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Daniel: Historical & Chronological Comments (IX)

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17. The Seventy Weeks: Chronological Considerations (Daniel 9:24-27)

As I have shown elsewhere, and as many older commentators and students of chronology have **maintained**, the **Persian** rulers known to us as **Xerxes** and **Artaxerxes Longimanus**, who succeeded Darius the Great, do not figure in the Biblical history. The **Ahasuerus** (**Xerxes**) of Esther, and the **Artaxerxes** of Ezra-Nehemiah are both Darius. This fact emerges from a careful study of the genealogies that are included in these books.

Moreover, 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).

Thus, the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem, which begins the 70 weeks of Daniel **9:24-27**, must refer to the decree of Cyrus. This is, in fact, the only decree the Scriptures ever refer to. Isaiah **44:23-27** say that Cyrus's decree would be to build Jerusalem and lay the foundation of the Temple. Isaiah 45:13 says that Cyrus would build God's city.

Since the decree is that of Cyrus, and since it is dated in 537 BC, then if the 70 weeks carry down to the time of Christ, the 70 weeks must be a symbol. There are several problems with this view. First, the 70 years at the **beginning** of Daniel 9 are clearly the context of

this prophecy. **The** 70 years were prophesied, and they were 70 consecutive actual years. Reading in context, there is no hint that the 70 weeks are not also weeks of years.

Second, **Gerhard Hasel** has recently pointed out that the Hebrew word translated "weeks" has both a masculine and a feminine plural form. Contrary to many modern expositors, this word means "week" and not merely "seven" or "**sevenness**," for it is used to mean "week" in Daniel **10:2 & 3**. In fact, only in Daniel do we find the masculine plural of "week" and only in Daniel **9:24-27** and **10:2-3**. In fact, the plural of "seven" in Hebrew is a different word.

Hasel points out that when a word has both a masculine and a feminine plural, the former is **corporate** while the latter is collective. Thus, in Hebrew, **sheaves (masc.)** refers to sheaves in **general**, **whale sheaves (fem.)** refers to a gathering of individual sheaves. Fields (fem.) refers to various individual fields or farms, while fields (masc.) refers to countryside in general. Just so, weeks (fem.) would refer to a gathering of weeks, while weeks (masc.) would refer to the totality of the weeks mentioned.

Thus, when Daniel says in Daniel **10:2-3** that he had been in mourning for three weeks, the sense is "a period of three weeks" or a "block of **three** weeks."

Hasel's two conclusions are these. First, since we have a "block of 70 weeks," there is no way to separate off the 70th week and distance it from the rest. This is one block of time. Second, since **these** are "weeks" and not "sevens," there is no way this passage can be taken symbolically. It speaks of chronological time, a period of 70 weeks of years, or 490 years. **Gerhard F. Hasel**,

“The Hebrew Masculine Plural for ‘Weeks’ in the Expression ‘Seventy Weeks’ in Daniel 9:24,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 31 (1993): 105-118.

The fact that the decree as recorded in Ezra 1 only mentions the Temple does not stand against this. The Scriptures tell us that Cyrus also decreed the rebuilding of the city. Moreover, in the Restoration era, the city is no longer the ‘city of David’ but the “holy city.” The entire city is a temple in a larger sense. This is why attention is paid to Nehemiah’s rebuilding of the walls, for **these** walls are now holy walls.

A third problem with the symbolic interpretation of the 70 weeks is the fact that in Jews’ day people were expecting the Messiah to appear at any moment. This expectation **makes** sense if they had been counting the years. They could assume that the Messiah would take **up his role at the age of 30, which was when the priests** and also Joseph and **David** took up their offices, and thus they **could** calculate roughly when He would be born.

Thus, we are left with the solution advocated by Calvin, but overlooked today, which is that our **BC** dating system is wrong at this point and the decree of Cyrus came in the year 457 **BC**, eighty years closer to our time. We arrive at this date as follows:

1. Fourteen years after his conversion, Paul visited Jerusalem at the time Herod died. This was AD 44. **Galatians 2:2 & Acts 11:27-12:25.**

2. **Therefore**, Paul was converted in **AD 30**.

3. Therefore, **Jesus’** crucifixion, resurrection, and **ascension** happened in the spring of AD 30, midway through the year.

4. **This** was in the center of the 70th week, the middle of the 487th year.

5. If we **count** backwards, remembering that there is no Year 0, we come to 457 **BC** as the first year of Cyrus, the year of the decree, the first year of the 490 years. (**This** year, of course, began in the fall of 456 Be.)

What about **these** 80 problematic years? The date of Alexander’s conquest of Babylon is fixed at 331 **BC**. This is the end of the Persian imperial period. Thus, the current chronology of Persia seems to be inflated by 80 years.

If we are to revise and shorten the current consensus chronology, the place to try it is in the later Persian imperial period, before the conquest of Alexander the Great. We need to get rid of 80 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] y **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 Iran . . . It is clear from earlier periods that even the best evidence on the Greek side, quite apart **from** its bias and its focus of interest, is factually unreliable where it can be checked” (E. Badian, “Alexander in Iran,” in *Ilya Gershevitch, ed., The Cambridge History of Iran, 2: Median and Achaemenian Periods* [Cambridge University Press, 1985], p. 420.)

Second, since there is no real 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 based solely on the **King List** of Ptolemy (c. AD 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. Ptolemy 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.

The Protestant Reformers, who took the historical nature of the Christian religion with the utmost seriousness and were as a result very concerned with Biblical chronology, were not sold on the **Ptolemaic** dates. Calvin **takes** note of the fact that fellow Reformer **Ecolampadius** devoted much time and attention to working out a Biblical chronology from creation forward: “**Ecolampadius** rightly and prudently admonishes us, that we ought to make the computation from the beginning of the world. 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 cd., p. 208.)

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

as fixed; 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. Which be the correct statement, there was **clearly** ~~some succession of the Persian kings, and many~~ additional years elapsed before 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 as 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.

Third, we have to call into question the reliability of eclipse data, on which so much current reconstruction of the ancient world relies. In brief, the **earth** undergoes

slight shifts in motion called "accelerations." **These** accelerations take place both in the earth's rotation and in her revolution around the sun, **and** they take place in the moon's motions also. In other words, every now and then the earth or the moon will slow down or speed up for a second or so, and then return to normal. This is caused by tidal forces and by the **magmatic** fluxes under the earth, as well as by other factors as well.

On this, see the various studies by astronomer Robert R. Newton of Johns Hopkins University, such as *Ancient Astronomical Observations and the Accelerations of the Earth and Moon* (Baltimore Johns Hopkins, 1970) and *The Moon's Accelerations* (Johns Hopkins, 1979). Newton was **forced** to do these studies in **order** to provide accurate data on the solar system to NASA, so that our **satellites and space probes would not** miss **their targets**. ~~The studies are highly technical, but very~~ important for the study of ancient chronology.

What all this means is that it is not possible to feed into a computer a bunch of information about the motion of the earth, moon, and sun, and then calculate eclipses for the ancient world. The "accelerations" of the earth and the moon mean that geographical positions of such eclipses will be off by hundreds of miles. For instance, suppose the computer says that an eclipse of the sun occurred at Nineveh in 600 **BC**. In fact, the "accelerations" of the moon and sun during the past 2600 years may have shifted things around so that the eclipse actually was visible 500 miles away, and not noticeable at **Nineveh** at all. This means that attempts to **fix** dates using ancient records and modern computers are fraught with difficulty.

The farther back we go, the more inaccurate any simple computer scheme becomes. This calls into question not only the Persian chronology, but also those of Assyria and Babylon, to the extent that **these** have ~~been "corroborated" by eclipse data. Eclipse data may~~ turn out to be of little or no use in the study of ancient history.

Thus, there is ample reason to call into question the current chronology of the later Persian period.

The book of Daniel may provide a clue in **Daniel** 11:2-3. There we read that three more kings will arise in Persia after Cyrus. These were Cambyses, Darius the Great, and **Xerxes**. Then would come a fourth, who would become very rich and stir up the realm of Greece. This was Artaxerxes **Longimanus**. Usually, however, this is referred to **Xerxes**, with the brief imposter Smerdis counted as one of the three previous kings. This is because **Xerxes** did accumulate great wealth and attacked Greece. The verse does not say that the fourth king attacked Greece, however; only that

Greece was stirred up. E. J. Young comments, "The last words of this verse are extremely difficult." (Young, *Daniel*, p. 232.) It might read, "He will stir up everyone against the kingdom of Greece." Or, "He will stir up **all** the kingdom of Greece." Or even possibly, "All will stir up the kingdom of Greece," an indefinite reference. A **clear** prediction of **Xerxes'** attack this phrase is not. In fact, **Longimanus** did become involved in a war with Greece springing out of Egypt's revolt against him. The Athenians, seeing an opportunity, joined with the Egyptians and were defeated by the Persians. Later conflicts led to a stalemate, and an **implied** if not documented treaty agreeing to keep out of each other's way. **The** war seems to have weakened the **Athenian** Empire (the "Delian League," possibly the "all of Greece" spoken of), and created problems for them in Greece-perhaps the "stirring up" spoken of here. Additionally, a few years later the first phase of the Athens-Sparta War, or **Peloponnesian** War, came during **Artaxerxes'** reign (431 **BC**). As a matter of fact, not much is known about this period, and it is entirely possible that **Artaxerxes** used Persian wealth to sow discord in Greece.

Now, if I am right in this exceptional interpretive **suggestion**, we can now look at the date of the end of **Artaxerxes'** reign, which is given as 424 **BC**. If we subtract 80 years from this figure, we come to 344 **BC**. Alexander conquered Persia 13 years later, in 331 **BC**. Daniel 11:3 says that **after** the fourth king, who I am suggesting is **Longimanus**, a "mighty **king** will arise," referring to Alexander. By 344, Philip of Macedon had already become dominant in Greece; he ascended the throne of Macedonia in 359 and had conquered Greece by 338. Alexander came to the throne in 336. Thus, Greece was "arising" at about the time **Longimanus's** reign came to an end.

I am not entirely comfortable with this **reconstruction**, because a "very rich king who stirs up all of Greece" does seem to fit **Xerxes** better than **Artaxerxes Longimanus**. If we are to see **Xerxes** as the very rich king of Persia, then the arising of Greece would be seen as following **Xerxes** disastrous defeat at **Thermopylae** and Salamis. In either event, using the shorter chronology there is no need to posit a large gap of time between Daniel 11:2 & 3.

Having said all this, problems remain. The history of the later phase of the Persian Empire seems to be sufficiently cloudy that perhaps it could be shortened by 80 years. **The** wars between Greece and Persia during the reigns of Darius and **Xerxes** are, however, also attested in Greek history and chronology. **There** seems to be more data about Greek history between these events and the rise of Alexander, data that **makes** it **doubtful** if 80 years can be filtered out of that history. Still, recent scholars have called **all** of Greek history before Alexander into question, including the reliability of Olympiad dating. See the discussions in Peter **James**, et al., *Centuries of Darkness* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993), especially chapter 5 and appendix 2.

My conclusion is agnostic. Certainly everything in Daniel 9, apparently including the grammar, points to 490 consecutive years between Cyrus and Christ. The matter is not, however, so absolutely certain as to exclude any possibility that the "block of 70 weeks" is a symbolic construct. The question is worth investigating, in my opinion, but if the current consensus chronology is wrong, it will take a good deal of work by many investigators over considerable time to demonstrate it and to work out an alternative.