

Daniel's 70 Weeks & Christ Chronology

Written by David Pyles

Wednesday, 04 July 2012 00:00 - Last Updated Wednesday, 04 July 2012 10:22

"Seventy weeks are determined upon thy people and upon thy holy city, to finish the transgression, and to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up the vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most Holy. Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the commandment 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. And after threescore and two weeks shall Messiah be cut off, but not for himself: and the people of the prince that shall come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary; and the end thereof shall be with a flood, and unto the end of the war desolations are determined. And he shall confirm the covenant with many for one week: and in the midst of the week he shall cause the sacrifice and the oblation to cease, and for the overspreading of abominations he shall make it desolate, even until the consummation, and that determined shall be poured upon the desolate." - Daniel 9:24-27

A plausible explanation of the prophecy is as follows:

- 1) It is agreed by nearly all Bible scholars that the term "weeks" here refers to years, with each week being a set of seven years; hence, the period contemplated by the prophecy is 490 years (i.e. 7 times 70).
- 2) The starting point of the prophecy was the decree of Artaxerxes I recorded in Ezra 7. This decree was in 458 BC, presumably in the fall, though Ezra claims to have actually departed for Jerusalem in response to the decree on Nisan 1, which would be in the spring (i.e. March/April).
- 3) The 69th week of the prophecy was completed with the baptism of Jesus Christ, which is thought to have occurred in the fall of AD 26.
- 4) Jesus Christ was crucified 3.5 years later, in the midst of the 70th week, at which point He caused "the sacrifice and oblation to cease" in the sense that He rendered these things obsolete and invalid.
- 5) The "people of the prince that shall come" to destroy the city and sanctuary are the soldiers of the Roman general Titus, who destroyed the city and temple in AD 70.

For those who are interested in details, I provide the following

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notes with explanations and qualifications:

1) In computing spans of time overlapping the BC/AD boundary, one must bear in mind that there is no such thing as a BC 0 or an AD 0. Rather, one goes directly from BC 1 to AD 1. Hence, a person born in BC 1 would be one year old on their birthday in AD 1. Therefore, to compute the span between two such dates, one must add the dates and then subtract 1. The span of time from 458 BC to 26 AD is $458 + 26 - 1 = 483$ years, which is also equal to 69 times 7.

2) Artaxerxes came to power after his father was assassinated at the very end of 465 BC. Under ancient reckoning, if a king were to die in the midst of a year and be replaced with a second king, then the year of death is credited to the reign of the deceased king, whereas it is considered the "ascension" year of his successor, and the first regnal year of his successor is considered to commence on the first day of the following year. For example, in terms of our present calendar, if a king were to commence on the first day of 2000, and die in the midst of 2005, then 2005 would be considered as the sixth year of his reign, and would be considered the ascension year of his successor, whose first regnal year would commence on Jan 1, 2006.

Under the ancient Jewish civil calendar, which was likely the one used by Ezra, the year commenced in the fall (September/October). Artaxerxes' father died after the commencement of the Jewish year; hence, the first regnal year of Artaxerxes began in the fall of the next year, which would be the fall of 464 BC on our calendar. Ezra claims to have departed Jerusalem in fulfillment of the decree in the spring of the king's seventh year, which would have begun in the fall of 458 BC. Hence, Ezra departed in what would be spring 457 BC on our calendar, and allowing a six-month preparation for the journey, this would place the decree itself in the fall of 458 BC.

Ancient people did not necessarily synchronize their month sequences (which were determined by the moon) with their year sequences. When Ezra claims to have left on the first day of the first month (Nisan), this does not mean he left on the first day of the year. The year did in fact commence with the prior seventh month (Tishri), assuming he was in fact following the Jewish civil calendar.

3) The most definitive date given in the New Testament was the date at which the ministry of John the Baptist began, which was shortly followed by the baptism of Jesus Christ. I do not recall the New Testament really providing any other date besides this. I believe the Holy Spirit inspired the recording of this date because it is significant to prophecy, and is in fact a benchmark date to Daniel's

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very important prophecy. Luke claimed John's ministry began in the 15th year of Tiberius Caesar.

4) Some scholars commence the reign of Tiberius from 14 AD when Augustus died in the month of August (it is likely no coincidence that he died in the very month that was named to commemorate his deity!). However, Tiberius was actually made co-regent with Augustus in AD 12, and most Bible scholars think Luke measured from this earlier date. This starting date would have his 15th year beginning in January AD 26 (the Roman year began in January).

5) The most popular interpretation of Daniel's prophecy would dissent from what I have here, claiming the relevant decree was the one recorded in the second chapter of Nehemiah and issued by Artaxerxes in his 20th year, or 445 BC. While premillennialists are very fond of this view, it has numerous problems, including:

a) Using it as a starting point, Daniel's prophecy overshoots the time of Christ. Proponents of the theory seek to correct this by redefining a year to mean only 360 days. I consider this possible but doubtful.

b) It has the 69th week terminating with the crucifixion (whereas I have the crucifixion occurring in the midst of the 70th week), thus leaving the 70th week with no particular purpose. To correct this problem, the theory typically contends that the 70th week is noncontiguous with the other weeks. Indeed, it places a 2000-year gap between the 69th and 70th weeks, claiming that the 70th week will happen in the great tribulation of the future. The claim that the weeks are noncontiguous is dubious on the very face of it.

c) Revelation does not define a seven-year tribulation period, nor does it expressly define any seven-year period. Rather, it repeatedly speaks of a 3.5-year period. It is not unreasonable to assume there are in fact two of these 3.5 year periods that are back-to-back; however, this is an assumption and not an established fact. The whole theory dating the 70 weeks from 445 BC critically depends upon this unproven assumption.

d) The theory typically has the year of the crucifixion being 32 AD - a year that does not have the days of the crucifixion week aligning with any plausible theory of the weekday on which the crucifixion occurred (i.e. Wednesday or Friday).

e) Proponents of the theory are much encouraged by Sir Robert Anderson's analysis wherein he purportedly made the theory work out to the very day; however, Anderson's conclusions were based on a subtle but definite mathematical error.

(With regard to (e), Anderson initially computed his date span using Julian dates, but then adjusted the span to reflect Gregorian dates.

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On the Julian calendar, a leap year occurs every fourth year. On the modern Gregorian calendar this is not true, though few people are aware of this. The rule for this calendar is that every year divisible by four is a leap year unless it introduces a new century (i.e. is divisible by 100), in which event it is not a leap year unless divisible by 400. Hence, 1700, 1800 and 1900 were not leap years, even though divisible by 4, but 2000 was a leap year because it is divisible by 400. When Anderson computed his date span using Julian dates, he overshot the target, but then made his computations work out by subtracting off the extraneous leap years in the Julian calendar. The problem here is that the Julian Calendar does not err in respect to spans between dates; rather, it only errs in that it is not synchronized with the Sun. Indeed, almost any ancient calendar is sufficient for measuring intervals between points in time, even if those calendars assumed an improper length of the true year. Anderson should have never made the adjustment, though his mistake proved very fortuitous to anyone wanting to believe his theory.)

6) The significance of the decree of Ezra chapter seven is that it reinstated the Law of God as the law of the land of Israel. No decree to rebuild the city or temple would be meaningful without this, because in absence of obedience to the Law of God, the city or temple would be destroyed again in only a matter of short time.

7) If we take it as given that the crucifixion occurred in AD 30, then the issue of whether it occurred on Wednesday or Friday revolves mostly about the question of how the Jews determined the new moon and therefore the beginning of their month. If they calculated it mathematically (as we do), then Wednesday becomes the likely candidate for Nisan 14 of 30 AD (the date of the Passover and crucifixion). If they based it upon observation, then Friday is the more likely candidate for that date.

8) The length of Christ's ministry is primarily inferred from the book of John, which seems to be chronologically arranged, and is thought to document four Passovers during Christ's ministry. Three of these are above question, but one is inferred from the word "feast" in John 5:1. It is thought this feast was a Passover, even though this is not explicitly stated. While the inference is likely sound, it is nonetheless a consequential assumption to the analysis. A ministry of 3-4 years in duration is also corroborated by the parable in Lk 13:6-9, and to some extent by the significance attached to an interval of 3.5 years in Revelation.

9) The premillennial theory mentioned in (5) contends that the prince that shall come and destroy the city is the anti-christ, which they

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say he will do in the great tribulation or presumed 70th week. I favor the idea this prince was simply Titus, and the details of the prophecy would corroborate this, because according to Josephus, Titus never actually ordered the destruction of the temple; rather, his angry soldiers did it in their rage; hence, it was not technically the "prince" that destroyed the sanctuary, but the "people of the prince," exactly as the prophecy said.

10) There is yet another theory about the 70 weeks that is a minority view but cannot be easily dismissed. This theory says the starting point of the prophecy was the decree of Cyrus recorded in the first chapter of Ezra. This was the first of the various decrees by Persian kings commanding the reconstruction of Jerusalem and the temple. Being the first, it would seem a likely candidate for Daniel's prophecy. Further, the prophecy of Isaiah concerning Cyrus (Isa 45) gives formidable indication that his decree was the one intended by the Holy Spirit as being pivotal.

The problem is that secular historians date this decree at 536 BC, making it far too early to satisfy the terms of Daniel's prophecy. Advocates of the theory reply to this by saying that secular historians are simply wrong in their chronology. They assert that historians have gotten this chronology almost entirely from a single source, namely the ancient astronomer Claudius Ptolemy. It is true that historians almost unanimously accept Ptolemy's dates even when they are contradicted by other historical sources. The reason for their confidence in Ptolemy is that much of what he did was dated by means of eclipses, and these eclipses can now be verified by modern methods.

However, Ptolemy not only used eclipses, but also other less-reliable criteria, especially when dating events in the Persian era, with the effect being that his dates contain a hole of uncertainty in that era that is commonly estimated to be around 200 years wide. Some advocates of the Cyrus theory assert that Ptolemy's calculations err by 79 years with respect to the early Persian era, and that Cyrus did in fact make his decree in 458 BC, not 536 BC as implied by Ptolemy. Their reasoning and computations are oftentimes similar to mine except that they have a different Persian king and different decree being situated at my starting point.

They have respectable evidence to substantiate their accusation of error in Ptolemy's work, but the data seem insufficient to exactly measure the true extent of the error. Nonetheless, they claim we should conform our chronology to the Bible and not conform our Bible to chronology. I have no argument with this, and would readily accept their view were there no feasible alternative to it. As it is, I

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think we have a feasible alternative, and I therefore prefer it, though I definitely reserve the right to change my mind. I am not passionate in my preference between these two views, but definitely think the Nehemiah theory is deficient.

The accuracy of Ptolemy's dates is a huge issue, and deserves more research than I have time to give. The ablest analyst of this problem was the late Martin Anstey, who reconstructed much of the old chronology, and who himself believed that Cyrus was the proper king for Daniel's decree.

It is likely no coincidence that Daniel's prophecy can be worked out under more than one set of assumptions. Whether we use the dates of Ptolemy or the dates of Anstey, the conclusion is the same. It would appear that the hand of God has so arranged that the prophecy of Daniel leaves the skeptic with no excuse.

May God bless, David Pyles