

Original Paper

Hebraic Influences in *The Life of Lazarillo de Tormes*

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Abstract

*The focus of this article is the impact of the Hebrew language with its literature, philosophy, biblical exegesis, and history on the sixteenth century anonymous author of *The Life of Lazarillo de Tormes*. I assumed the task of investigating the Jewish cultural heritage embedded in this work, as my studies in Hebrew Language and Literature could contribute towards a fuller comprehension of this masterpiece. And indeed, in addition to linguistic and biblical associations, I have detected influences that appear inspired by the monumental works of medieval Jewish Spanish theologians and philosophers—Hisdai Crescas, Maimonides, Nahmanides, and Joseph Albo in particular. I invite the reader to share and comment on this analysis.*

Keywords

Toledo, Tormes, heals, horn, Escalona, Maqueda, Showbread, Ispan, salvacion, Jerusalem

The focus of this article is the impact of the Hebrew language and heritage on the anonymous author of *The Life of Lazarillo de Tormes* as reflected in this influential picaresque masterpiece that is a critique of the clergy and aristocracy of Spain in the sixteenth century. The name itself - Lazarillo de Tormes - is symbolic of this theme. Lazarillo is the Hebrew Elazar, which means God helps, in the Bible the name of one of the sons of Aaron the High Priest. *Tormes*, although the name of a river wherein he was actually born, is the Hebrew *tirmos* of verse 14 of the well-known Psalm 91 that describes the divine protection of the faithful, . . . *The young lion and the serpent you shall trample [tirmos] under feet*. And so, with the help of God, the author aims to trample the ferocious aristocracy and clergy.

Lazarillo de Tormes is the son of Tome Gonzales and Antona Perez, names that reflect the Hebrew of the Bible. Tome is the Hebrew *tam* [תם]. The noun *tamim*, the adjective *tam*, and the verb root *t.m.m* refer to integrity, honesty, or purity, with numerous citations throughout the Canon. Psalm 18:26 declares, *With the upright man [tamim] You show Yourself upright [tetamam]*, and verse 31 tells us, *As for God, His way is perfect [tamim]*. Jacob is described in Genesis 25:27 as an *ish [man] tam*. Noah was an *ish tamim*. God commands Abraham, *walk before me and be tamim* (Gen. 17, p. 1). While *tam*

is a satirical description; the Hebrew *tamei* [טמא], which is phonetically similar but a completely different word, describes he who is defiled or ritually impure. Gonzalez also bespeaks the Hebrew root *g.n.z.*, meaning hidden, and *al* is the Hebrew referring to God. The common ending *ez* has been demonstrated to signify *eret Zion*, the land of Zion (Cortez, 2011). Gonzalez may suggest the forced lifestyle of the Conversos who were secretly practicing their Judaism. Antona recalls the Hebrew Canaanite name, Anat, the consort of the idol, Baal.

Perez, however, is the Hebrew Peretz of Genesis 38:29. The generally known incident relating to this term is the naming of Tamar's twin child Peretz because his brother was expected to have been born before him—. . . *and she [the midwife] said, 'Why have you made such a breach for yourself?' Therefore his name was called Perez* (Genesis, 38: 29).

Zaide, although a positive figure, was nevertheless guilty of theft and hence bespeaks the Hebrew *zed*, referring to a wicked or wanton individual but also combining the connotation of an elder. It appears that the anonymous author was familiar with Psalms 86:14 (also 19:14, 119:21, 51, 69, 78, 85, 122), *O God, the proud [zedim] are risen up against me. . . .* Rashi interprets *zedim* to refer to Doeg Ha'Edomic and Ahitofel, eminent chief judges but guilty in their conspiracy against David.

That the author was familiar with the Hebrew Bible is evidenced by allusions and phrases from the Bible woven into his masterpiece. The Book of Jonah that recounts how Jonah was in the belly of the whale for three days resonates in Lazarillo's description of the three days of unconsciousness from the injuries incurred by the second master, the priest. The third master, the squire, instructed Lazarillo "to lie down at his feet," the identical instruction given by Naomi to Ruth when encountering Boaz: *And it shall be, when he lies, down... and you shall go in, and uncover his feet, and lay yourself down. . .* (Ruth 3:4). "The Lord be blessed" is prevalent throughout the Hebrew Canon, e.g., Genesis 9:26, Exodus 18:10, Psalms 28:6. "God is my witness," as Lazarillo had sworn concerning his sentiments towards the arrogant, is biblical, also the same language used by Laban (a thief himself) in his conversation with Jacob (Gen. 31:50), "God is witness between me and you . . .".

The author seems to have been familiar with the biblical prohibition, both literal and otherwise, *You shall not curse the deaf nor put a stumbling block before the blind, but shall fear your God. . .* (Lev. 19:14). Indeed, Lazarillo specifically transgresses this dictum by causing the blind man to collide into a column – a stumbling block in every sense of the word, at the same time demonstrating his lack of fear of God. The "infernal bull" identified with the devil that gored Lazarillo also recalls the Golden Calf and the resultant punishment and destruction. He suffered for three days from his bull injury; Israel suffered the loss of 3,000 casualties. He seems also to have been familiar with the well-known teaching in Menahot 43 that one is required to recite one hundred blessings every day, reflected from his statement that the blind man knew over one hundred prayers by heart.

The constable's act of throwing his staff on the ground reenacts the biblical account (Ex. 5: 8-13) of Aaron throwing down his staff before Pharaoh which became a snake, symbolic of the contempt that the author had for the corrupt authority of the law, the clergy, and for society as a whole. The kicks of

“the treacherous mule” with regards to the constable’s vicious (albeit feigned) reaction is borrowed from the incident of Bil’am and his rebellious mule (Num. 22).

The prayer of the pardoner, “Lord God, from whom nothing is hidden, to whom all secrets are known, for whom nothing is impossible” recalls Genesis 18:13, *Is anything too hard for the Lord?*; or Psalm 139:4-7, *For there is not a word in my tongue, But, O God, you know it altogether. . . Whither shall I flee from your presence?* Lazarillo poured water for the squire to wash his hands, reflective of Jewish custom. There are numerous expressions of faith or gratitude, and these are addressed to God, and to God alone, indicative of Jewish belief.

Most blatant is the argument of the pardoner in his debate with the constable that paraphrases the speech of Moses to Korah and his company that rebelled against him (Num. 16:28-34):

If these men die a common death of all men, or if they be visited after the visitation of all men; then the Lord has not sent me. But if the Lord creates a new thing, and the earth opens her mouth, and swallows them up, with all that appertain to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, then you shall understand that these men provoked the Lord. And it came to pass, as he had made an end of speaking all these words, that the ground split beneath them, and the earth opened up her mouth, and swallowed them up

Moreover, the pardoner enhances his argument saying: “. . . If what he says is true, and I am purveying wickedness and falsehood, may this pulpit . . . sink seven fathoms under the earth . . .”. The author was obviously aware of the Talmudic statement in Sotah 10b that there are seven divisions of Gehenna.

The prayer for the forgiveness of the constable is another paraphrase of the Bible: Ezekiel 33:11 underscores the efficacy of repentance that is incorporated and repeated in the Yom Kippur liturgy, “Say to them, . . . says the Lord God, ‘I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked ; but that the wicked turn from his way and live . . .’”. And Lazarillo recounts, “Since, our Lord, he said, surely did not desire the death of the sinner, but wanted him to live and repent . . . he begged our Lord to pardon the sinner . . .”.

It is plausible that the author would be acquainted with the commentary by Nahmanides (Ramban, 1194-1270)—Catalan rabbi, biblical commentator, halakhist, physician and kabbalist, famous also for his forced participation at the Disputation at Barcelona of 1263—integrating some of Ramban’s well known teachings into his book. Thus, while treating the wounds with wine that he inflicted on Lazaro from the jug of wine, the blind man said, “What do you think of that, Lazaro? The same thing that got you hurt heals you...” In his commentary on Exodus 15:25 *Vayorehu Hashem eitz [And the Lord showed him a tree]* in reference to the miracle performed by Moses in sweetening the bitter waters, Nahmanides explains that the term *vayorehu* actually means “and God instructed him”, whereas *va-yarehu* means God showed him. Thus God instructed him that he heals the bitter with the bitter. Such also was the case with Elisha who cast something that spoils water (salt) into water that was

spoiled in order to cure. So too, contemplating the brass snake of Numbers 21, Nahmanides avers, was the method of healing: illness healed by the cause of illness: “The Torah removes injury by means of the cause of injury, and heals illness by means of the cause of sickness...” (Ramban, 1975 ed., p. 235). The squire’s comment that “men who have any self-respect should eat moderately” also recalls the meaning of holiness as defined by Nahmanides in Leviticus 19:2: “To practice moderation even in matters which are permitted” (Ramban, 1974 ed., p. 282).

For Lazarillo, the difficulty of finding a good master is equated with creation ex-nihilo, echoed in his exasperation: “Find a good master! Where? . . . Unless God were to make one from scratch, as he made the world.” The anonymous author seems to have been acquainted with the debates concerning this principle of belief emphasized by the Spanish philosopher Hisdai Crescas (1340-1410), the leading rabbinic authority of the Jewish community of Aragon, in his magnum opus, *Or Hashem* (The Light of the Lord) as well as by Nahmanides beginning with Genesis 1:1: “... it was indeed very necessary to begin the Torah with the chapter, *In the beginning God created* for this is the root of faith, and he who does not believe in this and thinks the world was eternal denies the essential principle of the religion. . .” (Ramban, 1971 ed., p. 17). Or, he may have perused *Sefer ha-Ikkarim* – Book of Principles, the monumental work of Joseph Albo (15th century Spanish philosopher and preacher) that combines these two principles in the first of his six dogmas: the creation of the world in time and out of nothing (Altman, 1973).

Nor was it coincidental that the author chose Escalona, a.k.a. Ashkelon, as the scene of atrocities. Ashkelon was one of the five Philistine city states for whom Amos prophesied punishment (Amos, 1:8) for their unforgiveable transgressions. It was in the house of the shoemaker in Escalona that there were a lot of ropes, an omen that seemed to have frightened the blind man who said, “Let’s go boy. Let’s get away from this: it’s a bad dish that chokes without nourishing.” Indeed, there are numerous references in the Bible of ropes in association with pain and suffering or death. King David, in 2Samuel 22:5 thanks God for having delivered him from *hevlei sheol*—the ropes of Sheol that encircled him. So too, Psalms 18: 5, 6: *The cords of death [hevlei mavet] compassed me... The cords of Sheol [the cords of Sheol] surrounded me.* . . . Perhaps he may have been reminded of the hangings of the Conversos or the rope torture that they suffered. The ropes seemed to have resonated the horrors of the 1391 massacres that were pointless—“a bad dish that chokes without nourishing.” Even more, towards the end of the book, Lazarillo, in his capacity of the town crier observed that a thief who was being hung was wearing a good quality hempen rope, and he reminded himself of the blind master’s comment.

Noticeably influenced by the *Lehem Ha-Panim*— *the Showbread or the Bread of Faces*—in the Tabernacle and the Temples, Lazarillo tells us that when the tinker was opening the Priest’s locked chest of bread, he saw “the face of God in form of bread, as they say—loaf after loaf, inside the chest”. The *Lehem Ha-Panim* were the twelve loaves of bread changed every Sabbath and eaten by the priests at the time of the desert Tabernacle and later in the Temple. *Lehem* is bread and *panim* means face.

According to Rashi on Exodus 25:30, it was called *bread with faces* because the bread had faces (surfaces) in both directions towards the sides of the Tabernacle and the Temple; while according to Nahmanides and Abraham ibn Ezra, because it was *lefani tamid* [it is before Me always]. (Note 1)

The “three kinds of prayers” that he prayed when the priest found the missing loaves recalls the three prayers prayed daily in the Jewish liturgy: Shaharit [Morning Service], Minhah [Afternoon Service], Ma’ariv [Evening Service]. The “nine troubles” that he wishes on the Priest bespeaks the Nine Days of mourning from the first day of the month of Ab culminating on the Ninth of Ab, the tragic day of the destruction of both Temples, also the day of the Expulsion from Spain, as July 31, 1492, coincided with the Ninth of Ab.

His lament upon learning that the Priest was boarding up the holes of the chest echo the famous Psalm 90 attributed to Moses that dwells upon the transitory nature of man’s existence and the brevity of his life of travail...*speedily gone and we fly away*. Compare verses 9-15 to Lazarillo’s reaction, “Oh my God! What misery and misfortune and disasters we mortals have to undergo, and how brief are the pleasures of this our toilsome life!” Even the prolonged obsession on the key and his three prayers were perhaps influenced by the well-known teaching of TB Ta’anit 2a: “R. Johanan said: Three keys the Holy One Blessed Be he has retained in His own hands and not entrusted to any messenger, namely, the Key of Rain [sustenance], the Key of Childbirth, and the Key of the Revival of the Dead.” Interestingly, the saga of the key ends in his revival from a near state of death.

Names of provinces, towns, or districts are obviously impacted by the Hebrew. Toledo has been conjectured to be the Hebrew *toldot*, meaning generations, the third portion of the Book of Genesis, *And these are the generations [toldot] of Yitzhak, Abraham’s son....* (Toldot, Wikipedia). Alternatively, Isaac Abrabanel (1437-1508, biblical exegete, theologian, statesman, and treasurer under Ferdinand and Isabella) maintains that the Judeans exiled to Spain in 586 BCE (Note 2) named the city Toletula because of their many *tiltulim* (wanderings/moving) from Jerusalem. This explains the name Toletum that is first recorded in Latin, but which is unfortunately considered to be of obscure etymology (Toledo, June 9, 2019). Salamanca is Shalem, the early name of Jerusalem (Gen, 14:18), before the Binding of Isaac when the root of seeing (r.a.h.), namely, divine providence, was attached to the name (Genesis Rabbah 56:10). Escalona is the Hebrew Ashkelon, and Maqueda is the Hebrew Makkeda, one of the Canaanite cities taken by Joshua (Josh. 10:28). According to Isaac Abrabanel these cities were so named by the exiled Judeans because of their respective resemblances to Ashkelon and Makkeda in the Land of Israel (Abrabanel on 2 Kings 25, 1955 ed.; see also Beinart, 1973).

Tejares and/or Torrijos is the Hebrew *tirah* (tower) with *tiros* in the plural referring to a palace or an encampment. Genesis 25:16 enumerates the sons of Yishmael by their names, towns, and *tirosam* [their encampments]. Ezekiel’s prophecy (Ez. 25:4) against Ammon predicts that they will be occupied by the *men of the east who will set their palaces [tiroseihem]* within them.

Magdalena derives from the Hebrew *migdal* (tower). Salvadore is the Hebrew *shalvah* (peace, tranquility), from the root *sh.l.v.* So too the English word salve, said to have derived from Germanic

origin, or the word salvation said to have derived from old French, as well as the Italian salvezza (salvation), the French salut, and the Spanish salvacion reflect the Hebrew word *shalvah* (tranquility and calmness), from the root *sh.l.v*. Since the s and sh sounds are the same letter, as are the v sound and the oo vowel (the *shuruk*), the two can easily be confused if read without vowel symbols. Moreover, in Hebrew grammar the past tense of this verb becomes *shalu* (they were tranquil). And so, Jeremiah wants to know (Jeremiah 12:1) *Madua.... shalu kal bogdei vaged [why are they happy all that deal treacherously]? King David in Psalms 122:6-7 prays for the peace and shalvah [tranquility] of Jerusalem: Pray for the peace of Jerusalem, those who love you shall prosper [yishlayu ohavayikh]. Let there be peace within your walls, tranquility in your palaces [shalvah b'armenotayikh] (Pollack, 2019).*

Indeed, the Abrabanel provides us with valuable information concerning the history of the Jews of Spain as well as the early history of Spain, found at the end of his commentary on 2 Kings, and sheds light that Jews were living in Germany also at the time of the destruction of the First Temple. He notes that there were three migrations to Spain: at the time of the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE and even prior to that destruction; during the Second Temple period (516 BCE-70); and after the destruction of the Second Temple by Titus. The following is my translation of this commentary, also relevant for understanding Hebraic influences in *Lazarillo de Tormes* and perhaps the historical background of its author.

And it is important that you should know that there had already descended upon Jerusalem with the king of Babylon kings and generals from the kingdoms of the rest of the nations and they exiled the Judeans to their lands. And amongst them was Pyrush [Pyrrhus] who was the King of Sefarad [Spain], because Hercules the Great from the land of Greece traversed the world to capture lands with his great strength and wisdom, and spread throughout the lands of the West. And after his mighty acts of conquering the countries, he came with ships and a large army to Spain and settled there and reigned throughout Spain. But because he longed for his homeland he went to Italy and from there to Greece. And he was one of the generals who went to destroy the great city Troy for the third time. And when Hercules left Sefarad [Spain] he gave the kingdom to his nephew named Ispan [איִשְׁפָּאן]; and all the land of Sefarad is therefore called Ipsania [איִפְּסָאנִיָּא]. Now this Ispan had only one daughter, and she married Pyrush [Pyrrhus] who was also of the generals of Greece. He was present at the destruction of the First Temple, and he brought from there the members of Judah, Benjamin and Shimon, and from the Levites and the priests that were in Jerusalem— a great multitude came willingly. And he brought them via the sea in ships to the kingdom of Sefarad and settled them in two regions; the one that is called today Andalusia, in one city that was in those days a major city in Israel, which the Judeans named Lucena, as it is known today. And it was said that its air made one wise, that it was clean and pure. Perhaps that is why the Judeans named the city Lucena as it resembled Luz in the Land of Israel, conducive to prophecy. The second region was the land Toletula, as it seems that the Judeans called it Toletula because of the *tiltul* [wandering/moving] that they experienced coming from Jerusalem. Beforehand its

name was Pyryzuela and not Toletula, which the Judeans that came had called it. And I also think that they named another city near Toletula- Maqueda- after the name of the city Makkeda in the Land of Israel; and another city near Toletula they named Ishkelonah after Ashkelon. Perhaps these cities were similar to those in the Land of Israel, and hence they named them accordingly. And there is no doubt that they named other cities in proximity to Toletula after the cities of the Land of Israel, however through the course of time these names were changed. However, these three names remain and are testimony to the others.

And the Judeans settled in the kingdom of Spain from then until now and spread throughout the cities. During the Second Temple period they did not return to the Land of Israel because they said the redemption was not complete; the Ark was not extant, prophecy did not exist, or other sanctified items. Therefore, they would not return until Shivat Zion [the return to Zion] that would include the exiles of Ashur, and Kush, and the islands of the sea, as is written in the chronicles of the kings of Spain.

And there is no doubt that also the Judeans came at the time of the destruction of the First Temple to France, to England, and to the land of Ashkenaz [Germany] and the other lands of the kingships of Edom, as is written in Obadiah 1:20, *And this exiled host of the children of Yisrael [ve-galut hahel mezeh] who are among the Kena'anim as far as Zarefat and the exiles of Yerushalayim who are in Sefarad, shall occupy the cities of the Negev.* For there were Jews there from the time of the first destruction.... Although Edom was not the major destroying force, they came with the Kasdim [Babylonians] to Jerusalem to destroy the city.... As I mentioned, the exiles of Jerusalem went by sea to the lands of the West, some crossed the Jordan to Babylon, some to Ammon and Egypt.... And with the destruction of the Second Temple a number of exiles came to the lands of the West; and I found in the ancient chronicles of the kings of Spain that the Caesar that ruled Rome sent 50,00 Jewish families to the cities of Spain under his rule from those exiled by Titus from Jerusalem; and the early and the latter exiles joined together and became one nation. (Abrabanel, 1955 ed., pp. 680-681.)

Scholars have debated the symbolism of the horn that is critical in understanding this work. Interestingly, the Hebraic meaning of horn in its various facets can provide the key towards understanding its elusive message:

Keren is ray, a beam, or a horn. In its figurative sense of kingship, strength, and power, it corresponds to crown, which preceded the Latin corona. As a verb it connotes radiating or shining. Thus Exodus 34 relates that...*when Moses came down from the Mount Sinai... Moses knew not that the skin of his face shone.... [Ki karan or panav]*, which recalls the offensive translation of the Vulgate that caused Michelangelo to portray Moses with actual horns. The Bible is not credited as the source for “crown;” the Latin corona (wreath) is the alleged origin.

“Horn” also parallels the Hebrew *keren*, but with the K sound changed to an H. More so, *karnos* also refers to the “horns,” i.e., the corners of the altar, as in verse Psalm 18: 27: . . . *Order the festival procession with boughs, even unto the horns of [karnos] the alter.* These were projections at the sides of the altar upon which the priests poured some of the blood of the sacrifice (Lev. 4:7). Thus the

English horn, crown, and corner all reflect the three connotations of the noun, *keren*. The origin for corner is unfairly ascribed to the Latin *kornu* (horn, tip, corner), which is the actual iteration of the Hebrew *keren*; equally, if not more offensive, is the ascription the origin for “horn” to the Indo-European root *kornu* - obviously adopted from the recurrent *keren* in all its facets.

It is important to note that the blood on the corners of the altar would evoke remorse, confession, and repentance for sin.

Addressing the horn, the blind master stated,

Oh wicked object, the fruit of worse behavior! How many there are who would like to see you on their neighbors’ heads, and yet how few want to have you for themselves, or even want to hear you mentioned in connection with them!... What I said is true. You’ll see if you live long enough.

At the end of the book, thinking of the activities of his immoral wife, Lazarillo says he is reminded of the blind master’s statement with his hand on the horn, but he adds that it is the devil that brings back this reminder to cause disagreement between man and wife.

And so, the horn is a reminder of guilt or sin, “the fruit of worse behavior,” as the blood of the guilt offerings is poured on the horns of the altar. But most people do not want to admit their guilt or even hear about it. Instead, they blame others. Moreover, it is the devil that conjures guilt. Evasion and lack of acknowledgement of guilt is endemic in this corrupt society and, unfortunately, a lesson to be taught and learned. More so, according to Maimonides (1135-1204, Spanish codifier, philosopher, and royal physician) the *shofar*, which is a ram’s horn that is sounded on Rosh Hashanah, is to bestir man’s conscience to awaken in repentance. In his *MishnehTorah*, “Hilkhoh Teshuvah” 3:3, Maimonides writes:

Albeit the sound of the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah is a divine decree, the *shofar* intrinsically tells us: Awaken, somnolent, from your sleep; arise slumberers from your slumber. Search your deed, repent, and remember your creator (1975 ed., p. 107).

So too, Zefaniah 1 tells us that the *shofar* announces that there will be a day of final judgment at the End of Days: “The great day of the Lord is near... a day of *shofar*”..., the day in which God will cut off “the name of the idolatrous priests with the priests.”

Alternatively, the horn may suggest the anti-Semitic caricature of the Jew. While accusing others, very few would want to admit any association or connection with Judaism. Hence the association of the devil with the horn at the end of the book. Such were the beliefs indelibly perpetrated on the masses against Judaism.

Conclusion

Studying the comments on the rope and the horn, combined with the sequence of the last chapter, the message of this masterpiece appears clear to me: The rope is torture or death inflicted on the Jews by the Inquisition, which served no purpose whatsoever. The horn is the conscience — the *shofar* — the fear of judgment, the feelings of guilt felt by the Marranos; but these may bring disaster (the devil) and are to be avoided. We learn that Lazarillo finally succeeds by living a life of sin and immorality. If

the audience of this work consists of the Marrano Jews or the Marrano priests, the author is advising them to rid themselves of their guilt. Let their consciences desist from plaguing them. They should continue to lead the life of corruption and falseness; forget their beliefs of the past and the teachings of such giants as Maimonides, Nahmanides, Crescas, or Albo. And certainly do not associate with Judaism, also symbolized by the horn. The alternative is the rope.

At any rate, the Hebraic impact on the author provides another key towards understanding *The Life of Lazarillo De Tormes*.

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Notes

Note 1. See Pollack, 2019, “The Philological Impact of Biblical Hebrew on the English Language.” The words for bread in French, Spanish, and Italian are much the same: pain in French, pan and pan de molde in Spanish, pan and panini (pl.) in Italian. It is conceivable that these hark back to the *Lehem Ha-Panim* [the Showbread, or Bread of Display /Bread of Presence]. The peculiar addition of the phrase de molde in the Spanish pan de molde reinforces the likely derivation from lehem ha-panim, since special molds [kearot] were used to fit the shape of the bread, both an iron mold and a golden mold. The *Lehem Ha-Panim* was originally baked in the iron mold, then placed on the golden one until the next day, the Sabbath, when it was arranged on the table, and the mold was removed.

Note 2. According to Jewish chronology of Seder Olam, the destruction was 423 BCE. This discrepancy of 163 years exists through the Babylonian and Persian periods.