

## Did the Jews Return to Judah in 538 or 537 BCE?

After their captivity in Babylon in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, some of the Jews returned to their homeland Judah shortly after the Persians under Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon in 539 BCE. For the last century, many scholars and other commentators have pinned the return date to 537 or 538 BCE. This essay briefly examines the evidence why 538 is probably the correct date.

While there is much scholarly discussion and controversy about these Old Testament books, for the purposes of this essay I will ignore the controversies and assume that the OT accounts in Ezra and 2 Chronicles can be taken at face value.

### The 538 BCE Date for the Return Is Indicated By Josephus

Shortly after the Persian conquest of Babylon, Cyrus in his 1<sup>st</sup> regnal year of 538/7 BCE, issued a decree allowing the Jews and other captives of Babylon to return to their homelands.—Ezra 1-4; 2 Chronicles 36. The OT gives no details about exactly when in his 1<sup>st</sup> year Cyrus issued his decree, or about how long it took the captives to prepare to go home. Based on reasonable speculation about such details, a few authors have argued that the Jews would have returned anywhere from late 538 through 533 BCE. The largest number, so far as I can see, have decided on 537, with 538 a close second. Very few authors actually discuss these details; most simply accept what others have said.

Briefly, a synchronism between Josephus in *Against Apion*, and the book of Ezra provides good evidence that the Jews returned to Judah in 538 BCE. Both accounts refer to the laying of the temple foundations about half a year after the Jews were settled in their cities in the month of Tishri (autumn). Ezra gives only a relative date in Jewish terms, while Josephus gives a date in terms of the years of Cyrus' reign, i.e., in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of Cyrus' reign. This date is almost certainly in the spring of 537 BCE; hence the Jews must have returned half a year earlier, in the autumn of 538. See the diagram and extended discussion below.

The Jews used a secular calendar beginning with the seventh month Tishri (Sep/Oct), and a religious calendar beginning with the first month Nisan (Mar/Apr). The Babylonian calendar began in Nisan.

### Details Briefly Stated

Ezra 1 states that Cyrus, in his first year (using the accession-year system for regnal years),<sup>1</sup> decreed that the Jews could return to Judah. Cyrus' first year was Nisan, 538 BCE through Adar, 537 BCE by the Babylonian dating method. Ezra 3:1-7 states that by the seventh month Tishri, the Jews were settled in their cities, and at that time they gathered in Jerusalem to initiate the rebuilding of the temple. So the

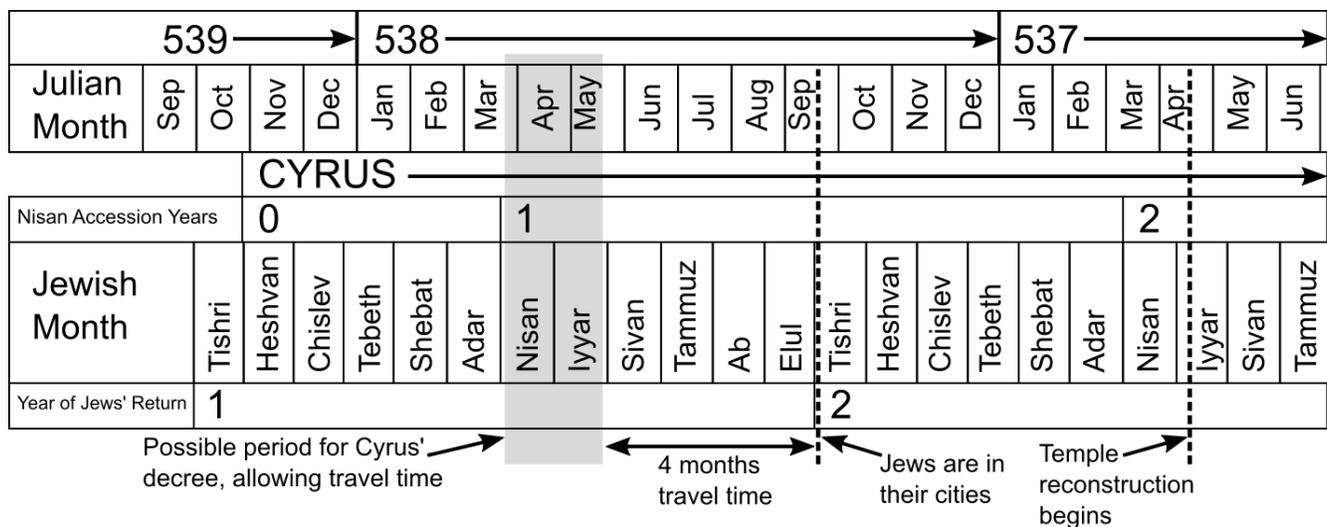
---

1 Two basic methods of numbering the years of a king's reign were used by the Jews: the accession-year and non-accession-year systems. The Babylonians used the first. In the first, the year in which the king began to reign was called the "accession year", the next year the 1<sup>st</sup> year, etc. Today we would number it the 0<sup>th</sup> year. In the second, the year in which the king began to reign was called the "1<sup>st</sup> year", the next year the 2<sup>nd</sup> year, etc. According to Edwin Thiele, writing in various editions of *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, the Jews sometimes used one or the other methods, which has contributed to much confusion in deciphering the chronology of the Jewish kings.

year that ended immediately before Tishri was the first year of the Jews' coming home, and the new year beginning in Tishri was the second year. Note that I am not stating here whether that was Tishri of 538 or 537 BCE.

Ezra 3:8-10 states that the temple foundations were laid in the second month of that second year. In *Against Apion* I,21, Josephus states that "in the second year of the reign of Cyrus [the temple's] foundations were laid." Therefore, this second Jewish year overlaps with the second year of Cyrus. Since Cyrus' second year began in Nisan, 537 BCE, the second month Iyyar was also in 537, and the first year of the Jews' return was in 538 BCE.

The following diagram illustrates the above concepts:



## Extended Discussion

A synchronism between Josephus and the book of Ezra provides strong evidence that the Jews returned to Judah in 538 BCE. Both refer to the laying of the temple foundations about half a year after the Jews were settled in their cities in the month of Tishri (autumn). Ezra gives only a relative date in Jewish terms, while Josephus gives a date in terms of the years of Cyrus' reign, which is solidly established. This date is in the spring of 537 BCE; hence the Jews must have returned half a year earlier, in the autumn of 538. Below are the details. The above diagram illustrates the concepts.

Ezra 1 states that Cyrus, in his first year (using the accession-year system of dating kings' reigns), decreed that the Jews could return to Judah. Cyrus' first year was Nisan (Mar/Apr), 538 BCE through Adar (Feb/Mar), 537 BCE. Neither the Bible nor other sources say exactly when he issued this decree.

Ezra 3:1-7 states that by the seventh Jewish month Tishri (Sep/Oct), the Jews were settled in their cities, and at that time they gathered in Jerusalem to offer sacrifices and collect money for the rebuilding of the temple. From this we deduce that, whatever modern calendar year this was, 538 or

537, the Jews returned in the preceding Jewish year, since the secular Jewish year began in Tishri (keep in mind that the sacred Jewish calendar began six months offset from Tishri, in Nisan, and the Jewish months were numbered beginning with Nisan). In other words, the year in which the Jews returned was the first year of their coming home, and the new year beginning in the Tishri mentioned in Ezra 3:1 was the second year of their coming home. The question is whether that Tishri was in 538 or 537 BCE.

Ezra 3:8, 10 states that a little later in that second year the Temple foundations were laid (NASB):

8 Now in the second year of their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak and the rest of their brothers the priests and the Levites, and all who came from the captivity to Jerusalem, began the work and appointed the Levites from twenty years and older to oversee the work of the house of the LORD.

10 Now when the builders had laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests stood in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD according to the directions of King David of Israel.

The crucial piece of information here is that the Temple foundations were laid in the second month (Iyyar; Apr/May) of the same year in which the Jews gathered in Jerusalem immediately after they returned to Judah.

The Bible does not explicitly relate these events to any event that can be firmly dated to our modern calendar. However, a careful examination of historical data indicates that it was Cyrus' general practice to free captives from the nations he conquered shortly after he secured his authority. Since he captured Babylon in October, 539 BCE, and the inhabitants would have known of his general practice, they would have expected him soon to begin freeing Babylonian captives, including the Jews. It is a good bet that, for political purposes, Cyrus would have done this around the time of celebrating the beginning of his first regnal year. If the books of Daniel and Jeremiah contain valid historical information about the fall of Babylon (Dan. 9:1, 2; Jer. 29:10), the Jews would have anticipated being freed soon after Cyrus entered the city in late October, 539 BCE.

A careful reading of Ezra 1-3 indicates that there might have been very little delay between the issuing of Cyrus' decree and the departure of the Jewish captives for Judah. Because Cyrus' first regnal year began in Nisan, and the Jews arrived by Tishri, if this all occurred in 538 BCE, there would have been at most six months for the Jews to complete their preparations and journey, and get settled in Judah. Since the trip takes about three to four months for a normal caravan, there is just enough time for these events to happen in 538 BCE.

Some authors speculate that Cyrus issued his decree sometime in late 538 or early 537 BCE, still in his first regnal year. They then argue that the Jews journeyed back to Judah in 537 BCE.

How then, can one decide whether the Jews returned in 538 or 537?

Josephus provides the tie breaker.

In *Against Apion* I,21, Josephus states:

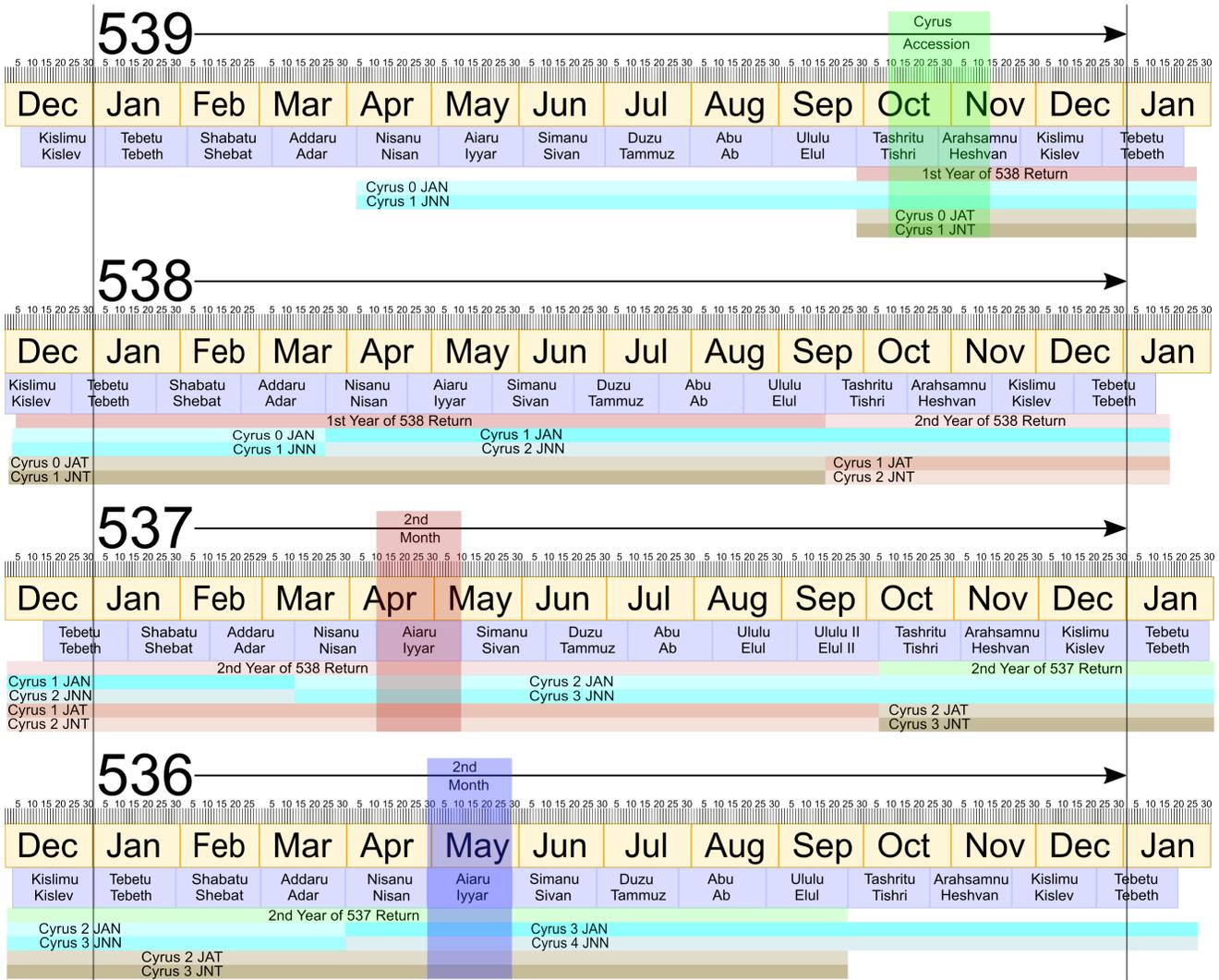
These accounts agree with the true histories in our books; for in them it is written that Nebuchadnezzar, in the eighteenth year of his reign, laid our temple desolate, and so it lay in that state of obscurity for fifty years; but that in the second year of the reign of Cyrus its foundations were laid, and it was finished again in the second year of Darius.

The crucial piece of information is that the temple foundations were laid in the second regnal year of Cyrus.

Combining this with the information from Ezra that the temple foundations were laid in the second month (Iyyar) of the second year of the Jews' return to Judah, we must conclude that this second year corresponds or overlaps with the second year of Cyrus. Since Cyrus' second year began in Nisan, 537 BCE and Iyyar was the second month of that regnal year, the first year of the Jews' return was in 538 BCE.

The above discussion assumes that Josephus used Babylonian-style dating—the accession-year method with the year beginning with Nisan. The reasoning also works if one uses non-accession-year-Tishri dating for Cyrus' reign, as some might argue that Josephus did, since it was common among the Jews. However, if one assumes that Josephus used accession-year Tishri dating, 538 is ruled out and 537 becomes the viable option, but it is not likely that Josephus used it. Least likely is that Josephus used non-accession-year Nisan dating, because then neither 538 nor 537 works. The following diagram illustrates these concepts.

## Return of the Jews: 538 BCE or 537 BCE ?



JAN = Josephus Accession Nisan dating  
 JNN = Josephus Non-Accession Nisan dating  
 JAT = Josephus Accession Tishri dating  
 JNT = Josephus Non-Accession Tishri dating

In conclusion, I argue that Josephus, with Ezra as a starting point, has provided the crucial information to determine that 538 and not 537 BCE was the year of the return of the Jews to Judah.