

The greatest prediction in history? *An examination of the prophecy of Daniel 9*

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There is a particular prophecy in the Hebrew bible, found in the book of Daniel, chapter 9, that has intrigued readers for centuries. It is intriguing because Daniel, writing hundreds of years before the life of Jesus, apparently describes how many years would pass from an event until an anointed one (in Hebrew, messiah) came to Jerusalem. It is generally wise to avoid fruitless investigations of "bible codes" and other devices that would not be apparent to the audience for which the book was written. However, in this case, the text is so explicitly numerical that it invites close examination.

Before going further, I must acknowledge a great debt to Harold W. Hoehner and his book entitled [*Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*](#) (Zondervan, 1977). A technical and scholarly work, it is certainly worthy reading for any bible student with a strong interest in dates surrounding biblical history. His analysis of the prophecy in Daniel 9 is more exhaustive than any other I have encountered. This essay draws heavily from his work. (The calculation to be undertaken was first published by Sir Robert Anderson in a book called *The Coming Prince* (1895). However, there were mistakes in his work that have been corrected by Hoehner.)

The intrigue from the Daniel 9 prophecy comes from its numerics. Often the Bible uses vague numbers, such as God owning, "the cattle on a thousand hills" (Psalm 50:10). In contrast, Daniel 9 contains the number 62 which is not a symbolic number in Jewish thought, increasing the likelihood that the passage is to be taken in a non-figurative sense. The chapter opens with Daniel's realizing that the time described by Jeremiah for Judah to be in exile, 70 years, are nearly completed. This realization of an imminent transition, rooted in Jeremiah's particular numerical prophecy, should heighten the possibility that what Daniel tells us is also literal-numerical, and not just allegory. In this essay only a portion of this prophecy will be examined.

To be fair, there are two views on how to accurately translate this verse. This verse represents one of the few times in the bible where a controversy in translation results in a different meaning of the text. In order to gain a balanced assessment of the text, two representative translations from both schools of thought are given.

So know and understand: From the going forth of the message to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until an anointed one, a prince arrives, there will be a period of seven weeks and sixty-two weeks. It will again be built, with plaza and moat, but in distressful times. (Daniel 9:25, NET) [Other translations that are similar include the NIV, NASB, NKJV.]

Know therefore and understand: from the time that the word went out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the time of an anointed prince, there shall be seven weeks; and for sixty-two weeks it shall be built again with streets and moat, but in a troubled time. (Daniel 9:25, NRSV) [Other translations that are similar include JPS, RSV, ESV.]

One set of translations (NET, NIV, NASB, NKJV) is clear that a total of 69 (corresponding to 7 + 62) weeks are to elapse before an "anointed one" comes. However, other translations (NRSV, JPS, ESV, RSV) separate the weeks because of a Hebrew punctuation mark called an *athnach* added by the Massoretes in the 9th-10th century AD that puts a break between the 7 weeks and the 62 weeks. It should be noted that ancient Hebrew was written without punctuation marks, so punctuation is itself an interpretation. Punctuation and vowels (both ancient and modern Hebrew are written without vowels) were added many centuries later by the Massoretes. So should there be a break between the 7 and 62 weeks?

To help decide, it is helpful to examine the Septuagint (LXX). This was a Jewish translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek that was made around 200 BC. The Septuagint reads:

*kai gnose kai suneseis apo ecodou logou tou apokrithenai kai tou oikodomesai ierousalem eos xristou egoumenou **ebdomades epta kai ebdomades ecekonta duo** kai epistreyei kai oikodomethesetai plateia kai teixos kai ekkenothsontai oi kairoi (LXX, Daniel 9:25)* [The bold print is translated seven sevens and sixty-two sevens, or seven weeks and sixty-two weeks.]

The Septuagint favors a continuous sentence between the 7 and 62 weeks. In addition, the Vulgate (the early Latin translation made by Jerome from Hebrew) supports a continuous sentence. Because the RSV (published in 1947) chose to follow the *athnach*, translations derived from it (like the NRSV and ESV), follow this questionable and late punctuation scheme. On the grounds that earlier translations from Hebrew (including one made before Jesus' time) favor the continuous sentence, it will be followed here. Many commentators concur with this decision.

Understanding the text

On to the task of understanding the meaning of the verse. Revisiting the text,

So know and understand: From the going forth of the message to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until an anointed one, a prince arrives, there will be a period of seven weeks and sixty-two weeks. It will again be built, with plaza and moat, but in distressful times. (Daniel 9:25, NET)

The prophecy tells us how long it will be from the time of a word going out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until "an anointed one, a prince" comes. To understand the prophecy, we need only answer three questions.

1. When was the word to restore and rebuild Jerusalem given? (This would correspond to our start date.)
2. How long is the interval specified?
3. What occurs by adding the interval to the start date?

Each question will be handled in turn. So the reader understands the direction of the essay, the abbreviated answers are presented first:

1. When was the word to restore and rebuild Jerusalem given? *When King Artaxerxes of Persia granted Nehemiah's request to rebuild Jerusalem. This occurred in the month of Nisan, 444 BC. The first day of this month corresponds to March 5, 444 BC.*
2. How long is the interval specified? *The interval is $69 * 7 = 483$ years, where each year is 360 days long, according to ancient calendars. The corresponds to 173880 days.*
3. What occurs by adding the interval to the start date? *Adding 173880 days to March 5, 444 BC gives March 30, AD 33 -- the exact date of Jesus triumphal entry into Jerusalem.*

The nature of the word to rebuild

In the interest of presenting alternative views, we have three choices that could correspond to when "word went out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem" occurred (verse 25, NRSV). The student of Jewish history and the Old Testament could suggest Cyrus' edict to allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem from Babylon, Artaxerxes' decree to Ezra to restore the temple and its fortunes, or Artaxerxes' decree that Nehemiah was permitted to rebuild the city.

Choice 1: (words of Cyrus)

Any of those among you who are of his people -- may their God be with them! -- are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel (Ezra 1:3).

Choice 2: (words of Artaxerxes to Ezra)

I decree that any of the people of Israel or their priests or Levites in my kingdom who freely offers to go to Jerusalem may go with you. For you are sent by the king and his seven counselors to make inquiries about Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of your God, which is in your hand, and also to convey the silver and gold that the king and his counselors have freely offered to the God of Israel (Ezra 7:13-15).

Choice 3: (narrative)

The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah. In the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capital, one of my brothers, Hanani, came with certain men from Judah; and I asked them about the Jews that survived, those who had escaped the captivity, and about Jerusalem. They replied, "The survivors there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire." ... In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was served him, I carried the wine and gave it to the king. Now, I had never been sad in his presence before. So the king said to me, "Why is your face sad, since you are not sick? This can only be sadness of the heart." Then I was very much afraid. I said to the king, "May the king live forever! Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my ancestors' graves, lies waste, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?" Then the king said to me, "What do you request?" So I prayed to the God of heaven. Then I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor with you, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my ancestors' graves, so that I may rebuild it." (Nehemiah 1:1-3, 2:1-5)

Cyrus' decree (choice 1) allows the people to return and rebuild the temple, but does not mention anything about the walls or infrastructure of Jerusalem. Artaxerxes' first decree to Ezra (choice

2) involves his offering religious tribute to the Jewish God and the temple, and does not concern rebuilding Jerusalem either. However, Artaxerxes' second decree (choice 3) is explicitly in response to Nehemiah's request to rebuild Jerusalem. It is the most satisfactory of the choices. Nehemiah 2:1 says that this occurred in the month of Nisan during the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes. As a start date of the prophecy, the first date of the month will be selected. Anderson reports that this practice of selecting the first day of the month is harmonious with Jewish religious customs, and cites *Rosh ha-Shanah* from the Mishnah as evidence. Using extra-biblical data, the first day of Nisan in 444 BC can be shown to be March 5, 444 BC. (See Hoehner's text for further detail.)

How long is the interval being specified?

The final translation issue is how to interpret the Hebrew word *shv`m*, which was translated as "weeks." Found 20 times in the Hebrew bible, the word has a broad semantic range. In the singular, it can mean "week" or a "unit of seven". However, in another passage (Daniel 10:2 and 10:3) Daniel himself qualifies *shv`m* with the word days (*yomim*) to explicitly say "seven days." Thus it is unlikely that "sevens" here means "weeks" -- seven years is more plausible. This is also favored on the grounds that such a large project as rebuilding Jerusalem (which was leveled at the time of Daniel's writing) would take much longer than 69 weeks, only slightly more than a year, to accomplish. Lastly, in the Mishnah there is precedent for *shv`m* to mean seven years. Thus it is best to take 69 weeks as 69 "sevens", (how the NIV translates the word) meaning 69 sevens of years, which is 483 years. On this point, most commentators agree, including those who believe the seven and sixty-two weeks should be separated.

Consistent with the ancient calendars of Persia and Egypt, a year was twelve months of 30 days, giving a 360 day year. (Each culture had complex means of inserting months to deal with their shortened year.) Also, Jewish prophetic literature used a year of 360 days (see Hoehner).

To conclude this section, Daniel was almost certainly referring to a total span of 69 "sevens," which is 483 years, which in turn corresponds to $483 * 360 = 173880$ days.

Adding the interval to the reference date

This is the easiest step of all. Adding 173880 days to March 5, 444 BC gives March 30, AD 33.

This can be seen as follows:

- A true solar year is 365.24220 days.
- $173880 / 365.24220 = 476 \text{ years} + 0.06766 \text{ years} = 476 \text{ years} + 25 \text{ days}$
- $444 \text{ BC} + 476 \text{ years} = 33 \text{ AD}$ (there is no year in between 1 BC and 1 AD)
- $\text{March } 5 + 25 \text{ days} = \text{March } 30$

The date of March 30, AD 33 corresponds to the date of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. (Hoehner describes in great detail the chronology of Jesus' life, especially the Passion week, in his book.)

Conclusions

The traditional date of the book of Daniel is to the 6th century BC. The harshest critic would not argue for a dating after the second century BC. (Daniel is well attested in the Dead Sea Scrolls, fixing the latest possible date to the second century BC.) Thus we have Daniel predicting the day that Jesus would ride into Jerusalem at least 200 years before the event took place, probably closer to 500 years. The fact that this result is correct to the day cannot be ignored.

In retrospect, there were four assumptions involved in arriving at this incredible result.

1. It is best to interpret the seven and sixty-two weeks as continuous rather than broken. This is confirmed by the Septuagint and Vulgate translations, made from Hebrew manuscripts even older than the Massoretic ones we have today. The Septuagint is a Jewish translation reflecting an understanding of the text around 200 BC.
2. Of the possibilities, the "word to restore and rebuild Jerusalem" referred to by Daniel was the one by King Artaxerxes to Nehemiah to allow him to rebuild Jerusalem. This choice is legitimated by seeing that the other options do not mention rebuilding Jerusalem.
3. Using extra-biblical data, Artaxerxes' decree to Nehemiah took place in Nisan in the year 444 BC. The first day of the month of Nisan was used as the starting date. This is consistent with the Jewish practice of attributing events to the first day of the month or year.
4. The word shv`m should be interpreted as "sevens" instead of a 7-day week. This is consistent with Daniel's usage of the term and the fact that the term is sometimes used this way in the Hebrew bible and Mishnah.

Taken together, it is difficult to view this result as mere coincidence. One additional argument for its veracity is the fact that the New Testament authors do not claim it as evidence for Jesus being the Messiah. Surely if they had known about it, they would have vaunted it as powerful evidence for their claims. It was not until modern history that scholars have been able to properly date Artaxerxes' reign and check Daniel's prediction. The strength of this prophecy merits serious study for the truth-seeker, particularly the person who doubts the divine nature of the Scriptures.

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