

DANIEL'S SEVENTY WEEKS
AND THE OLD TESTAMENT SABBATH-YEAR CYCLE

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According to contemporary historians, the first century A.D. was a time of great Messianic expectation among the Jews. The feeling was widespread that some prophecy regarding the time of his coming was now fulfilled. According to the Roman Suetonius:

There had spread over all the Orient an old and established belief, that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judaea to rule the world. This prediction, referring to the Emperor of Rome, as afterwards appeared from the event, the people of Judaea took to themselves.¹

His compatriot Tacitus is more specific regarding the source of this prophecy:

...in most there was a firm persuasion, that in the ancient records of their priests was contained a prediction of how at this very time the East was to grow powerful, and rulers, coming from Judaea, were to acquire universal empire. These mysterious prophecies had pointed to Vespasian and Titus, but the common people, with the usual blindness of ambition, had interpreted these mighty destinies of themselves, and could not be brought even by disasters to believe the truth.²

Closer to the scene, and writing within ten years of the fall of Jerusalem, was the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, who indicates that only a single ruler was expected:

But now, what did most elevate them in undertaking this war was an ambiguous oracle that was also found in their sacred writings, how, "about that time, one from their country should become governor of the habitable earth." The Jews took this prediction to belong to themselves in particular; and many of the wise men were thereby deceived in their determination. Now, this oracle certainly denoted the government of Vespasian who was appointed emperor in Judea.³

Josephus' application of this prophecy to his patron is understandable,

1. Suetonius, *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, "Vespasian," 4.
2. Tacitus, *History* 5. 13.
3. Josephus, *War* 6. 5. 4.

but it is not likely that his defeated countrymen agreed. In any case, many Jews were ready to follow Bar Kokhba to disaster only sixty years later, when Rabbi Akiba proclaimed him the Messiah.⁴

By the middle of the third century, a mood of resignation seems to have set in, as Rab admits that "all the predestined dates have passed." He explains the delay by suggesting that the Messiah's coming now depends only on Israel's repentance and good works.⁵

But what Old Testament prophecy lies behind this expectation that the Messiah should have come in the first century of our era? Conservative Christians have long believed that Daniel 9:24-27 gives just such a prediction, although there has been considerable disagreement on how the details of this prophecy fit the ministry of Jesus.⁶

ANDERSON'S CALCULATION

Perhaps the most popular interpretation of this passage has been given by Sir Robert Anderson.⁷ He pinpoints the end of the sixty-ninth week, the coming of "Messiah the Prince," as Sunday, April 6, A.D. 32, and claims that this was the very day of our Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem.⁸ Unfortunately this view, as spectacular as it is, faces some serious problems.

First, in order for the prophecy to come out right, Anderson assumes that the Jews used "years" of only 360 days. He seeks justification for this from Revelation 11:2-3, and he calls such a period a "prophetic year."⁹ However, the Old Testament connects the Passover festival, in the middle of the first month, to the offering of the first-ripe grain (Lev. 23:6-14); therefore the Jewish calendar was locked into the seasons. Both the Talmud and archaeology indicate that this was accomplished by adding an extra lunar month every few years,¹⁰ so that in the long run the average length of the Jewish year matches our solar year of just under 365½ days.

Second, the accuracy of Anderson's dates depends upon the Lord's crucifixion having occurred in the year A.D. 32. Although this possibility cannot be ruled out, the New Testament data seem to fit A.D. 30 much better.¹¹

Third, Anderson arbitrarily chooses the first day of the month Nisan

4. Jack Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past* (2nd ed.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), p. 330.

5. *Babylonian Talmud*, Sanhedrin 97b.

6. e.g., see J. Barton Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), pp. 383-89.

7. Sir Robert Anderson, *The Coming Prince* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1957 reprint).

8. *Ibid.*, pp. v-vi.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

10. Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), sections 58-61.

11. *Ibid.*, sections 454-468.

for his starting point,¹² although the Biblical information (Neh. 2:1) gives only the month. But for him to start even a week later would make it impossible to end the prophetic period before the crucifixion, even granting the validity of "prophetic years" and A.D. 32. It also appears that Anderson may be off several days because he confused the Julian and Gregorian calendars.¹³

In spite of all these objections, it appears that a good case can still be made for a definite fulfillment of this passage, even though it is not as spectacular as Anderson's. In addition, this alternative suggestion seems to arise much more naturally from the context.

THE CONTEXT OF THE SEVENTY WEEKS

In the first two verses of Daniel chapter nine, we have the setting for Daniel's vision of the seventy weeks. Daniel has just understood from "books" (plural) that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years. Since Jeremiah is mentioned by name, his prophecy is obviously one of the books (the length of the captivity is predicted in Jeremiah 25:11, 12 and 29:10), but what other books were involved?

The second book of Chronicles also mentions the seventy years (36:21), but it probably was not completed at the time of Daniel's vision. However, the Chronicler explains that the captivity was seventy years long in order to compensate for seventy sabbath years in which the Jews had disobeyed God's command for the land to lie fallow (see Ex. 23:10-11; Lev. 25:3-7, 18-22). In fact, Leviticus 26:32-35, 43, predicts that just this punishment would come upon Israel if they violated the sabbatical-year regulation. Perhaps Exodus and Leviticus were the other books Daniel consulted; Daniel at least had all the materials necessary to reach the conclusion found in II Chronicles, even if he never saw that work.

It is therefore not unreasonable to suppose that Daniel had been thinking about the seven-year land use cycle and the period of seventy such cycles during which Israel had disobeyed this command. If so, the message which the angel brings, "Seventy weeks are determined upon thy people . . .," suddenly seems much less obscure.

It is interesting to note that a remark in the Talmud also associates the coming of the Messiah with a seven-year period.¹⁴ I suggest, therefore, that this prophecy uses the term "week" for the Old Testament Sabbath-Year Cycle.

EXEGESIS OF DANIEL 9:25-26

In this paper, let us consider only the coming of the Messiah, which involves only the first sixty-nine weeks. Personally, I feel that the text

12. Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 127-28.

14. *Babylonian Talmud*, Sanhedrin 97a.

allows a gap of undetermined length between the sixty-ninth and seventieth weeks, in that the destruction of the sanctuary in verse 26 is followed by the stopping of sacrifice in verse 27, which seems to presuppose a rebuilt temple.

To calculate the time of the coming of the Messiah, we are concerned with the 25th and part of the 26th verses of this chapter. In the Authorized or King James Version, this reads:

Know therefore, and understand, that from the going forth of the commandment to restore and 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. And after threescore and two weeks shall Messiah be cut off, but not for himself. . . .

The Revised Standard Version gives a rather different rendering:

Know therefore and understand that from the going forth of the word to restore and build Jerusalem to the coming of an anointed one, a prince, there shall be seven weeks. Then for sixty-two weeks it shall be built again with squares and moat, but in a troubled time. And after the sixty-two weeks, an anointed one shall be cut off, and shall have nothing. . . .

In summary, the K.J.V. has only one Messiah (or anointed one) who comes at the end of 7+62 weeks, whereas the R.S.V. has two: one coming after 7 weeks, another after an additional 62 weeks.

Although the R.S.V. follows the Hebrew punctuation, such marks only date back to the ninth or tenth century A.D.¹⁵ Likewise, although the peculiar combination of 7 and 62 (in place of the sum, 69) is easily explained by the R.S.V. rendering, the parallelism of the passage favors the K.J.V. In the Hebrew, the phrase rendered "restore and build" consists of just the same two verbs as are later rendered "built again." Likewise the word "Messiah" is repeated. Thus the parallelism may be sketched as follows:

From the going forth of the word to *build again* Jerusalem
 To *Messiah* the Prince shall be 7 weeks and 62 weeks
 The street and wall shall be *built again* . . .
 And after the 62 weeks *Messiah* shall be cut off

I suggest that only one Messiah or anointed one is mentioned, and he comes after 69 weeks as measured from the starting point. Perhaps the first seven weeks, if one may hazard a guess, involve the actual rebuilding of the city.

THE STARTING POINT

Among interpreters of the seventy weeks, various arguments have been

15. Ernst Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957), p. 19.

constructed to fix the proper starting point for the prophecy.¹⁶ Anderson's choice of 445 B.C., the twentieth year of Artaxerxes mentioned in Nehemiah 2:1-6, uses the only suggested passage which specifically mentions building the city. Chronological studies since Anderson's time have not changed this date.¹⁷

THE SABBATICAL YEAR

Now we must make the calculation forward from 445 B.C. Unlike Anderson, however, we shall seek to use the actual sabbatical cycles, rather than just adding 7×69 years, as we have suggested that this method better fits the context. But is it possible to locate these cycles in antiquity?

In modern times, the Jews in Palestine still observe a seven-year cycle. According to the *Encyclopedia Judaica*,¹⁸ the year A.D. 1951/2 (beginning in September) was a sabbatical year. This year is consistent with that of A.D. 54/5 given by Sir William Ramsay,¹⁹ and that of A.D. 40/1 mentioned in a footnote of the Socino Talmud,²⁰ but it is not clear where these got their information.

In the first book of the Maccabees, the primary historical source for the Maccabean period, we find that Jewish resistance to the Syrians was once weakened because of a sabbatical year (6:49, 53-54). A reference earlier in the chapter (6:20) indicates that this occurred in the 150th year of the Seleucid era. According to Finegan,²¹ the 150th year could be either 163/2 or 162/1 B.C., depending on whether the Macedonian or Babylonian reckoning was in use.

The former case fits the modern sabbatical year very well: the year 164/3 would have been the sabbath year, so that famine conditions would have been most acute in the following year before crops could be harvested. Let us then take the modern cycle as valid in antiquity also.

THE CALCULATION

Using A.D. 1951/2 as a sabbath year, the period 1945-52 would be the corresponding seven-year cycle, since the sabbath year comes last. Calculating backwards (and remembering that A.D. 1 immediately follows 1 B.C.), we find that the 69th cycle is A.D. 27-34. This certainly brackets the crucifixion of Jesus Christ; in fact, it extends over most of His public ministry also.

Some may be troubled by the fact that Daniel says, "after the 62 weeks shall Messiah be cut off. . .," whereas according to this calculation

16. e.g., see Payne, *loc. cit.*

17. Finegan, *Biblical Chronology*, section 336.

18. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, XIV, 585.

19. Sir William Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveler and Roman Citizen* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1966 reprint), p. 192.

20. *Babylonian Talmud*, Sotah 41a (Socino ed.), XVI, 202n.

21. Finegan, *Biblical Chronology*, sections 194-95.

the crucifixion occurs on the 62nd "week" (the 69th, adding the first seven). But this, too, is a conventional Jewish idiom. Recall that our Lord's resurrection is variously spoken of as occurring "after three days" (Matt. 27:63; Mark 8:31) and also "on the third day" (Matt. 20:19; Mark 9:31).

CONCLUSION

I personally believe that there is real apologetic value in this prophecy of the seventy weeks. The use of sabbatical cycles is favored by the context. Inclusive counting is a regular Jewish practice. The location of the exact sabbath year in antiquity can be in error by a couple of years in either direction from our choice without harming the result, especially as A.D. 30 is the most widely-accepted date for the crucifixion.

Of all the Messianic claimants that Judaism has ever had, the only one considered as outstanding historical figure and ethical teacher (even by atheists) "just happened" to conduct his short public ministry (and was "cut off") within the period A.D. 27-34!

The Jews were once exiled seventy years for not keeping the sabbatical year. Is it unreasonable that their present exile of about 1900 years should be a punishment for rejecting their promised Messiah?