years, whereof the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah the prophet, that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolation of Jerusalem" (Daniel 9:2).

Since he says "I understood,"161 this implies that he162 erred.

It is not entirely clear how we are supposed to understand the exegetical basis of this comment. If we accept the reading of the principal textual tradition, according to which the midrash is rooted in the expression "בְּנַהֲרִים" then we are presumably supposed to attach

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157 "Says Rava" — MSS G, Mf: “Says Rabbah”; ~ in EY.
158 "And" — only in MS Y, AgE and EY.
159 "also" — ~ in MS O.
160 "this calculation" — MS O and EY: "that count."
161 MSS N, EY add: "by books."
162 MS O and EY add: "also."
significance to the morphology\textsuperscript{163} or meaning\textsuperscript{164} of the biblical word for “I understood.” Alternatively, the exegesis might be based on the choice of the ambiguous expression “\textit{סָפוֹר},” which can be rendered as either “books” or “numbers.”\textsuperscript{165} Nor does the Talmud spell out the precise content of Daniel’s misunderstanding. Most commentators\textsuperscript{166} agree with Rashi,\textsuperscript{167} that Daniel expected the Temple to be rebuilt at the date indicated in the verse (Daniel 9:1) “in the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus,” which he computed to be the conclusion of seventy years from Nebuchadnezzar’s subjugation of Jehoiakim; on reflection, however, Daniel realized that the starting point for the count should be the destruction of the First Temple, “to the desolations of Jerusalem,” as was deduced at the conclusion of the preceding talmudic discussions.\textsuperscript{168}


\textsuperscript{164} I.e., understanding implies that something had hitherto been \textit{not} understood or misunderstood.

\textsuperscript{165} This is Rashi’s interpretation here (possibly misunderstood by the translator of the Soncino English version, p. 67, n. 5), which is probably based on a different reading; and in his commentary to Daniel 9:2; though it hardly seems necessary to propose such an unlikely translation when the verse makes explicit mention immediately afterwards of “the number of the years.”

\textsuperscript{166} E.g., Ibn Ezra: “All the \textit{Ge’onim} are in unanimous agreement with the view of the ancients, who argued that Daniel erred in his calculation...”; \textit{Leqaḥ jow}, 87 (“When Belshazzar was killed and Darius son of Ahasuerus the Mede succeeded him, Daniel began to wonder about the expiration of the seventy years...” So also in the \textit{Meṣuddat dāvid} commentary to Daniel \textit{ad loc.}

\textsuperscript{167} As noted by Maharsha, Rashi does not deal with this question in his commentary to our talmudic passage, but rather in his commentary to Daniel 9:2.

\textsuperscript{168} Significant exceptions to the scholarly consensus include Judah Halevi (cited in Ibn Ezra’s commentary; see the fascinating exchange between the two scholars, as recorded there), who seems to have difficulties accepting that a sage and prophet such as Daniel should have succumbed to such an error; and R. Isaiah Ditrani in \textit{Tosefot rid}, who argues that the Talmud cannot be saying that Daniel initially computed from the

\textit{Continued on next page...}
One is tempted to speculate why Rava goes out of his way here to ascribe to Daniel an error of this sort, when the comment does not appear to have been occasioned by any pressing textual difficulty in the scriptural passage. Two related possibilities that come to mind are:

• Rava's dictum is to be viewed within the context of a more general tendency among some rabbis to discourage messianic speculations and the demoralizing consequences that ensue when the expected hopes are not fulfilled.\(^\text{169}\)

• Rava may be attempting to downgrade Daniel from the position of a true prophet, who speaks with oracular infallibility, to that of a righteous and wise man who is nonetheless subject to errors of human judgment. This issue (which is in evidence in such phenomena as the exclusion of Daniel from the "Prophets" section of the Bible)\(^\text{170}\) should probably be regarded as a by-product of the more general controversies over the status of apocalyptic speculations about the "end of days."\(^\text{171}\)

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subjugation of Jehoiakim ("to Babylon"), since that very verse in Daniel states explicitly that he knew that he was supposed to calculate from "the desolations of Jerusalem"; hence Ditrani prefers to interpret that the whole passage took place in the reign of Darius "II" (the Persian), that Daniel had begun his count from the destruction of the first Temple, and that the discrepancy consisted only of the two "partial" years mentioned previously by the Talmud. Ditrani does not appear to have read Rashi's comments on Daniel 9:2, or he would have noted that this realization (i.e., that the count should begin from Zedekiah's captivity) is perceived by the midrash as the result of Daniel's "understanding," not its premise. But cf. Leqah tov, 88: "...there was one year missing to complete the seventy 'to the desolations of Jerusalem,' so Darius the Great [i.e., the Persian!] arose and completed them."

\(^{169}\) For an overview of this issue in rabbinic literature see: E. Urbach, The Sages, especially 680-5, 1002-3. On 681, Urbach reviews the attitudes of some Babylonia Amora'im regarding the desirability of messianic speculation, but does not deal with Rava (however see ibid., p. 65).

\(^{170}\) See Di Lella's Introduction to the Anchor Bible commentary to Daniel, 25.

\(^{171}\) An interesting discussion of the question may be found in Ginzberg, Legends of the Jews, 6:413-4, n. 76, where he observes that this seems to be a point of contention between Babylonian and Palestinian sources: The latter, while agreeing that the Book of Daniel belongs among the Hagiographa, entertain no doubt that the man Daniel was a true prophet; the Babylonian Talmud, on the other hand, tends to deny Daniel prophetic status; as in TB Megillah 3a / Sanhedrin 94a [on this passage, see: E. Segal, "'The Goat of the Slaughterhouse...'- On the Evolution of a Variant Reading in the

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Our discussion continues:

[12a] At any rate, the verses do contradict one another! It is written: “that after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you” (Jeremiah 29:10); and it is written: “that he would accomplish...in the desolations of Jerusalem” (Daniel 9:1)!

In keeping with the premises with which we have been operating so far, there are two different sets of seventy-year calculations that are being referred to in the scriptures:

1) Jeremiah’s count beginning from the captivity of Jehoiachin, which concludes at the end of the reign of Darius the Mede, and the beginning of that of Cyrus.

2) Daniel’s count, which starts at the destruction of the Temple under Zedekiah, and concludes with the building of the Second Temple in the second year of Darius the Persian.

Note that the Talmud’s objection seems to tacitly reject what has hitherto been its working assumption, that Daniel’s calculation is an interpretation of Jeremiah’s, not an alternative one. The new interpretation is necessitated by the fact that the Bible itself (Ezra 1:1) identifies Cyrus’ decree as the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy.

The Talmud now proposes a solution to the contradiction:


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172 “It” — MS L and YS: “For it.”

173 The Talmud’s inconsistency on this point seems to have inspired R. Isaiah Ditrani to apply all the references to Darius the Persian; see our discussion of his views above.


175 “but...redemption” — Only in MSS Y, R, HgT2, AgE; Others: ~.
And this is what is written: "Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and put it also in writing, saying" (Ezra 1:1); and it is written: "Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The Lord God of Heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah" (1:2); "Who is there among you of all his people, his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel, he is the God which is in Jerusalem" (1:3).

Rava asserts that the decree of Cyrus was actually the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy which foretold, not the full restoration of the Temple, but a more limited "visiting," which was accomplished when permission was granted for the return of the exiles. The "visiting" is identified by the various commentators as: the stirring of Cyrus' spirit; the return of the Jews to their homeland; their release from servitude; or the laying of the foundations for the Second Temple.

"Cyrus His Anointed"

[12a] Rav Nahman bar Rav Hisda expounded: What is it that is written "Thus saith the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him..." (Isaiah 45:1)?

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176 "And" — ~ in MSS B and R, and added in emendations.
177 "and...written" — ~ in MSS G, N, B, Printings; MS R: "for it is written."
178 MSS B*, O, M, Mf, EY add: "and it is written"; MS R adds: "for it is written."
179 There might be midrashic significance to the fact that the same root used to designate "visitation", "yw", is employed in Ezra 1:2 to mean that God has "charged" him with the building of the Temple; the traditional commentators do not pick up on that possibility.
180 Qimhi's commentary to Jeremiah 29:10.
181 Rashi to Ezra 1:1; Mesuddat david to Jeremiah 29:10; Maharsha to the Talmud.
182 Ibn Ezra to Ezra 1:1.
183 Rashi to Ezra 1:1;
184 "Rav Hisda" — MS P and EY: "Isaac."
185 "expounded" — ~ in MS M.
Is Cyrus his anointed?

—Rather: The Holy One said to the “anointed one” (Messiah): I accuse you with regard to Cyrus. I said “he shall build my city, and he shall let go my captives” (Isaiah 45:13).

And he said: “Who is there among you of all his people, his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem” (Ezra 1:3)!

This last passage is of course not an integral part of the preceding midrashic exposition, but a separate comment that is brought here because of its thematic resemblance to Ezra 1:2, which was quoted by Rava.

Rav Nahman objects to the fact that Isaiah refers to the Persian king as His “anointed one,” a term which carries with it special associations in Jewish parlance, whether as the actual Messiah or, at the least, as one who has been literally anointed with oil as part of the religious investiture rites of a priest or king.

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186 “Is” — Spanish family: “And is”; Printings and AgE: “And was.”
187 “his” — found only in MS Y.
189 “you” — ~ in Ashkenazic family.
190 MS M adds: “king of Persia.”
191 “city” — Emended according to biblical text; MSS Y, G, O, W, L, R, HgT2, Printings, YS, AgE, Genizah fragments: “house.”
193 “captives” — only in MS Y, Printings and AgE; all others: “captivity.”
194 “And” — ~ in MS R.
195 He was a fourth-generation Babylonian; see Albeck, Introduction to the Talmud, 370-1.
196 For an overview of rabbinic Messianic concepts, see Urbach, The Sages, 649-90 and bibliographical references on 990, n. 2, and 1034-6.
197 This is the view of Rashi. On the various usages of the root קדש, see the standard dictionaries.
The solution makes use of a common midrashic device,\textsuperscript{198} that of re-punctuating the verse so as to alter the relationships between its components. In the present instance, a separation is inserted between "to his anointed" and "to Cyrus," so that the second part of the verse is no longer taken as a modifier of the first, but as the content of God's message to the Messiah. The verse is now read as follows: "Thus saith the Lord to his Messiah [I am complaining to you] about Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him..."\textsuperscript{199} It is not really explained how or why God should be addressing the Messiah on this occasion. The impression is that the Messiah is, as it were, "waiting in the (celestial) wings" for certain events to occur before his coming, but is being obstructed by Cyrus' half-hearted execution of his orders. Our midrash criticizes Cyrus for not taking more decisive measures to ensure the rebuilding of the Temple.

Louis Ginzberg\textsuperscript{200} has collected several instances of such negative assessments of Cyrus in the Babylonian Talmud. For example, in \textit{TB Rosh hash-shanah} 3b-4a several different sages vie to adduce midrashic evidence to the effect that Cyrus disappointed his initial noble intentions. Ginzberg suggests that these criticisms should be regarded as a characteristically Babylonian phenomenon, which contrasts with the generally favorable judgment of the Persian ruler in Palestinian sources.\textsuperscript{201} He attributes this difference to the different political situa-

\textsuperscript{198} On the phenomenon, see I. Heinemann, \textit{Darkhei ha'-aggadah}, 109-10; James Kugel, "Two Introductions to Midrash," 77-80.

\textsuperscript{199} Note however Rashi's observation that the Masoretic cantillation separates "to his anointed" from "(to) [concerning] Cyrus," implying that the latter is not simply modifying the former (cf. Norzi's Minhat shai to the verse). What the Talmud is doing here is applying to a scriptural text the method of אֶrze אֶשֶּר, which it employs so frequently in its interpretations of Tannaitic texts; see: J. N. Epstein, \textit{Mavo' lenosah ha-mishnah} (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1948), 595-672.

\textsuperscript{200} \textit{The Legends of the Jews} 6:433-4, n. 7.

\textsuperscript{201} The above-mentioned pericope in \textit{TB Rosh hash-shanah} 3b-4a provides good support for this view. It opens with a complementary remark by the Palestinian R. Abbahu, which is afterwards contrasted or modified with a long series of derogatory comments most of which are attributed to Babylonian sages. Nonetheless, Ginzberg also includes references to derogatory statements from Palestinian sources (e.g., \textit{Song

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tions of the two Jewish communities: In the Land of Israel they looked to Persia as an ally in the struggle against Rome, whereas in Babylonia they felt the sting of Persian or Zoroastrian persecution. E. E. Urbach has challenged Ginzberg’s view, arguing that Palestinian sources also express negative evaluations of Cyrus and his proclamation. For Urbach, it is precisely in Roman Palestine that we ought to seek the origins of this midrashic motif, as a reaction to Julian the Apostate’s failed attempt to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. Without any sympathy for Jews or Judaism, but acting out of a determination to restore the traditional values of pagan Rome and to demonstrate his disdain for Christianity, Julian’s project ultimately failed. It would be natural, argues Urbach, that the rabbis would note the parallels between the two foreign monarchs and, in typical

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of Songs rabbah, 6:[11] in the name of R. Johanan; Ecclesiastes rabbah, 10:12; Esther rabbah, Proem 8).

202 See also: Samuel Krauss, Paras veromi batalmud uvamidrashim (Jerusalem: 1948).

203 E. E. Urbach, “Kores vehakhrazat be’einei haza”l,” Molad 157 (1961), 377-74 [reprinted in: The World of the Sages: Collected Studies (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1988), 407-10]. Urbach does not mention Ginzberg at all, but it is hard to understand that his remarks could have been intended as anything other than a refutation of Ginzberg’s hypothesis. Urbach suggests as well that the later Jewish traditions may really preserve some authentic memories from the Persian era, including the anti-Cyrus propaganda of Ctesias.

204 His central proofs are from: (a) TB Rosh hash-shanah 3b, where the Palestinian R. Isaac refers to Cyrus’ eventual moral decline; (b) R. Johanan’s cynical assessment of Cyrus’ motives in Song of Songs rabbah, 4:4. Those sources which blame the inferior status of the Second Temple on its foreign patron (e.g., Pesiqta rabbati, 160a) need not be perceived necessarily as ad hominem criticisms of Cyrus.

midrashic fashion, would read into Cyrus’ actions the questionable motives that had guided Julian. As was the case with Julian, so too with Cyrus, a project that was founded upon such impure motivations was doomed from the start to failure.

Concluding Remarks

The complex midrash to which the present chapter was devoted is, unlike much of the other material in the Esther-Midrash, a decidedly Babylonian creation with no substantial parallel outside the Babylonian Talmud. At its core stand four dicta of the fourth-century Babylonian Amora Rava, which presumably constitute the earliest strata of the pericope:

1) Says Rava: What is {the meaning of} “*when the king Ahasuerus sat*” —When his mind became settled.

2) Says Rava: They were partial years.

3) Says Rava: And Daniel also erred in this calculation.

4) [At any rate, the verses contradict one another!...] Says Rava: Merely for “visiting,” but not for redemption.

While it is not inconceivable that these statements should have derived from separate and unrelated contexts, the coincidences of their common attribution and the fact that they are not found elsewhere in the Babylonian Talmud makes it much more likely that they originated in an integrated midrashic interpretation.

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207 I am ignoring for purposes of this summary the last two units, which are (as we have already stated) independent passages appended here through associative redaction. For an overview of the source-structure of the pericope see: A. Weiss, *Studies in the Literature of the Amoraim*, 282-3, where it is observed that the passage is made up of “long and short *derashot* by Rava to Esther 1:2-3... Rava’s expositions have a distinctive character. Their point of departure is contradictions between verses, and their sole purpose seems to be to resolve these contradictions.”

208 We entertained above the possibility that in at least some of the cases the attribution might be fictitious or hypothetical.
The fundamental themes of the pericope lend themselves well to a homily on Esther; in particular, we should note the intertextual parallel that is drawn between Belshazzar’s and Ahasuerus’ feasts, and the resulting insights provided as to the reasons for Ahasuerus’ banquet and the identity of the vessels that were displayed there, as well as the monarchs’ agendas vis à vis the Temple (which connect conveniently to Ahasuerus’ appearance in Ezra 4:6 in the role of the king who obstructs the Temple’s reconstruction).

In the final analysis however, the greater part of the passage is not devoted to these provocative and fascinating thematic concerns, but rather to intricate and elaborate calculations of the respective chronologies of Jeremiah’s “seventy year” prophecy. It is difficult to imagine how such intellectually demanding stuff could have been incorporated into a sermon directed to a congregation of non-mathematicians.

We might argue initially that the mathematical component of the passage—most of which is contained in the (presumably later) “anonymous Talmud” additions, and is in any case copied largely out of Seder olam—did not occupy such a central position in the homily’s original form. The facts however militate strongly against such a position: Three of Rava’s four attributed dicta relate directly to the computational aspect of the pericope.209 None of them make complete sense unless supported by the specific dates of the reigns and events in question. Even if we give the ancients credit (as we ought) for widespread familiarity with the Bible,210 it stills strikes us as farfetched that the average congregant in a Babylonian synagogue would be expected to have mastered the intricacies of the Seder olam chronology, or to be able to recalculate it on the spot.

209 Whereas the first merely serves to connect it to Esther 1:2, and relates only peripherally to the thematic content.

210 But note that the texts being referred to here are, almost without exception, not taken from passages that would constitute part of the normal synagogal lections.