

WHEN DID THE SEVENTY WEEKS OF DANIEL 9:24 BEGIN?

William H. Shea

Former Associate Director
Biblical Research Institute

In the first year of Darius the Mede (538 B.C.), Daniel, the prophet and Babylonian court official, set about offering up to God earnest prayers on behalf of the exiles from Judah.

In his prayer (Dan 9:1-19) Daniel plead with the Lord to forgive His rebellious people and restore them to their land and capital city. He sought the Lord for the fulfillment of His promises to the prophets that Jerusalem and its temple would be rebuilt after the destruction that it suffered.

God answered Daniel's prayer. He saw to it that His people were sent back to their homeland by Cyrus (Ezra 1, 2), rebuilt the temple (Ezra 5, 6), and eventually rebuilt the city of Jerusalem (Neh 1-5; 6:15, 16). But God went on beyond Daniel's requests. Through the prophetic word transmitted by Gabriel (Dan 9:21-23), God gave Daniel instruction about the Messiah who was to come to His people after the city and temple were rebuilt.

In this prophecy, God designated the time when the Messiah would come. It was to be marked off from the time of the event Daniel had been praying about, the rebuilding of Jerusalem. Gabriel said to Daniel, "Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the word to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the Messiah the Prince shall be seven weeks, and threescore and two weeks: the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublous times" (Dan 9:25).

Clearly, this remarkable prophecy is a major prophetic landmark. It offers a valuable criterion by which the true Messiah could be distinguished from false ones. If a person claiming to be the Messiah did not come at the right time, he could not be the true Messiah. Given this major significance of this prophecy we do well to pay careful attention to its details. The minor focus of our study of this prophecy will be on the length of time involved; our major focus will be on its starting point. We will deal briefly with the length of time first.

The Time Period

A. Length. The first matter to deal with in terms of the length of the period has to do with the units by which it was to be measured off. Older translations such as the KJV translated the word involved here as "weeks," while a more recent one, the NIV, prefers the translation of "sevens." The net effect of both translations is the same length of time, for those commentators who prefer the translation of "sevens" acknowledge that they are sevens of years.¹ For those who retain the older translation of "weeks," each of the weeks is made up of seven days, and each prophetic day is taken as a historical year according to the apocalyptic hermeneutical principle of a day for a year (see Ezek

¹L. Wood, *A Commentary on Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 247. Wood gives four main reasons here why he holds that each unit of the "sevens" should be interpreted as a literal and historical year.

4:6; Num 14:34).² Thus the only real difference between the two schools of thought is whether or not the year-day principle needs to be invoked here. In either case the total number of years comes out at 483 years ($7 + 62 \times 7 = 483$). While the translation of the crucial word is of interest, it need not detain us for the linguistic evidence relevant to the question still favors the translation “weeks.”³ Even the NIV puts “weeks” in the margin.

B. Punctuation and divisions. The other question involved with the length of time before the Messiah would come has to do with punctuation. Should the passage be translated in such a way as to indicate that the seven weeks and the sixty-two weeks belong together as a compound unit, or in such a way as to apply it to separate events. Some modern translations separate them, whereas old translations keep them together. The RSV, in speaking of the prince, says that “there shall be seven weeks.” Then after inserting a period to close the sentence, it begins a new sentence, “Then for sixty-two weeks it shall be built again.” This punctuation gives the seven weeks to the prince and allows sixty-two weeks for the reconstruction of the city. But if the two time units are kept together, then both the seven and the sixty-two weeks must be fulfilled before the Prince could come.

The rationale by which these time units have been separated in translations, such as the RSV, involves the amount of stress and weight put on the punctuation mark, *'athnah*, in the Hebrew text as pointed by the Massorettes. There are a number of problems with this treatment. In the first place, an *'athnah* is not a *soph pasûq*, just as a comma is not a period. A *soph pasûq* ends verses of the Hebrew text just as a period ends an English sentence, but the *'athnah* is used only at the approximate middle of the Hebrew sentence, in contrast to the comma, which sets off phrases. To divide the Hebrew sentence into two sentences with a period as a divider in English just because an *'athnah* is located in the middle of it goes beyond the significance of the significance of the *soph pasûq*. Doing such a thing is not warranted by the Hebrew accent and is not good translating.

The arbitrary nature of the RSV punctuation here can be borne out by a comparison with what they have done with the rest of Daniel 9. No other examples occur in the RSV text of Daniel 9 in which an *'athnah* is represented with a period. Further, there are four cases in which the RSV does not represent even a *soph pasûq* with a period. Daniel 9:1 treats a *soph pasûq* as a hyphen, verse 4 as a comma, and verses 5, 20 as a semicolon. When measured against its own practice, what the RSV has done with the *'athnah* here in Daniel 9:25 is not only poor translating but also quite an arbitrary case of special pleading. The older paired translation of the time units should be retained. Even the LXX supports the paired translation in this case.

The Starting Point

Our conclusion thus far is that the seven and sixty-two weeks in Daniel 9:25 belong together as a compound making up sixty-nine weeks or 483 historical years until the coming of the Messiah. If the starting point for this period can be found, the date for His coming 483 years later can be fixed. So we turn next to that important starting point.

Daniel 9:25 states that the starting point was to be a going forth of a “word” (Hebrew *abar*)

²For an extended discussion of the year-day principle as applied to apocalyptic time prophecies see my study in chapter three of *Selected Studies on Prophetic Interpretation*, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Biblical Research Institute, 1982), 56-88.

³Ibid., 74-77.

to restore Jerusalem. Before looking for specific decrees and the actual rebuilding, we should ask a few questions about the term “word.”

A. The decree. The reason why the term comes up is because an effort has been made by some historical-critical scholars to equate this “word” in Daniel 9:25 with the “word of the Lord to Jeremiah” to which Daniel referred in verse 2 of this chapter.⁴ Daniel was studying the scroll of Jeremiah about the prophecy of the desolation of Jerusalem for seventy years. Jerusalem was to be restored at the end of that period of time. Because the message that came to Jeremiah was termed a “word” and the same Hebrew term was used in Daniel 9:25, should they be equated? Doing so would place the commencement of the 70 weeks of Daniel back in the time of Jeremiah, about 593 B.C.

This type of interpretation overlooks the fact that the term for “word” is used again twice in Daniel 9:23. If one is to look for linguistic connections, here in verse 23 is a far more reasonable one to use than the reference in verse 2 to the time of Jeremiah.

But even here there is a difference between the “word” of Gabriel's introduction and the “word” in the prophecy itself. In the first part of verse 23, Gabriel told Daniel that a word had gone forth (*yasa'*), obviously from God who sent the message to Daniel. The fact that the perfect form of the verb is used indicates that the word had already gone forth, and having gone forth it had reached Gabriel who was now going to give it to Daniel. The reference is to a past action or communication which Daniel is now to understand.

But the word which Daniel is to understand is not the decree for the rebuilding of Jerusalem. It is the entire prophecy, which follows which constitutes that “word.” Thus the “word” about the reconstruction of Jerusalem was contained in the entire overall prophetic word or message that Gabriel brought to Daniel. That word is a description of future events. And one of those future events is the going forth of the “word” or decree to rebuild Jerusalem. Thus the “word” of verse 25 is neither the word of the Lord to Jeremiah in verse 2 nor the word of the Lord through Gabriel to Daniel in verse 23. It is something to be fulfilled in the future. For corroboration we note that the term for “going forth” (Hebrew *mosa'*) that is used in verse 25 is neither the term that is used for the word in verse 2 (Hebrew *hayah*) nor the verb used in verse 23 (Hebrew *yasa'*). A further contrast between verse 2 and verse 25 is that the former is specific, “the word of the Lord,” in a construct chain with God's name in the genitive relationship, whereas in verse 25 it is just “a word” with neither the divine name nor an article used with it.

B. The king of the decree. The next point that should be noted here is just what it was that the prophecy foretold was to be rebuilt. The verse in question uses the specific name of the city, Jerusalem. There can be no question, therefore, that we must look to the circumstances under which that city was rebuilt. The specific mentioning of the name “Jerusalem” helps avoid confusion with the rebuilding of the temple within Jerusalem. A city is not a temple and a temple is not a city, though a city may contain a temple or be located near one. This distinction is important because the decree of Cyrus in Ezra 1:2-4 specifically mentions authorization for the rebuilding of the temple but does not mention the city. In response to that decree, and a supplementary decree by Darius I, the temple was rebuilt (Ezra 6:14-16); but even after its reconstruction the city still lay in ruins, and

⁴J. A. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1927), 378.

this was the condition in which Nehemiah found it in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes I, some 70 years later. The temple was completed in the sixth year of Darius I, 516 B.C., but the city was still unreconstructed in the time of Artaxerxes in the middle of the next century.

We must now attempt to discover the decree that had the effect of leading to the rebuilding of the city. It was not the decree of Cyrus in Ezra 1; nor was it the decree of Darius in Ezra 6, which was in actuality an authorization to carry out the stipulations of the original decree of Cyrus. Both of these decrees dealt with the temple and both of them were brought to their final consummation when the temple was finished. We must look beyond the rebuilding of the temple for the next major building project in Jerusalem. There actually were two decrees, or a decree and an authorization, that were involved in this later event, much like the previous two decrees focused on the temple. This new pair of official rulings is found in Ezra 7 and Nehemiah 2. The circumstances and contents of these decrees require close examination in our quest for the starting point of Daniel's time prophecy.

C. The nature of the decree. The decree given to Ezra is recorded in Ezra 7:12-26 as an official decree of Artaxerxes. It is quoted in the text as a copy of the decree in the original Aramaic language. Because the decree of Darius in Ezra 6 actually contains a reiteration of the antecedent decree of Cyrus, the decree of Artaxerxes is longer than that of Darius. The decrees get longer as one goes through the book. The decree of Cyrus in chapter 1 is the shortest, the decree of Darius in chapter 6 is of medium length, and the decree of Artaxerxes in chapter 7 is the longest and should, therefore, be accorded some measure of importance.

Contributing to that importance is the wide-ranging authority it accorded to Ezra in this decree. By this decree he was not only given privileges to pay for and offer sacrifices in the temple in Jerusalem, but he was also given power to appoint magistrates and judges in the province of Beyond the River. The province of Beyond the River included more than Judea. It included all of Syria that was located west and south of the Upper Euphrates River. Thus by this decree Ezra was given authority not over the Jews only, but also over the persons and territory outside of Judea (Ezra 7:25). He was given permission to draw upon the treasury of that province up to the amount of 100 talents of silver (see Ezra 7:21, 22).

Included among Ezra's responsibilities under this decree of Artaxerxes was the authorization to teach the law of his God to Jews and non-Jews alike in this same extended territory. For anyone who would not obey his teachings in these matters he was authorized to execute punishment up to the death penalty (see Ezra 7:25, 26). His authority over non-Jews is probably the most remarkable feature of the decree. The extent and importance of Ezra's position should be noted carefully in order to understand the nature of his action that followed upon his arrival at Jerusalem.

A second return of Jews with him (Ezra 8) took place under the same decree. This was only the second official large-scale return of Jews since the Persian conquest of Babylon, the first being under Cyrus (see Ezra 1, 2). While a trickle of Jews may have returned between these two events, the full and official nature of this authorized return should be noted (see Ezra 7:13). In the same way that an officially decreed return initiated the reconstruction of the temple, this second officially decreed return served as the stimulus to commence the construction of Jerusalem.

D. The results of the decree. Now we come to the question of what Ezra did upon his arrival at Jerusalem. We know that he had to deal with the question of mixed or foreign marriages (see Ezra 9, 10), but what else did he do? The record of his other main activity is recorded in Ezra 4:7, 16, in a letter from the western governors to Artaxerxes, the king who had issued the decree. The governors struck a note of alarm, reporting, "Be it known to the king that the Jews who came up from you to

us have gone to Jerusalem. They are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city; they are finishing the walls and repairing the foundations” (Ezra 4:12, RSV). Then the governors went on to threaten the king where it could hurt him most, in the treasury pocketbook: “If this city is rebuilt and the walls finished, they will not pay tribute, custom, or toll, and the royal revenue will be impaired” (vs. 13, RSV).

Some important aspects of this report to the king need to be considered. First the report is recorded in a letter from the western governors. It is found in Aramaic in the book of Ezra as an official document of the Persian archives (see vss. 7-11). There can be no question about the identity of the king to whom it was addressed. The title to the letter bears the name of Artaxerxes (vs. 11), who allowed a group of Jews to return to Judea. The Jews had stopped to see the governors on their way to Jerusalem (cf. Ezra 4:12 with 8:36). This information fits well with the authorization given to Ezra to draw upon the treasuries of the western provinces. Undoubtedly, the western governors were saddened that their resources had been depleted by authorization from the king. When they wrote their letter finances was uppermost in their minds.

After stopping for their official visit with the governors the returning Jews had gone on to Jerusalem. The city is mentioned by name in Ezra 4:12 and its character is described rather extensively by the governors in their report. The only question here, what group of Jews is under discussion? The book of Ezra itself provides the answer. Ezra brought a group of Jews back from Babylonia under authorization from Artaxerxes. The governors then reported to the king that a group of Jewish returnees had come to them and gone on to Jerusalem. Because no other officially authorized return of Jews is known in the Persian period since the time of Cyrus, and certainly no other is known to have taken place in the reign of Artaxerxes, this is unquestionably the Jews who returned with Ezra. The only way that one can avoid such a conclusion is to posit somebody just like Ezra doing the same work that Ezra did. Such conjecturing is unnecessary.

The logical conclusion that Ezra and his returnees are the group referred to here has been hinted at obliquely by other scholars. For example, L. W. Batten states,

We note that the Jews here denounced are recent arrivals. There must therefore have been an extensive migration in the time of Artaxerxes, of which we have no other record (sic!). From their undertakings the company must have been a large one.⁵

F. C. Fensham notes that, “the reference to a migration in verse 12 probably refers to a return of certain Jews before Nehemiah.”⁶

One of the reasons why some scholars have been loathe to accept Ezra as the leader of this group of returnees has to do with the long-discussed question of the sequence of Ezra and Nehemiah. Did Ezra precede Nehemiah or did Nehemiah precede Ezra? Scholars unsure of the answer to this question are, of course, unsure about the identity of the group that preceded Nehemiah back to Jerusalem during the reign of Artaxerxes. But if one agrees to the idea that Ezra preceded Nehemiah, then Ezra and his fellow returnees are the only logical candidates to fit the text. The sequence of Ezra

⁵L. W. Batten, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1913), 173.

⁶F. C. Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 73.

and Nehemiah is too large a question to be discussed here.⁷ Suffice it to say that the traditional, classical, and canonical order of Ezra followed by Nehemiah is accepted and utilized here. The Persian period history is described from its beginnings in Ezra but Nehemiah discusses only his own experiences during the reign of an Artaxerxes, the same name of the king with whom the book of Ezra ends. And Nehemiah uses a date later in the reign of that king according to the regnal year number. This also makes good sense out of the references to Ezra in the book of Nehemiah (8:1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 9, 13; and 9:6). If one reverses the order of these two men, these references or this narrative needs to be emended or changed in some other fashion. The logical and direct interpretation of the data is that Ezra had returned before Nehemiah did and was present for the events of Ezra 8 and 9. The book of Ezra tells how he came to be there beforehand.

With this order applied to the events described in Ezra 4:12-23 (but not including vs. 24), Ezra now becomes the person who led out in the reconstruction of the city of Jerusalem upon the return of the wave of exiles who came with him during the reign of Artaxerxes I, before the time of Nehemiah. Reconstructing these events in this way, however, creates something of a problem in the order of the text. The return of the Jews under Ezra is described in chapters 7 and 8 but their rebuilding of the city is described in chapter 4. Why are things out of order like this?

It should be pointed out here that there is more than one way to organize a book, biblical or otherwise, and the author does not always have to subscribe to the strictly chronological approach. He might also follow a topical approach. And that is what has happened here. There is a parenthesis here between Ezra 4:5 and 4:24-5:1. The parenthesis continues its own recital along chronological lines but the topic or subtopic being opposition to the Jews. That opposition is cited first for the reign of Cyrus in Ezra 4:1-5, then for the reign of Ahasuerus (or Xerxes) Ezra 4:6, then for the reign of Artaxerxes in Ezra 4:7-23. Then with Ezra 4:24 the narrative returns to the time of Darius "between the times of Cyrus and Ahasuerus.

The topic treated in this subsection (Ezra 4) is opposition to the Jews. The opposition is in the first case about building the temple (time of Cyrus), then a more general opposition (time of Xerxes), and finally an opposition about building the city of Jerusalem (time of Artaxerxes). Fensham has given a nice evaluation of this problem in his statement that,

In spite of this [the chronological order of Persian kings in chapter 4], Rudolph presumes that the Chronicler had no idea of the historical sequence of the Persian kings and mentioned typical names which are accidentally correct chronologically. Rudolph arrives at this conclusion because of the sudden switch to Darius in 4:24. . . . Thus it is understandable that modern scholars, reasoning from their own logic, should regard the historical reliability of this chapter with suspicion. But there is another kind of perfectly legitimate logic to the reasoning of the author of this chapter: he is referring in this chapter in chronological order to the hindrances placed in the way of Jews to rebuild the temple and the wall of Jerusalem. When he discussed the problems of the building of the temple in 4:1-5, it reminded him of later similar troubles with the rebuilding of the

⁷Ibid., 6-9. The literature on this subject is extensive and cannot be cited in detail here. For one study among many which upholds the traditional order of Ezra-Nehemiah see C. G. Tuland, "Ezra-Nehemiah or Nehemiah-Ezra?" *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 12 (1974): 47-62.

wall of Jerusalem, and so 4:6-23 has been inserted, almost parenthetically, before the argument of the building of the temple has again been taken up in 4:24ff. (already noted by C. F. Keil in the last century).⁸

Thus there is a perfectly good explanation as to why the decree and the return are described in chapters 7 and 8 but the rebuilding undertaken by the very same people who returned in these chapters is described in chapter 4. There is no conflict. The chapter arrangement merely reflects the author's decision to treat his materials in a topical rather than in a strictly chronological manner.

Two final questions about these events arise before we turn to more specifically chronological matters. The first question is, Why did Ezra undertake the rebuilding of the city when it was not specifically mentioned in the authorizing decree from Artaxerxes? The second question is, Why did Artaxerxes stop the rebuilding if he authorized it and was so favorable to Ezra?

In answering the first question we can simply supply the historical proof. Ezra 4:12, 13 indicates that Ezra did indeed go ahead and undertake the building. He appears to have made no effort to conceal what he was doing. He did not do it surreptitiously but in full view of the western governors. Given that open nature of the project, one can only say that Ezra understood that the rebuilding fell within the jurisdiction of the authorization given to him. As conscientious an observer of the law of God as he was--and even Artaxerxes noted this point--he made no attempt to deceive anyone in regard to what was being carried out. Ezra had been granted legal and judicial courtroom authority (Ezra 7:15, 26) which needed to involve the establishment of places of judgment. Such places were typically the "gates" of the city wall where the judges met for their judgment activities. There seems to be here a clear indication that Ezra must have provided the building facilities where proper civil judicial activities were to be carried out. Jerusalem was a religious precinct surrounding the temple area in a sense, and Ezra's authority over religious matters seems to have to include also the reconstruction of Jerusalem.

E. Response of the king. What kind of king was Artaxerxes, who reversed his own decree? Historians describe him as two-faced. Probably the classic example of his duplicity occurred in the disposition of Inarus, who rebelled against him in Egypt. After Inarus was defeated by Artaxerxes' general, Megabyzus, in 454 B.C. in 454 B.C., Artaxerxes promised him safe conduct to Persia and assured him that he would not be executed. Artaxerxes honored this promise for some five years but eventually, at the pleading of the Queen Mother Amestris, he had Inarus impaled. Megabyzus was so upset at the king's perfidy that he then raised a revolt in Syria.⁹

Chronology

We now turn to the question of the chronology of the events involved. Once the chronological issues are settled a direct calculation of the date for the Messiah can be proposed and history can be examined to see who fits.

The date for the beginning of this period of the prophecy must coincide with the going forth or issuing of the word or decree that led to the commencement of the reconstruction of Jerusalem.

⁸Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, 69-70.

⁹A. T. Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1948), 308-312.

According to the interpretations discussed above, the decree that led to that commencement can be identified as the decree which Artaxerxes I gave to Ezra. Now that decree needs to be dated. The narrative connected with it indicates that Ezra and his fellow returnees left Babylon on the first day of the first month of Artaxerxes' seventh year (Ezra 7:9), or I/1/7. After a journey of four months they came to Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month of the seventh year (vs. 10), or V/1/7. Two main issues are involved here: (1) absolute dates for the reign of Artaxerxes, and (2) the kind of calendar according to which these dates were reckoned.

A. Regnal years of Artaxerxes. Absolute dates for the reign of Artaxerxes I can be established through knowledge of the dates for the two preceding kings, Darius I and Xerxes. The dates for these kings are well known because both men conducted invasions of Greece and Greek historians dated their reigns in terms of the well-understood Olympiad dating system. In addition we have sources from the Ancient Near East which include papyri from Egypt dated to the reign of Artaxerxes and the constant flow of contract tablets written in cuneiform when Babylonia was under Persian control. We also have Ptolemy's Canon, in which the reigns of ancient kings back to the mid-eighth century B.C. were dated and fixed by means of eclipses and astronomical-mathematical calculations. In other words, we are in a very good position to give a very accurate fix to the dates for Xerxes and of his son Artaxerxes, who followed him.

1. *Classical historical sources.* We will begin with some of the latest sources and work our way backwards. At least half a dozen classical (Greco-Roman) historians mention something about the time or circumstances surrounding the death of Xerxes. The Greek historian Ctesias tells us the most about the circumstances involving Xerxes' murder by Artabanus, but he does not date the event precisely.¹⁰ Diodorus of Sicily who gives us the more precise date for those events, dating both by the Athenian archonship and the Roman consular year. These two types of years overlap to indicate that Xerxes was murdered sometime during the last half of the Julian year 465 B.C.¹¹

2. *An Egyptian astronomical source.* The Egyptian solar calendar was 1/4th day short of a true solar year it advanced regularly in relation to the Julian years used to calculate B.C. dates. This feature has been used by modern historians to work out ancient Egyptian dates by figuring backwards in the Egyptian calendar. It was also used by the astronomer Ptolemy in his *Almagest*.¹² For the year in which Xerxes died, 465 B.C., the Egyptian New Year's day, Thoth 1, fell on our December 17. If Xerxes died before December 17, then Artaxerxes' second regnal year would have begun on that day; but instead, Artaxerxes' first year begins on December 17, and that means "according to the Egyptian system" that Xerxes died between December 17 and the Persian Babylonian Spring New Year, Nisanu 1, in the spring.

3. *A Babylonian Astronomical Source.* The Babylonians were aware that solar and lunar eclipses repeated themselves almost exactly in cycles of 18 years. Ancient astronomers called these periods "Saros cycles." Cuneiform tablets recording Saros cycles in terms of the years of reigning kings are known from the Hellenistic period.¹³ Tables derived from these tablets measure off these

¹⁰*Persica*, 29-31.

¹¹Diodorus Siculus, xi.69.1-6.

¹²For an extended treatment of Ptolemy and other works in relation to this problem see J. Neuffer, "The Accession of Artaxerxes I," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 6 (1968): 60-87.

¹³Basic studies of the Saros tablets may be found in J. N. Strassmaier, "Einige chronologische Daten aus astronomischen Rechnungen," *ZA* 7 (1892): 197-204; id., "Zur Chronologie der Seleuciden," *ZA* 8 (1893): 106-113.

cycles from the ninth year of Xerxes to the sixth year of Artaxerxes to the twenty-fourth year of Artaxerxes. Aside from the fact that modern astronomers can determine when these astronomical phenomena took place, they also measure off for us the number of years between these regnal dates. In this way this cycle dates the 18 years between the ninth year of Xerxes and the sixth year of Artaxerxes to the span between 477 B.C. and 459 B.C. This fixes the year of Xerxes' death and Artaxerxes' accession to 465 B.C.

4. *Egypto-Jewish historical sources.* Papyri from the fifth century B.C. written in Aramaic by Jewish military mercenaries in Persian employ on the island of Elephantine in Egypt supply us with additional valuable historical and chronological information. These documents were dated in terms of both of the overlapping Egyptian and Persian-Babylonian calendars. The mathematical junctures at which these two variable calendars intersect with double dates help to fix the dates for the reigns of the kings during which these documents were written. A case of special importance here is Cowley papyrus No. 6 which was dated to both the twenty-first (and last) year of Xerxes and to the accession year of Artaxerxes.¹⁴ The day and month dates utilized in this document fix its writing to January 2, 464 B.C. This text itself indicates that Xerxes' death had been reported in Egypt by that time. Since the Persian "pony express" type of courier system was in effect by that time, the delivery of that news in Egypt may be located late in 465 B.C. This supports the other indications that Xerxes died late in that year, toward its very end of 465 B.C. (In the previous section we reviewed evidence that he died after December 17, 465 B.C.)

5. *Babylonian historical sources.* The flow of contract tablets from Babylonian scribes continued under the Persian kings, but our sources have a tendency to thin out toward the later kings of that period. Thus these tablets have not been as helpful as one would wish in terms of pinning down the precise date of the transition between Xerxes and Artaxerxes, in spite of the recent publication of additional collections of these tablets¹⁵ and catalogues of unpublished collections of these tablets.¹⁶ They do, however, abundantly confirm the previously established pattern which indicates that 465 B.C. was the twenty-first year of Xerxes and that Artaxerxes I's first full regnal year began on Nisanu 1 in the spring of 464 B.C. Recent publication of astronomical tablets from the eleventh and twenty-fourth years of Artaxerxes I have provided more precise support for that same chronological pattern.¹⁷

6. *Summary on Artaxerxes' regnal dates.* In summary, we can say that there are a number of very important chronological lines which focus upon dating the regnal years of Xerxes and those of his son Artaxerxes I. A knowledge of these dates was never lost, because they were preserved in the classical historians of Greece and Rome and in the tables of Ptolemy's *Almagest*. These clearly

¹⁴A. E. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1923). Papyrus No. 6 appears on pp. 15-18 of this work.

¹⁵*Cuneiform Texts From the Babylonian Tablets in the British Museum*, vols. 55, 56, and 57 (London: British Museum, 1982). These three volumes present an extensive collection of previously unpublished Neo-Babylonian tablets.

¹⁶The massive Sippar collection of Neo-Babylonian contract tablets has now been catalogued, but most of the tablets remain unpublished. For the catalogue see E. Leichty, *Catalogue of the Babylonian Tablets in the British Museum, vol. VI: Tablets from Sippar I* (London: British Museum, 1986) and E. Leichty and A. K. Grayson, *ibid.*, *vol VII: Tablets from Sippar 2* (London: British Museum, 1987).

¹⁷A. J. Sachs and H. Hunger, *Astronomical Diaries and Related Texts from Babylonia, vol. I: Diaries from 652 to 262 B.C.* (Vienna: Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1988).

indicate that 465 B.C. was the twenty-first and last year of Xerxes and that 464 B.C. was the first full official year of Artaxerxes I. Archaeological discoveries from late in the last century and from this present century have provided ample confirmation of the accuracy of those calculations. Support for these dates have been found in the Elephantine papyri and in a more general but still strongly accurate way from the Saros tablets and the compilation of Babylonian contract tablets from the Persian period. There can be no doubt for anyone familiar with the available chronological sources that we have the regnal years of Artaxerxes I accurately fixed. Indeed, the dates are so well set in the cement of these sources that it is hard to imagine any kind of future discovery that could possibly move them.

B. The calendar for calculation of the king's years. Having established the absolute dates for the reign of Artaxerxes, we come now to the point of how the Jews of Ezra's time used contemporary dating methods. Ezra, living under this very same Artaxerxes and as a citizen of Babylon, knew very well when Xerxes was killed and when Artaxerxes took the throne. Thus, when he dated his own return to Judea in the seventh year of Artaxerxes (Ezra 7), he was making use of this living, active, and on-going chronological information. The only question is whether he used that information, according to the Persian and Babylonian system of dating, or according to his own Jewish calendar?

The difference here can be illustrated quite simply. The Babylonian calendar year began with the month of Nisanu (Jewish Nisan) in the spring of the year, March-April in our calendar. If Ezra followed the Babylonian system, which continued to be used by the Persian kings, he dated the regnal years of Artaxerxes, including the seventh year mentioned in Ezra 7, as beginning in the spring. In contrast, there was the Jewish civil calendar which began in the fall with Tishri 1 (Tashritu of the Babylonians). In the case which we are considering, this provides us with a difference of 6 months.

If Ezra began Artaxerxes' years according to the Persian-Babylonian system then his first regnal year of Artaxerxes began in the spring of 464 B.C. But if Ezra began Artaxerxes' years according to the Jewish civil year then his first year began in the fall of 464 B.C. In both systems a king's first *regnal* year began on the system's new year's day. The period between the moment when a king died and a new king officially came to the throne on his first New Year's day was known as his *accession* year. In Ezra and Nehemiah we are dealing with regnal years only.

These considerations effect the date for the beginning of the 70-week prophecy, because we have looked to the decree of Ezra 7 as representing the going forth of the "word" in response to which the reconstruction of the city of Jerusalem began. Ezra says that he left Babylon on I/1/7 of Artaxerxes and he arrived in Jerusalem four months later, on V/1/7 of Artaxerxes (see Ezra 7:7-9). If he gave these dates according to the Persian-Babylonian spring-to-spring year, this would have fallen in the spring and summer of the year 458 B.C. The decree then would have been given before Nisan 1 of 458 B.C., or sometime in the sixth year of Artaxerxes, 459-458 B.C. But if these events are calculated according to the Jewish civil year, which began with Tishri 1 in the fall of 458 B.C., then the decree would probably have been given during that winter of 458-457 B.C., and the journey took place during the spring and summer of 457 B.C. (In the case of the fall-to-fall year, the month numbers do not change, they run VII, VIII, IX, X, XI, XII, I, II, III, IV, V, VI).

The matter may be boiled down to the fact that if Ezra was using the Persian-Babylonian calendar, the decree and the return occurred in 458 B.C.; whereas, if the decree and the return were dated by Ezra according to the Jewish civil year, they fell in 457 B.C. Which of these two alter-

natives is correct and why? The overwhelming evidence is in favor of Ezra's use of the Jewish fall calendar, as the paragraphs below will reveal.

1. *The Jewish fall calendar during the united monarchy.* First, it should be noted that there were two calendars in use in ancient Israel, the religious calendar that began (like the Babylonian calendar) in the spring, and the civil calendar that began in the fall. The Jewish new year of Rosh Hashanah, that survives in the liturgical calendar of synagogues today, is a survival of the civil calendar. The use of the fall calendar for civil or political purposes goes back to the time of Solomon. As E. R. Thiele has shown so effectively, the regnal years of Solomon as they were applied to the record of building his palace and the temple were dated by a fall calendar.¹⁸

2. *The Jewish Fall Calendar During the Divided Monarchy.* When we compare together the various synchronisms and regnal-year records in 1 and 2 Kings, we see that the use of the fall calendar predominated in the south, in the kingdom of Judah, while the spring calendar was more commonly used in the northern kingdom of Israel.¹⁹

3. *The Jewish Fall Calendar at the End of the Divided Monarchy.* The use of the fall calendar in Judah can be elucidated with special detail at the end of the kingdom of Judah, during the years of its last kings as they went down to defeat at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar and his troops from Babylon. The use of a fall calendar in these records of 2 Kings can be demonstrated especially well because the biblical text not only gives the years of the kings of Judah involved, it also gives some references to the years of king Nebuchadnezzar. With the publication of Nebuchadnezzar's own royal chronicles down to the year 593 B.C.,²⁰ the dates in the Bible and in those chronicles can be compared. When such a comparison is carried out it can be demonstrated that the writer of 2 Kings was indeed using the fall calendar of the Jews to calculate these dates.²¹ Only in such a way can these biblical and extrabiblical dates be harmonized.

Thus the use of the fall calendar for the civil or regnal years of the kings who reigned in Jerusalem can be demonstrated at the outset from the biblical dates for Solomon. Their use continued through the divided monarchy, as demonstrated by the synchronisms in the biblical record, and they are readily evident as checked with an extrabiblical source at the end of the Judahite monarchy.

4. *The Jewish fall calendar during the Babylonian Exile.* The fall calendar continued in use among the Jews in exile in Babylon. This is evident from the system of dating employed in the book of Ezekiel, the prophet who wrote from exile in Babylon. He did not date his visions according to the regnal years of the Babylonian kings under whom he lived, rather he dated them according to the years of the exile of the Jews. This is apparent from the date in the title to the book found in Ezek 1:2; 8:1; 40:1.

5. *The Jewish fall calendar after the Babylonian Exile.* We come now to Ezra himself. Is there

¹⁸The biblical texts involved are 1 Kings 6:1, 37-9 and 7:1. For a detailed discussion of the dates in these passages and the way they fit a fall calendar better than a spring calendar see E. R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* (Grand Rapids: 1965), 28-30.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 18-20, 30.

²⁰D. J. Wiseman, *Chronicles of Chaldean Kings (626-556 B.C.) in the British Museum* (London: British Museum, 1961).

²¹S. H. Horn, "The Babylonian Chronicle and the Ancient Calendar of the Kingdom of Judah," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 5 (1967): 23; A Malamat, "A New Record of Nebuchadnezzar's Palestinian Campaigns," *IEJ* 6 (1956): 148

any evidence from his book that he used a fall calendar? Unfortunately, there is not; however, we have precisely that kind of information in Nehemiah 1, 2. Because Nehemiah was a contemporary and compatriot of Ezra's, the use of a fall calendar in Nehemiah's book can be taken as very strong evidence that Ezra used it too. What then is the evidence for the fall calendar in Nehemiah?

In the first chapter of Nehemiah we are presented with circumstances in which Nehemiah found himself at the court of Artaxerxes. He had received recent news that Jerusalem was destroyed and burned (see Neh 1:1-3). We should emphasize that this was recent news about recent events. Nehemiah was not talking about what Nebuchadnezzar did to the city more than a century before.

If we understand that Ezra had already gotten the reconstruction of the city underway when he returned (Ezra 4:12-26), then any future assault upon the city would be what Nehemiah was concerned about. Seeing Nehemiah's distress, the king inquired about its cause. When he found out, the king authorized him to go to Jerusalem and tend to the matters himself.

Of chronological interest in this narrative is the way the two dates involved are stated. Nehemiah's receipt of the news concerning Jerusalem in the ninth month of Artaxerxes twentieth year. The authorization given to Nehemiah to attend to these matters was of course given later, yet according to Nehemiah 2:1 it was given in the *first* month of the same twentieth year of Artaxerxes! There can be only one way to explain these dates historically as they stand, i.e., that they were reckoned upon the base of a fall-to-fall year which began in the seventh month"for as we noticed a few paragraphs ago, in the fall-to-fall year the number of the months ran VI, VII, VIII, IX, X, XI, XII, I, II, III, IV, V. Thus in the fall-to-fall year the first month came six months *after* the seventh month.

As the text stands, and this is the basis upon which scholars should draw their conclusions, these dates in Nehemiah 1, 2 present the strongest possible evidence that Nehemiah used a fall-to-fall calendar, and, that therefore, it is most reasonable to conclude that his contemporary colleague Ezra did too.

6. *The Jewish fall calendar during the contemporary Egyptian Exile.* A final supplementary line of evidence is found in the Elephantine papyri, a second batch of which was published in 1953. Among these papyri is one which has direct implications for the type of regnal year that was employed by Jews who served in Egypt. Kraeling papyrus No. 6 contains dates which locate its month of Tammuz, the fourth month of the Jewish year (or July) 420 B.C. Kraeling papyrus No. 7 is dated to Tishri (or October) of the same year, 420 B.C. But the regnal year number of Darius II, under whom these texts were written, changes between the texts from year three of the July papyrus to year four of the October papyrus. This means that the year number of the king, according to the usage of the people who wrote these papyri, changed at the fall New Year of Tishri 1 rather than of the spring new year of Nisan 1.

This has been examined and explained in detail by Siegfried Horn in his study of these and related texts.²² Thus, while Ezra and Nehemiah used the Jewish fall calendar in their documents, other Jews exiled in Egypt were also using it a quarter of a century later in their part of the diaspora.

7. *Summary of the use of the Jewish fall calendar.* To summarize, it may be noted that the Hebrew monarchy started out using the fall calendar for the regnal years of Solomon and continued to use it in the kingdom of Judah. Its use is specifically demonstrated by a comparison between 2 Kings and extrabiblical documents at the end of the monarchy. Jews carried this calendar into exile

²²S. H. Horn and L. H. Wood, *The Chronology of Ezra 7* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1953).

with them into Babylon and they continued to use it there, as is evidenced by the dates in Ezekiel. In the postexilic period Nehemiah, Ezra's fellow worker, provides direct textual evidence of the use of this kind of calendar. Other exiles elsewhere continued to use that same calendar. Thus the conclusion that Ezra used a fall-to-fall calendar for the dates in his book rests upon very solid ground. This means that “the seventh year of Artaxerxes” in Ezra 7 is 457 B.C. rather than 458 B.C. as would be suggested if he had been using a spring calendar.

C. Conclusions on chronology. Through these two chronological procedures, a search for an absolute date for the regnal years of Artaxerxes and an examination of the question of which kind of calendar Ezra used, we have arrived at 457 B.C. as the date for the decree of Artaxerxes in Ezra 7. Because this was the decree which led to the commencement of the reconstruction of the city of Jerusalem, we have come to an absolute date for the specification for the prophecy of Daniel 9:25. That text may now be paraphrased here to identify its starting point as, “From the going forth of the word (the decree of Artaxerxes I) to restore and to rebuild Jerusalem (by Ezra according to the decree of Ezra 7 and the actions of Ezra 4), in 457 B.C.”

D. Nehemiah's decree. Two final points need to be made in relation to the “decree” to Nehemiah recorded in Nehemiah 2. The first has to do with its relationship to the antecedent decree of Ezra. Actually, this later communication was not quite on the same level as the official decree given earlier to Ezra. Nehemiah was given a letter that authorized him to receive recognition and assistance for the tasks that the king permitted him to perform. It had the net effect of a decree, but it was not quite the same thing. The relation between the two communications was that of initial authorization and supplementary authorization. What Ezra went and started was then taken up and carried on to partial completion by Nehemiah. As in the preceding case of Cyrus' initial decree in Ezra 1 and Darius' supplementary authorization in Ezra 6, Artaxerxes' two decrees in Ezra 7 and Nehemiah 2 can be seen as a pair. In both cases the initial decree led to the commencement of the project, but both reconstruction projects required supplementary authorization to complete them; with the temple in the first case and the city in the second.

E. Alternate interpretations. Because it really was the first decree of the second set, the one given to Ezra in 457 B.C., which led to the commencement of the construction of the city, is the decree to which we should look for fixing the point for the beginning of the prophetic and historical period outlined by Daniel. But some Evangelical commentators hold that we should work instead from the date of 444 B.C. (the communication given to Nehemiah) to begin this period. In order for this period to predict when Jesus of Nazareth would become the Messiah, however, those beginning in 444 B.C. are forced to shorten it. A full 483 years from 444 B.C. overshoots the ministry and death of Jesus by at least five years by almost any standard.²³ There is no way to reconcile the date 444 B.C. and to have the 490 years terminate anywhere close to the time of Jesus Christ's death.

Conclusion

When the correct procedures described above are carried out, it can be seen that the prophecy

²³An excellent review of how evangelical commentators have handled these dates can be found in G. F. Hasel, “Interpretations of the Chronology of the Seventy Weeks,” in F. B. Holbrook, ed., *Seventy Weeks, Leviticus, and the Nature of Prophecy*, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, vol. 3 (Washington D.C.: Biblical Research Institute, 1986), 3-64, see especially pp. 14-21 for the type of calculations cited above.

of the 69 weeks, or the 483 full historical years of Daniel 9, culminates in A.D. 27. The final question of this study is, What do the words “unto Messiah the Prince” mean? They should indicate the time for the coming of the Messiah. It should be noted carefully what a Messiah is. According to its verbal root, Messiah means an anointed one. Thus the Messiah is one who is anointed. Before that anointing the person involved was not fully the Messiah yet. Thus we are not talking here about the time of the Messiah's birth or the time of His death; we are talking about the time when He would appear as the Messiah. There is one person and one only who fulfills this requirement, and that is the one who was anointed as the Messiah in A.D. 27—Jesus of Nazareth. His anointing at the Jordan River, by both John the Baptist and His heavenly Father, took place in the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar according to Luke 3:1, 21, 22. While there are other possible ways of reckoning this regnal year of Tiberius,²⁴ it certainly is a reasonable and standard procedure accepted by many commentators, chronographers, and historians to reckon it from A.D. 12. Utilizing that procedure and starting from the beginning point established above in 457 B.C. leads us to one specific individual as the Messiah of this prophecy—Jesus Christ. In other words, the establishment of 457 B.C. as the starting point of the 70-week prophecy of Daniel 9 is one of the strongest indicators among the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament that Jesus truly was all that He claimed to be.

Abbreviations:

IEJ *Israel Exploration Journal*

ZA *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*

Scriptures quoted from NIV are from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*, copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

Scriptures quoted from RSV are from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1946, 1952, 1971 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. Used by Permission.

²⁴For the different ways in which the regnal years of Tiberius were calculated see J. Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 1964), 259-272. Note that at least four or five of the solutions discussed lead to 27 A.D. as the date for the commencement of Jesus' ministry.