

# BIBLICAL CHRONOLOGY

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## DANIEL'S 70 WEEKS

by James B. Jordan

As we saw last time, we have come to the place in the study of Biblical chronology where it seems that we are forced to abandon the Bible itself as our primary source of information. If we assume that the seventy sevens of Daniel 9:24-27 are in fact weeks of years, and that they begin with the decree of Cyrus, then we are forced to move the decree of Cyrus from 536 B.C. to around 457 B.C., with room for variation depending on our precise interpretation of the prophecy. This shift completely wrecks the currently-accepted system of B.C. dating, which is regarded as inviolable in scholarly circles.

### The Artaxerxes I View

There are other ways to take the seventy sevens of Daniel 9:24-27. Some have supposed that there is another decree in the 20th year of Artaxerxes I, which these same interpreters identify as the Artaxerxes of Nehemiah, and which would be the starting point for the 490 years of prophecy (around 444 B.C.). This would enable a literal interpretation without changing existing B.C. dates. The problem is that there is no foundation for the notion of a decree in the reign of Artaxerxes. Nehemiah 2:8-9 records Artaxerxes' letters granting Nehemiah support in his endeavor, but this is not really a decree. By way of contrast, Cyrus's decree is highlighted consistently in the text as the great turning point in the affairs of the Jews (Ezr. 1:24; 2 Chron. 36:21-23; Jer. 29:10; Is. 44:28; 45:13). [An excellent discussion showing that the decree starts with Cyrus is Vern S. Poythress, "Hermeneutical Factors in Determining the Beginning of the Seventy Weeks (Daniel 9:25)," *Trinity Journal* 6 NS (1985) :131-149.] Also, as we shall see in a future installment, there is a good possibility that the Artaxerxes of Nehemiah is in fact Darius, not the ruler called Artaxerxes I in Greek literature, in which case the letters mentioned in Nehemiah 2:8-9 were issued around 500 B.C.

### The Symbolic View

Another way to deal with the prophecy is to assume that the "seventy sevens" are not years but simply a prophetic figure, and thus make no prediction of events. In context, however, Daniel has been praying about the literal 70 years of captivity (Dan. 9:2), so it is most likely that the seventy sevens are years. Still, perhaps they are some kind of "prophetic years," and are not to be taken so chronologically literal any more than Ezekiel's Temple, which represented the estate of the Jews after the exile, was to be taken literally. (On Ezekiel's Temple and its meaning, see James B. Jordan, *Through New Eyes*, chap. 17; available for \$12.00 from Biblical Horizons, Box 132011, Tyler, TX 75713.)

Some, based on the text itself, that there are 49 consecutive years (7 weeks), then 434 years (62 weeks), and then 7 years (the 70th week), with a gap between each. This does put us in the unhappy situation of advocating a "gap" approach, but at least the text itself leaves the possibility open by speaking of three periods within the 70 weeks.

### The Revisionist View

One of the problems with any non-literal or non-consecutive approach to this prophecy is that the New Testament seems to be against it. We find in the New Testament that about the time Jesus was born, people were expecting a Messiah to be born. Similarly, about the time He began His ministry, people cognizant of the Old Testament were looking for it. There were false Messiah's floating around in this period as well, as both the New Testament and Josephus tell us. Possibly all these people had made good guesses, or had been moved supernaturally by the Spirit, to look for the Messiah at this time. More likely, however, they knew when the 70 weeks of Daniel began, and thus in a practical way the Spirit caused them to add up the numbers and thereby know that they were ending about this time.

At this point in my studies, I am in no position to offer a full revisionist view of this subject. In this essay, however, I want to present an initial case for revising the B.C. dates and taking the 490 years as literal and as starting with Cyrus. The reader should be aware that I am not at all decided one way or another on this matter. I do think, however, that the possibility of historical revision should be entertained as an option.

If we are to revise and shorten the B.C. chronology, the first place to try it is in the later Persian imperial period, before the conquest of Alexander the Great. We need to get rid of about 79 years. To do this we have to call into question three things: 1. the reliability of the Greeks as historians of Persian affairs; 2. the reliability of Ptolemy's King List; and 3. the reliability of eclipse data.

First, concerning actual history of this period, which we know almost exclusively from the Greeks, scholars of Persian history admit that little is known about the later period of the Persian empire, except for a few scattered events discussed by Greek writers. concerning these later events in Persian history, E. Badian has written: "The pervasive source problem that makes a proper history of relations between Greeks and Persians almost impossible - the absence of any historiographical record and paucity of evidence on the Persian side - must inevitably bedevil any attempt to write the history of Alexander's conquest of

vitch, ad., *The Cambridge History of Iran, 2: Median and Achaemenian Periods* [Cambridge University Press, 1985], p. 420.)

Sines there is no reel history of events in this period, we have no chronology for it that arises from sources close to the scene. The chronology for this period was originally beeed solely on the King List of Ptolemy (c. A.D. 150), a list appended to his *Almagest*, a book on astronomy. It is found in *Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 16, p. 466. Ptofemy simply lists the kings of Assyria, Persia, Macedonia, and Rome, with years for each one. Adding these up consecutively provided the chronology Ptolemy used, and which was used by everyone who leaned on his work - which has been just about everybody, starting with the Church Fathers. In recent years, Ptolemy's dates have been reinforced by interpretations of eclipse data.

### Calvin's Suggested Revision

The Protestant Reformers, who took the historical nature of the Christian religion with the utmost seriousness and were es a result very concerned with Biblical chronology, were not sold on the Ptolemaic B.C. dates. Calvin takes note of the fact that fellow Reformer Oecolampadius devoted much time and attention to working out a Biblical chronology from creation forward: "Oecolampadius rightly and prudently admonishes us, that we ought to make the computation from the beginning of the world [not backwards from the birth of Christ - JBJ]. For until the ruin of the Temple and the destruction of the city, we can gather with certainty the number of years which have elapsed from the creation of the world; here there is no room for error. The series is plain enough in the Scriptures." (Calvin, *Lectures on Daniel*, lect. 50; Myers trans., Baker Book House ad., p. 208.) Would that modern Calvinists took the chronology of the Bible so seriously!

Calvin's continuing remarks are worth citing, because he lays a good groundwork for our discussion: "These two points, then, in my judgment, must be held esfixed; first, the seventy weeks begin with the Persian monarchy, because a free return was then granted to the people; and secondly, they did not terminate till the baptism of Christ, when He openly commenced His work of satisfying the requirements of the office assigned Him by His Father" (*ibid.*, p. 209).

Calvin then discusses the problem of accounting for these years, noting controversies of his own time: "After Cyrus had transferred to the Persians the power of the East, some kings must clearly have followed him, although it is not evident who they were, and writers also differ about the period and the reigns of each of them, and yet on the main points there is a general agreement. For some enumerate about 200 years; other 125 years; and some are between the two, reckoning 140 years. [The 125-year view takes the 70 weeks literally - JBJ.] Which ever be the correct statement, there was clearly some succession of the

Alexander the Macedonian obtained the monarchy of the whole East" (*ibid.*, p. 210).

As we have seen, Calvin wants to take the 490 years literally es beginning with Cyrus. How can he shorten the chronology provided by Ptolemy? Here is his answer: "We must remember how our ignorance springs chiefly from this Persian custom: whoever undertook a warlike expedition appointed his son his viceroy. Thus, Cambyses reigned, according to some, twenty years, and according to others, only seven; because the crown was placed on his head during his father's lifetime. Besides this, there was another reason. The people of the East are notoriously very restless, easily excited, and always desiring a change of rulers. Hence, contentions frequently arose among near relatives, of which we have ample narratives in the works of Herodotus. I mention him among others, as the fact is sufficiently known. When fathers saw the danger of their sons mutually destroying each other, they usually created one of them a king; and if they wished to prefer the younger brother to the elder, they called him 'king' with the concurrence of their council. Hence, the years of their reigns became intermingled, without any fixed method of reckoning them" (*ibid.*, p. 211).

In other words, Ptolemy may have the years right as regards each individual king, but we cannot simply add them up because they may overlap. Since the Bible indicates a continuity of reign in the years of Darius, and possibly Xerxes and Artaxerxes I as well, the overlapping reigns would be toward the end of the Persian period. For reasons that I shall set forth later in this series, I am inclined to the view that the "Ahasuerus" and "Artaxerxes" of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther are the same as Darius, and so in the chart that follows, I shall place Xerxes and Artaxerxes I in the section of possible confusion and overlap.

For reference, here is a chart of the options we have presented thus far:

Evsnt	current B.C.	Revisionist B.C.	Rev. A.M.
Cyrus's Decree	538 B.C.	457 B.C.	3476 A.M.
Cambyses	529	450	3483
Darius	521	442	3491
Xerxes	485	406	3526
Artaxerxes I	464	overlapping	
Darius II	423	reigns, so	
Artaxerxes II	404	detailed	
Artaxerxes III	358	chronology	
Arohus	337	not possible	
Darius III	33s		
Alexander conquers	331	331	3601
Zero A.D.			3932
Crucifixion of Christ, middle of 70th week (A.D. 30)			3962
Abomination of Temple: Christians depart finally			4000
Destruction of Jerusalem (A.D. 70)			4002