

The 70 Weeks and 457 B.C.

Establishing the specific date for the beginning of the prophecy of the seventy weeks of Daniel 9:24-27 is of great importance for Adventists as well as for those who find there a messianic prophecy. Identifying that date has been a challenging task for biblical scholars and consequently different dates have been suggested based on different interpretations of the biblical text. These different views have been analyzed and rejected by Adventist scholars after concluding that they do not conform to the explicit meaning of the text.¹ Our attempt to clarify this area of biblical research should begin with the biblical text itself.

Beginning of the Prophetic Period

Daniel 9:25 provides for us the specific events that would initiate the prophetic period of seventy weeks:

From the issuing [*motsā*, from the verb *yātsā* = “come out,” “go forth”] of the decree [*dābār* = “word,” “command,” “thing”] to restore [*hāshîb*, from *shûb* hiphil = “bring back,” “restore”] and rebuild [*libnôth*, from *bānāh* = “build,” “rebuild”] Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven ‘sevens’ [*shābu‘im* = “weeks”], and sixty-two ‘sevens.’ It will be built with streets and a trench [MT reads: *tashûb w^enibn^ethāh* = “it will be restored and rebuilt”; *r^echôb* = “plaza” *w^echarûts* = “and moat”?], but in times of trouble.

The passage is identifying the initiation of the prophetic period and its extension by combining the prepositions “from [*min*]” and “until [*ad*].” *Min* is used here in its temporal meaning pointing to the beginning of the 70 weeks, while *ad*, also used in a temporal sense, points to the end of the period.

The prophetic period starts with “the going out of a word.” The noun *motsā* has a semantic range similar to the verb *yātsā*, “come out,” and could be translated in the Old Testament as “exit,” “going out,” “intention,” “point of departure” and “utterance.”² Here, in Daniel, it means “the going forth.”³ The word *dābār*, “word,” translated “decree,” has a wide range of meanings in the Old Tes-

tament such as “thing,” “speech,” and “command.” Whenever a “word/command” goes out from the Lord it is either to be fulfilled (Isa 45:23; 55:11) or to be obeyed (Gen 24:50). When the “command” of a king goes out it is considered to be a royal decree (Esth 1:19; 7:8).⁴

In Daniel 9:23 we find the expression “an answer was given,” “a word went out,” referring to the answer God gave to Daniel’s prayer. The noun *dābār*, “word,” is modified by the verb *yātsā* in a somewhat similar way to what we find in 9:25. This has led some to conclude that the “word” in 9:25 refers to a divine pronouncement and not to the decree of an earthly king.⁵ But the fact that vs. 25 is clearly interested in the initiation and progression of specific historical events in a chronological order militates against that view. The “word” in 9:23 “is at the vertical level, whereas the *dābār* in Daniel 9:25 comes from and finds its meaning at the horizontal level.”⁶ This royal decree is the point at which the 70 weeks are to begin to be counted.

The content of the “decree” is described in vs. 25: “To restore and rebuild Jerusalem.” The two infinitives describe two different and yet interrelated activities. The verb *shûb* is not used in the Old Testament to designate a physical reconstruction; it is the second verb (*bānāh*) that expresses that idea. What is being restored here is a city, namely, Jerusalem. In other places in the Old Testament the verb *shûb* takes as its direct object the exiles and it then designates the “return” of the exiles from captivity to Jerusalem (e.g. Jer 12:15; 23:3). But in Daniel the object of the verb is a city and in order to understand the meaning of the verb it would be necessary to study the passages in which *shûb* takes as its object a similar one.⁷ There are several of those:

The Aramean king said to Ahab, king of Israel, “I will return [*shûb*, “restore”] the cities my father took from your father.” (I Kings 20:34).

In this case “to restore” is to return the cities to the original owner and does not include the idea of rebuilding the cities because they had not been

destroyed. To restore them meant that they would be ruled by the Israelites themselves according to their own laws.

Azariah, king of Judah, is described as “the one who rebuilt [*bānāh*] Elath and restored [*shûb*] it to Judah.” (2 Kings 14:22)

We find here the two verbs we found in Daniel — “to rebuild,” “to restore.” The city had been in ruins, it was rebuilt and then it was restored to Judah. The verb “to restore” means that it was to function again as a city ruled by the Israelites as part of their territories (cf 1 Kgs 12:21).

Based on the usage of the verb *shûb*, “restore,” in those passages we can conclude that the restoration of Jerusalem in Daniel 9:25 points to a time when the city was going to be returned to the Jews to be ruled according to their own laws as a theocentric organization. The verb “to rebuild” stresses the physical reconstruction of *the city*.

At the end of Daniel 9:25 we read about the restoration and rebuilding of “the street and the moat.” It is quite difficult to determine the meaning of those terms, particularly the second one. It is generally accepted that the first one, *r^echôb*, “street,” does not mean “street” but designates “a broad open space” within the city.⁸ It was located by the gate of the city (Neh 8:16); there proclamations were made (2 Chr 32:6; Esth 6:9), people were instructed (Neh 8:1, 3), legal decisions were made (Ezra 10:9), and justice was to be practiced (Isa 59:14). *R^echôb* as a designation of an open square or plaza of a town or city had an important social function and also an “official administrative and judicial function.”⁹ One can conclude that the plaza “was a symbol of the people’s freedom in using the laws of their God” in the administration of society.¹⁰

The second term, *chārûts*, “trench,” is difficult to translate. It is commonly rendered “moat, conduit” but that rendering is far from certain. The verbal root means “cut, decide.” Some scholars have suggested that the noun in Daniel 9:25 means “cut place,” that is to say a “moat;”¹¹ but no one seems to know for sure what it really designates. However, the verb is used to express the idea of a legal decision or verdict (1 Kgs 20:40; cf Dan 9:26, 27). This seems to be the meaning of the noun in the

phrase “valley of decision” in Joel 3:14 [4:14]. The nations “are all brought into an open space like the public square, and there decisions are made with regard to their judgment.”¹² In fact, the verb and its derivatives are used in the Old Testament to express the idea of “decide, determine.”¹³ Based on that it has been suggested that the noun *chārûts* in Daniel 9:25 means “decision-making” and indicates that the judiciary power of Jerusalem based on the law of God will be restored to the people.¹⁴

According to Daniel 9:25 the decree that would initiate the fulfillment of the 70 weeks would allow the people to govern themselves on the basis of the theocratic law and to rebuild the city, e.g. the walls of Jerusalem.

Identifying the Decree

Is it possible to identify the decree that permitted the restoration and rebuilding of Jerusalem as described by Daniel? Many scholars, from different religious traditions, have found in the book of Ezra the fulfillment of the Danielic prediction. But the interpretation of the evidence has not been a simple matter because there are in Ezra several different decrees concerning the exiles and Jerusalem. We find a decree from Cyrus in 538 B.C. (Ezra 1:1-4; cf Isa 45:1), the Decree of Darius in 520 B.C. (Ezra 6:1-12), the decree of Artaxerxes in 457 B.C. (7:12-26), and even an authorization given to Nehemiah to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem in 444 B.C. (Nehemiah 1).¹⁵ Which one of these decrees is the fulfillment of Daniel 9:25? Let us look briefly at each one of them.¹⁶

The decree issued by Cyrus in 537 B.C. is considered by some to be the one prophesied not just by Daniel but particularly by Isaiah. The prophet stated,

Isa 44:28:

Who says of Cyrus, ‘He is my shepherd,
and he shall fulfill all my purpose’;
saying of Jerusalem, ‘She shall be rebuilt,
and of the temple, ‘Your foundation shall be
laid.’

45:13:

He [Cyrus] shall build my city
and set my exiles free,
Not for price or reward.

According to these passages Cyrus was (1) to rebuild the city, and (2) to set the exiles free to go to Jerusalem. Isaiah uses the verb *bānāh*, “to build,” employed also by Daniel, but not the verb *shûb*, “restore.” In its place we find the verb *shālach*, “to send, let go free.” This is somewhat different from what we have in Daniel and, more important, quite different from its presumed fulfillment recorded in Ezra 1:2-4. There we find the following summary of Cyrus’ decree:

“This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of his people among you—may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem. And the people of any place where survivors may now be living are to provide him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.”

This decree is in some ways in agreement with Isaiah but there are some differences. (1) It makes clear that God appointed Cyrus to act on behalf of Israel; (2) a building project is authorized; (3) exiles are authorized to return to Jerusalem; and (4) provisions for the building project were made. There is one important difference between this decree and the Isaianic passage: *What is built is not the city but only the temple.*

There are probably several possible ways to deal with that significant discrepancy. One could possibly argue that the prophecy was not fulfilled exactly as expected because in phrasing it the prophet made a mistake. This solution creates more problems than it solves and is to be rejected. Another possibility would be to suggest that when Cyrus authorized the rebuilding of the temple he was in fact authorizing the rebuilding of the whole city. But there is no evidence in Ezra and Nehemiah or anywhere else in the Bible that would suggest that the exiles understood Cyrus’ decree to be an authorization to rebuild the city.

It would be better to interpret the prophecy of Isaiah as meaning that Cyrus himself was not to

be directly responsible for the rebuilding of the city but rather that he initiated a process that would ultimately lead to a decree authorizing the rebuilding of Jerusalem.¹⁷ Hence, Cyrus stood not just for his own person but he represented the other Persian kings that came after him, one of whom would issue the decree announced by the prophet.¹⁸

The decree of Cyrus recorded in Ezra 1:2-4 does not meet the requirements stipulated by Daniel’s prophecy because it allows only for the rebuilding of the temple and does not address the restoration and rebuilding of Jerusalem.

The second decree is the one by Darius in 520 B.C.. According to Ezra 5, Zerubbabel and Joshua, under the influence of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, reinitiated the project of rebuilding the temple several years after it was stopped. When Tatnai, governor of the province, saw the building activities, he questioned the legal basis for what they were doing and wrote a letter to Darius asking him to verify the information he had obtained from the Jews in Jerusalem. An investigation was made and the decree of Cyrus was found. Consequently, Darius issued another decree confirming the first one (Ezra 6:3-12). The decree of Darius is not significantly different from Cyrus’ edict. The only important difference is that the king ordered Tatnai not to interfere with the project of rebuilding the temple and to impale anyone who would oppose it.

The third decree is the one of Artaxerxes in 457 B.C. recorded in Ezra 7:12-26. This decree is significantly different from the previous ones partially because by then the temple had been finished.¹⁹ Ezra is now introduced “as the one who above all others was responsible for the establishment of the Pentateuchal law as the norm for all religious and social life in the postexilic community.”²⁰

The decree of Artaxerxes included several important elements: (1) Granted permission to the exiles to return to Jerusalem, (2) funds were assigned for the support of the temple in Jerusalem, (3) temple and temple personnel were tax exempted, (4) Ezra was to investigate the condition of the people in Judah, possibly in order to bring their lives into agreement with the Mosaic law, and (5) it established a legal system based on the Torah for all

the Jews in Judeah and throughout the Trans-Euphrates province. This last point included setting up magistrates and judges to enforce the law.

Of particular importance is vs. 26: “Whoever does not obey the law of your God and the law of the king must surely be punished by death, banishment, confiscation of property, or imprisonment.” The Persian king made the Mosaic law “part of his own law”²¹ granting it imperial authority. The Jews could now use it freely to regulate their lives and in the administration of justice in Jerusalem. The king restored the authority of the Jews to govern themselves on the basis of the law of God. It is to this type of restoration that Daniel 9:25 was pointing in its prophetic announcement.

The decree of Artaxerxes, recorded in Ezra 7, was comprehensive enough to permit the rebuilding of Jerusalem. In fact, the rebuilding of the city is implicit in the authorization to set up a judicial system at a central place based on the law of God. But in addition we do find clear evidence in Ezra and Nehemiah to the effect that Ezra was authorized to rebuild the city.

The first line of evidence is found in Nehemiah 1. About 13 years after Ezra arrived at Jerusalem Nehemiah is informed that those who returned to Palestine were “in great trouble and shame” and that “the walls of Jerusalem” were broken down and the gates destroyed by fire (1:3). The reaction of Nehemiah to this information (vs. 4) “is so strong that this report cannot refer to the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar some 140 years previously.”²² He would have known long before 444 B.C. what the Babylonian army had done to Jerusalem in 586 B.C.. Nehemiah is referring to a recent event and indicates that the rebuilding of the city had been in progress but was stopped and much of the work done had been damaged and/or destroyed. This rebuilding project took place before 444 B.C. but was unfinished. The question is, when did the rebuilding of the wall begin? Was it during the time of Cyrus, Darius or Artaxerxes? The biblical text provides a clear answer. According to Ezra 4:7-23 it took place during the reign of Artaxerxes.

This leads us to the second line of evidence. Ezra 4:7-23 states that a group of Persian officers in the province called Trans-Euphrates wrote a letter to Artaxerxes recording their opposition to the

rebuilding of Jerusalem by the Jews. In the letter they stated two important things. First, they mentioned to the king that the city was being rebuilt, the walls were being finished, and the foundations were being repaired. Second, this rebuilding was being done by “the Jews who come up from you to us” and who were in Jerusalem (4:12). The phrase “from you to us” indicates that the rebuilding was being done by a group of exiles who had been authorized by Artaxerxes to return to Jerusalem.²³ According to Ezra 7 the king authorized Ezra and the exiles in 457 B.C. to return to Jerusalem. It was this group of exiles who were rebuilding the city.

In the letter the Persian officers tried to persuade the king to stop the project arguing that Jerusalem had always been a rebellious city and that in fact it was because of that that the Babylonians destroyed it (Ezra 4:13, 15). The letter argued that if the Jews were permitted to finish their project they could take control of the Trans-Euphrates province and would stop paying taxes and tribute to the king (vss. 13, 16). This was an exaggeration, but it could have been based on the fact that Artaxerxes authorized Ezra to teach and to enforce the law of God throughout the province and not just in Jerusalem (7:25, 26).

It is also important to observe that the letter does not suggest in any way that the rebuilding of the city and its walls was being done without royal consent.²⁴ Since the officers were trying to damage the Jewish community, had the rebuilding being illegal they would have used the argument of insubordination to the king against them. The arguments they used presuppose that the rebuilding was authorized by the king. They wanted the project stopped not because it was not supported by Artaxerxes but because of the potential danger of insurrection once it was finished.

The answer to this letter given by the king suggests that the Jews had been authorized by Artaxerxes to rebuild the city. Once the complaint was received the king did not check whether the Jews had been authorized to rebuild Jerusalem. He knew that they had been legally authorized to do what they were doing. He could only stop the project on the basis of a potential insurrection in the future. Hence, he checked the history of Jerusa-

lem and it was confirmed that it had been a rebellious city, and based on that he ordered that the project be stopped (vs. 19). We should notice that the decree allowing for the rebuilding of the city was not cancelled out but its execution was postponed by the king to a future time to be determined by him. This he did during the time of Nehemiah (Nehemiah 2).

The Persian officers took the letter of the king, went to Jerusalem “and by force and power made them [the Jews] cease” (Ezra 4:23). It is difficult to know the full meaning of that last phrase but it certainly indicates that the officers employed military force to stop the project and that at least some sections of the wall were destroyed.²⁵ This explains why it took Nehemiah only 52 days to rebuild the wall of the city (Neh 6:15). It is to this attack on the Jews and the city that Nehemiah 1 refers.

The third line of evidence supporting the conviction that the decree of Artaxerxes in 457 B.C. allowed the Jews to rebuild Jerusalem is found in Ezra 9:9. In one of his prayers Ezra states that God authorized the people through the Persian kings “to rebuild the house of our God and repair its ruins, and he has given us a wall of protection in Judah and Jerusalem.” Some scholars have given a metaphorical interpretation to the phrase “a wall of protection in Judah and Jerusalem” arguing that there was never a literal wall around Judea.²⁶ The wall is then taken to be a symbol of divine protection. But such approach is not persuasive. First, “if there is a wall associated with Jerusalem (cf Ezra 4:12), then there would be a wall ‘in Judah’ where Jerusalem is located. Secondly, the ‘wall in Judah and Jerusalem’ is just as physical and real as ‘the house of our God,’ the temple, which is also referred to in the same wise.”²⁷ It is true that the word *gālēr*, “wall,” is not the common word used to designate a city wall but it is also used in the Old Testament to designate such a wall (Mic 7:11).²⁸

The prophecy of Daniel 9:25 was fulfilled in 457 B.C. when Artaxerxes authorized Ezra through a royal decree to go to Jerusalem accompanied by a group of exiles to restore and rebuild the city.²⁹ The books of Ezra and Nehemiah show clearly that this was exactly what took place and that the rebuilding of the city was finished under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Historical Value of the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

Another problem we confront when attempting to establish a date for the commencement of the 70 weeks is that the historical value of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah is questioned and rejected by a significant group of scholars. Consequently, different historical reconstructions are suggested creating at times a diversity which gives the impression that it is impossible to be certain about some of the historical events described in those books.

Canonical Narrative

A brief summary of the main elements in the narrative recorded in Ezra and Nehemiah would include the following:

1. Cyrus issued a decree in 538 B.C. granting authority to the Jews to return to Jerusalem, to rebuild the temple, and to collect money in Babylonia for the project.

2. The Jews arrived at Judah and began to rebuild the temple. A series of internal reasons led the returnees to stop the project. In 520 B.C., encouraged by Haggai and Zachariah, Zerubbabel and Joshua reinitiate the building of the temple.

3. There was strong opposition to the rebuilding of the temple by the neighboring people. It was necessary for Darius, in 520 B.C., to re-confirm the decree of Cyrus. In spite of the problems, the temple was finished and dedicated in 515 B.C. (Ezra 6:15, 16).

4. Even after the temple was finished (4:6), the enemies of the Jews wrote letters against them to King Xerxes (485-465 B.C.).

5. About 58 years after the temple was rebuilt Artaxerxes issued a decree giving permission to Ezra to go to Jerusalem with another group of exiles to restore and rebuild the city. This took place in 457 B.C..

6. Persian officials were able to stop the rebuilding of the city but about 13 years later Nehemiah was authorized by Artaxerxes to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall of the city. The decree of 457 B.C. was renewed.

7. Shortly thereafter the wall was finished under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah.

We can divide the books into two main sections: Ezra 1-6 deal with the rebuilding of the temple; and Ezra 7 - Nehemiah 13 with the restoration and rebuilding of the city.

The order of the Persian kings mentioned in the books follow the order of the kings in Persian history. (The following list of kings and the biblical passages have been taken from Mordecai Cogan, "Chronology," *ABD* 1:1010-11). Obviously not all the Persian kings are mentioned in Esdra-Nehemiah but those mentioned are well known:

<i>Ezra-Nehemiah</i>	<i>Persian History</i>
Cyrus (Ezra 1:4; 4:3; 5:13; 6:3, 14)	Cyrus (539-530 B.C.) Cambyses (530-522 B.C.) Pseudo Smerdis (522 B.C.)
Darius (Ezra 4:5, 24; 5:6; 6:1, 13) Xerxes (Ezra 4:6)	Darius (522-486 B.C.) Xerxes (486-465 B.C.)
Artaxerxes I (Ezra 4:7, 8, 11, 23; 6:14; 7:1; 8:1; Neh 2:1; 5:14; 13:6)	Artaxerxes I (465-423 B.C.)
Darius II (Neh 12:22)	Darius II (423-405 B.C.) Artaxerxes II (405-359 B.C.)

The order of events present in the biblical text was accepted by biblical expositors and became the traditional interpretation of the chronology of Ezra and Nehemiah. Modern scholars have also recognized that the traditional view is supported by the biblical text. A few examples will suffice.

Otto Eissfeldt

... Opinions differ very widely indeed as to which king of this name [Artaxerxes] is to be understood in the Artaxerxes mentioned in Ezra vii and viii, and so which actual year is implied by the seventh year of this king mentioned in Ezra vii, 7. Many scholars decide in favor of Artaxerxes I, and so fix the seventh year of Artaxerxes in Ezra vii, 7 as 458, and indeed the order of the material as it now stands in the book of Ezra-Nehemiah can hardly be understood otherwise.³⁰

Interestingly, he rejects that interpretation and argues that the king is Artaxerxes II.³¹

Norman K Gottwald:

A straight forward reading of the biblical text places Ezra's arrival in Judah in 458 BCE for a public career of unspecified duration. . . . Journeying to Judah with about five thousand returning exiles, Ezra bore a commission to investigate internal conditions in Judah in order to determine how they corresponded to the religious law which Ezra and his exilic Jewish community regarded as authoritative.³²

Gottwald finds the biblical order or events to be somewhat unreliable.³³

S Talmon:

According to the biblical sources, both [Ezra and Nehemiah] were active in the time of Artaxerxes. In following the biblical presentation of events, this king must be identified as Artaxerxes I Longimanus. The date of Ezra's coming to Jerusalem in the seventh year of the king's rule then would be 458 B.C.. Nehemiah's arrival in the king's twentieth year would fall in the year 445-444 . . . ; and his return to Persia, after a term of twelve years as governor, in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes I (Neh 13:6) would have occurred in 433, followed by a second term of office of undetermined duration beginning in 432.³⁴

He accepts the biblical order of events.

One final example is taken from the *Cambridge History of Judaism*:

According to the Bible, Ezra the priest and scribe came from Babylon in the seventh year of the reign of Artaxerxes (458 BCE), who had appointed him . . . to establish the laws of the Torah as the religious and social authority of the Jewish community.³⁵

Rejection of the Canonical Order

If this is really what the biblical text establishes why would scholars reject it? They argue that there are historical contradictions and tensions in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah that can only be solved by reconstructing the historical sequence of the events narrated. These so-called contradictions and inconsistencies have been analyzed by other scholars and they have concluded that they are not serious enough to require radical changes in the events narrated in the Bible.³⁶

Those who insist on reconstructing the historical events have come up with at least two main different views or theories. The first one argues that Ezra arrived at Jerusalem in the seventh year of Artaxerxes II, i.e., in 398 B.C., after Nehemiah. There is general agreement that Nehemiah reached Jerusalem in 444 B.C. during the twentieth year of Artaxerxes I. Archeological evidence has confirmed the Biblical information.³⁷ Since this theory presupposes that Ezra and Nehemiah were not contemporaries, scholars who support it are forced to delete from Nehemiah several passages in which they are mentioned together (Neh 8:9; 12:26, 36). There is no textual basis for this deletion.

A second theory argues that Ezra arrived at Jerusalem in 428 B.C. instead of 457 B.C.. Scholars arrived at this date by emending the reference to the “seventh year” in Ezra 7:7-8 to the “thirty-seventh year” of Artaxerxes I. Again Ezra would have arrived at Jerusalem after Nehemiah. There is no evidence to support this textual emendation. Moreover, the biblical text fully supports the priority of Ezra. Kenneth G. Hoglund has concluded that “despite the debate, no critic has shown the priority of Ezra to be impossible. While there are certain problems associated with the traditional view, the issues raised in placing Ezra prior to Nehemiah can be explained.”³⁸ He adds, “the traditional view makes the most sense of the relationship between Ezra’s reform and those of Nehemiah.”³⁹ The fact that the alternative theories have to alter the biblical text detract from their credibility.⁴⁰

The Specific Year: 458 or 457?

Most scholars date the seventh year of Artaxerxes mentioned in Ezra 7:7 to 458 B.C. instead of 457 B.C. Historians have been able to establish absolute dates for the reign of Artaxerxes I using classical Greek sources and Egyptian and Babylonian astronomical and historical sources.⁴¹ We now know that Artaxerxes ascended to the throne late in 465 B.C. after his father, Xerxes, died and that his first full year was 464 B.C. “There need 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.”⁴²

The difference between 458 and 457 is based on the type of calendar used to calculate the years. If we use the Persian-Babylonian calendar the date would be 458 B.C.; but if we employ the Jewish calendar the date would be 457 B.C. The Persian calendar was based on a spring-to-spring civil year while the Jews used a fall-to-fall one. The basic question is, what calendar was Ezra using when he referred to the seventh year of Artaxerxes?

We are fortunate to have two biblical passages in the book of Nehemiah that provide an answer to that question. In Nehemiah 1:1 the arrival of Hanani to Susa is dated “in the month of Kislev of the twentieth year” of Artaxerxes. Later we are told that Nehemiah spoke to the king about the situation in Jerusalem “in the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes” (2:1). The year is the same but the months are different. If Nehemiah was using a spring-to-spring calendar Nisan would have been the first month of the year and Kislev the ninth month. It would have been impossible to have Kislev before Nisan in the same year. Scholars who believe that Ezra and Nehemiah used a spring-to-spring calendar have tried to solve this problem by emending Nehemiah 1:1 to the nineteenth year of Artaxerxes. The fact is that no emendation is necessary because the biblical writer was using a fall-to-fall calendar. It is obvious that “the monarch’s regnal years were calculated from some time other than a Nisan inception of the year . . . The dates are consistent with a fall inception of the year.”⁴³ Therefore, we can conclude that the author of Ezra and Nehemiah used a fall-to-fall calendar and that according to that calendar the seventh year of Artaxerxes was 457 B.C. This is based on the fact that the first full year of Artaxerxes was 464 B.C. We are fortunate to have biblical information concerning the exact year when Artaxerxes issued a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem and also concerning the specific type of calendar used to compute the years.

Conclusion

Our brief survey of the biblical data related to the fulfillment of the prophecy of Daniel recorded

in Daniel 9:25 has shown that the Bible itself provides all the basic information we need in order to understand this prophetic period. If there is confusion in the scholarly world, it is because scholars feel uncomfortable with the historical information provided by the books of Ezra and Nehemiah and are willing to introduce unnecessary changes in the text.

The prophecy of Daniel pointed to a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem as the starting date for the prophecy of the seventy weeks. Information provided by Ezra indicates that this prophecy was fulfilled by the decree of Artaxerxes I in 457 B.C. which authorized Ezra to restore and rebuild Jerusalem by allowing him to establish a judicial system based on the Law of the Lord in Jerusalem and throughout the Trans-Euphrates province. The decree also allowed for the rebuilding of the city. Nehemiah makes it clear that in computing the years of the reign of Artaxerxes he was using a fall-to-fall calendar making it possible for us to identify the seventh year of the king as 457 B.C.

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1 See Gerhard F. Hasel, "Interpretations of the Chronology of the Seventy Weeks,": in *70 Weeks, Leviticus, Nature of Prophecy*, F. B. Holbrook, editor (Washington, DC: Biblical Research Institute, 1986), 3-63; William H. Shea, "When did the Seventy Weeks of Daniel 9:24 Begin?" in *Symposium on Revelation—Book I*, Frank B. Holbrook, editor (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), 375-94; and Brempong Owusu-Antwi, *An Investigation of the Chronology of Daniel 9:24-27*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Andrews University, 1993, 11-69.

2 H. D. Preuss, "Yāsā", in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 6:227 (hereafter quoted as *TDOT*).

3 *BDB*, 425; John J Collins, *Daniel*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993), 346, translates the noun "the going forth."

4 See Owusu-Antwi, *Investigation*, 164.

5 E. G. Collins, *Daniel*, 354.

6 Owusu-Antwi, *Investigation*, 166. See also John E. Goldingay, *Daniel*, Word (Dallas, TX: Word, 1989), 260.

7 This was done by Owusu-Antwi, *Investigation*, 173-77, to whom I am indebted.

8 Goldingay, *Daniel*, 229.

9 Carol L. Meyers and Eric M. Meyers, *Haggai, Zechariah 1-8*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 415.

10 Owusu-Antwi, *Investigation*, 204.

11 D. N. Freedman and J. R. Lundbom, "Hāras," *TDOT* 5:218.

12 Owusu-Antwi, *Investigation*, 220.

13 Ibid and Freedman, "Hāras," 217.

14 Owusu-Antwi, *Investigation*, 226.

15 For a list of the possible decrees see Goldingay, *Daniel*, 260.

16 For a more complete analysis see Arthur J. Ferch, "Commencement Date for the Seventy Week Prophecy," in *The Seventy Weeks, Leviticus, and the Nature of Prophecy*, F. B. Holbrook, ed. (Washington, DC: Biblical Research Institute, 1986), 65-74.

17 Owusu-Antwi, *Investigation*, 312.

18 We find a similar situation with Nebuchadnezzar, who at times stood as a representative of the future line of Babylonian kings (Dan 7:37-38).

19 The temple was finished in 515 B.C. during the reign of Darius (Ezra 6:15). However, in Ezra 6:14 it is stated that it was finished under the command of Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes. The best way to reconcile these two verses is "to recognize that although the temple was completed in 515 B.C., the benefits which Artaxerxes I bestowed upon the temple in 457 B.C. were considered substantial enough to include this later king as a benefactor in the list with his predecessors" (Ferch, "Commencement," 68). See also H.G.M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, Word (Waco, TX: Word, 1985), 83-84.

20 D. J. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, NCBC. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 99.

21 Ibid, 106.

22 Williamson, *Ezra*, 172. Fensham, *Ezra*, 152 supports the opposite view.

23 Clines, *Ezra*, 80 writes that the phrase "from you" "does not imply necessarily a migration in the time of Artaxerxes" but that it "could mean 'from Babylonia generally.'" "But we must remember that this is a personal letter addressed to the king and that when the writers want to refer to the decisions of previous kings they call them "your fathers" (vs. 15). Williamson, *Ezra*, 63 rejects the geographical interpretation and comments that "from you" reads "much more naturally if it alludes to a recent movement of which Artaxerxes was aware."

24 See Ferch, "Commencement," 71.

25 Clines, *Ezra*, 82 says that "it is a reasonable assumption that the military method of terminating a project was to destroy what had already been accomplished."

26 See Fensham, *Ezra*, 130-31; Williamson, *Ezra*, 136-37.

27 Hasel, "Interpretations," 59.

28 Ibid, 60; and W. L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Arameic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 57.

29 Some interpreters have argued that the decree to

which Daniel is referring is the one given by Artaxerxes to Nehemiah in 444 B.C.. The argument is that it is only in this decree that the rebuilding of the city is explicitly mentioned. This line of reasoning overlooks the fact that the decree had to include the restoration and the rebuilding of the city. The “decree” of 444 B.C. deals only with the walls. But more important, the permission given to Nehemiah is nowhere called a “decree.” The permission given to him to rebuild the city was supplementary to the decree given to Ezra, an extension of that one. For a more detailed evaluation of this interpretation see Owusu-Antwi, *Investigation*, 338-42.

30 Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 553.

31 Ibid, 554.

32 *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 435.

33 Ibid, 437.

34 S Talmon, “Ezra and Nehemiah,” *IDB Sup.*, 320.

35 Ephraim Stern, “The Persian Empire and the Political and Social History of Palestine in the Persian Period,” in *Cambridge History of Judaism*, vol 1, W. D. Davies and L. Finkelstein (Cambridge: University Press, 1984), 73.

36 Recently Clines, *Ezra*, 16-21, analyzed each argument and provided satisfactory solutions to them. See also Williamson, *Ezra*, xxxvi-xliv; and Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 139-74.

37 See Frank M. Cross, “A Reconstruction of the Judean Restoration,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1975):4-18; R. W. Klein, “Sanballat,” *IDB Sup.*, 781-82; and H.G.M. Williamson, “Sanballat,” *ABD*, 5:973-75.

38 *Achaemenid Imperial Administration in Syria-Palestine and the Missions of Ezra and Nehemiah* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1992), 43.

39 Ibid, 44. John Bright writes concerning the traditional view that “it can claim the support of the canonical books of Ezra and Nehemiah, and it presents a not implau-

sible picture which seems on the surface to involve no insuperable difficulties. I had myself been somewhat inclined to accept it” (*A History of Israel* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972], 392). Nevertheless, he argues in favor of the priority of Nehemiah over Ezra (428 B.C.). (Ibid, 400).

40 Some scholars have suggested a third alternative which does not require emending the text. According to them the traditional biblical description of Ezra coming before Nehemiah in 458 B.C. is right. They suggest a reorganization of some of the materials in order to solve what appear to be inconsistencies in the text. The common suggestion is to place Nehemiah 8 immediately after Ezra 8 or 10. According to these scholars that was the original position of Nehemiah 8. An editor changed the order of the chapters for liturgical reasons. (See Williamson, *Ezra*, 279-286; for a discussion and evaluation of this view and others, see Ralph W. Klein, “Ezra-Nehemiah, Book of.” *ABD* 2:736-37; Klein supports 458 as the date for the arrival of Ezra to Jerusalem because “it agrees with the sequence [sic] of Ezra and Nehemiah presupposed in the present text of Ezra 7-Nehemiah 13” [p 737].)

41 See Shea, “Seventy Weeks,” 384-88; still very useful is Siegfried H. Horn and Lynn H. Wood, *The Chronology of Ezra 7* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1972).

42 Shea, “Seventy Weeks,” 388.

43 James C. Vanderkam, “Calendars: Ancient Israelite and Early Jewish,” *ABD*, 1:817. E. J. Bickerman defended the spring calendar in Nehemiah, arguing that in Nehemiah 1:1 and 2:1 the writer is using the regnal year and not a calendar year. For instance, if Artaxerxes ascended to the throne in the month of Ab then Kislev would be the fifth month, and Kislev would follow Ab. But the problem he faces is that there is no evidence from Babylonia or Palestine indicating that this system was in use during the Persian period (“En marge de l’Ecriture: 1. Le comput des années de règne des achéménides,” *Revue biblique* 88 [1981]: 19-23; Williamson, *Ezra*, 171, sympathizes with him).