

A NEW INTERPRETATION OF DANIEL'S "SEVENS" AND THE CHRONOLOGY OF THE SEVENTY "SEVENS"

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In 538 B.C., the year that followed Cyrus' conquest of Babylon, Daniel prayed for the restoration of Israel and received his answer in the form of the prophecy of the seventy "sevens" as set forth in Dan 9:24-27. This prophecy has been subject to a great variety of different interpretations, almost all of which assume that Daniel's "sevens" are periods of seven years. The purpose of this paper is to suggest that the conventional interpretation of Daniel's "sevens" is too restrictive. An analysis of the Hebrew word *šabu'im*, based on earlier work by E. J. Young, leads to the conclusion that the "sevens" can be any integer multiple of seven years.

This hitherto overlooked possibility opens up a new perspective on the chronology of the seventy "sevens." I will show that the 532 years that elapsed between the decree of Cyrus and the birth of Christ are a mathematically exact fulfillment of the "seven 'sevens' and sixty-two 'sevens'" that, according to Dan 9:25, were to elapse between the "command to restore and build Jerusalem" and the advent of "Messiah the Prince." This reinterpretation has two advantages.

(1) It explains why the prophecy is worded as it is, with its implied distinction between the seven "sevens" and the sixty-two "sevens." Had there been no distinction between these two groups of "sevens" one would have expected the prophecy to simply refer to the total, to sixty-nine "sevens." In our reinterpretation the distinction between the seven "sevens" and the sixty-two "sevens" becomes explicit. The lengths of the "sevens" in the two groups are different integer multiples of seven years: Those in the first group are fourteen years long, while those in the second group are the usual seven years long.

(2) It permits a consistent identification of the "decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem" of Dan 9:25 with the decree of Cyrus in 538 B.C. Several writers have felt that Cyrus' decree is the logical *terminus a quo* of the seventy "sevens" owing to its obvious importance in Biblical history.¹ It was the decree that put an end to the Babylonian captivity and, moreover, it was issued in the very same year that a decree to "restore

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¹ Cf. e.g. E. J. Young, *The Prophecy of Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 202-203. Young cites Calvin, Kliefoth, Keil and Mauro as other commentators who have identified the decree of Dan 9:25 with the decree of Cyrus.

and rebuild Jerusalem” was prophesied to Daniel. Finally, Cyrus was explicitly named as the deliverer of the Jews in the prophecies of Isaiah 44-45. In Isa 45:13, for example, God singles out Cyrus as the one who will rebuild the city of Jerusalem and set the Jewish exiles free.

The problem with Cyrus’ decree has always been that it seemed impossible to show that the number of years between 538 B.C. and the advent of the Messiah satisfied the terms of Daniel’s prophecy: that it be equal to seven “sevens” and sixty-two “sevens.” This difficulty disappears, however, once the “sevens” are reinterpreted as integer multiples of seven years.

The first section of the article deals with the analysis of the Hebrew word *šabu‘im* and shows why the “sevens” can be consistently interpreted as integer multiples of seven years. In the second section we apply this to the chronology of the seventy “sevens” and show that the number of years between Cyrus’ decree and the birth of Christ is a perfect fulfillment of the terms of Daniel’s prophecy. The third section presents our conclusions together with some thoughts on the implications that our reinterpretation of Daniel’s “sevens” might have for the question of Daniel’s seventieth “seven.”

I. THE LENGTH OF DANIEL’S “SEVENS”

The standard interpretation of Daniel’s “sevens” is that they are periods of seven years. Let us begin by tracing the reasoning normally followed in reaching this conclusion.

The Hebrew word that the *KJV* translates as “weeks” and the *NIV* translates as “sevens” is *šabu‘im*. Now *šabu‘im* is the masculine plural form of *šabûa‘*, and *šabûa‘* is the word used in both Biblical and modern Hebrew to denote an ordinary seven-day week. The *KJV* translators rendered *šabu‘im* as “weeks” and let it go at that, but the *NIV* translators recognized that *šabu‘im* is a rather peculiar form and so they rendered it as “sevens.” What is peculiar about *šabu‘im* is that the usual plural of *šabûa‘* is *šabu‘ôt*, the feminine plural form. It is the form used throughout the Hebrew Bible whenever an ordinary seven-day week is intended. Obviously, then, *šabu‘im* are not ordinary seven-day weeks.

The word *šabu‘im* appears only in the prophecy of the seventy “sevens” and in one other place. In Dan 10:2-3 we read that Daniel mourned for three *šabu‘im yāmim* (literally, for three “sevens” of days). In this context it is clear that *šabu‘im* means ordinary weeks. But this is the only other place in the Hebrew Bible where the word *šabu‘im* appears, and in this one instance—because the word is intended to denote ordinary seven-day weeks—Daniel takes care to put the qualifier *yāmim* after it. There is more than a hint here that when the word *šabu‘im* appears without a qualifier, as it does in 9:24-27, it has a more general meaning. What that meaning might be has to be discovered either from the context or from other considerations.

The next step is to argue from the context of the prophecy that the *šabu'im* must refer to "sevens" of years rather than days. The context was Daniel's study of God's word to Jeremiah to the effect that the Babylonian captivity would last seventy years. To quote from Alva McClain's study of the seventy weeks:

In the first place, the prophet Daniel had been thinking not only in terms of years rather than days, but also in a definite multiple of "sevens" (10×7) of years (Dan. 9:1-2). Second, Daniel also knew that the very length of the Babylonian captivity had been based on Jewish violations of the divine law of the Sabbatic year. . . . According to 2 Chronicles 36:21 the Jews had been removed from off the land in order that it might rest for *seventy* years.²

There is no doubt that the context of the prophecy shows that Daniel had been thinking in terms of years rather than days and that the "sevens" must refer somehow to "sevens" of years. That the context requires the "sevens" to be "sevens" of years is universally recognized by all writers on Daniel.

On the other hand, it is at this juncture that the standard line of reasoning jumps to the further conclusion that the "sevens" must all be seven years long. To quote again from McClain's study:

Most important is the fact that in their divinely inspired calendar, the Jews had a "seven" of *years* as well as a "seven" of *days*. And this Biblical "week" of years was just as familiar to the Jew as the "week" of days. It was in certain respects even more important. *Six years* the Jew was free to till and sow his land, but the *seventh year* was to be a solemn "Sabbath of rest unto the land" (Lev. 25:3-4). Upon a multiple of this important week of years—"seven Sabbaths of years"—there was based the great jubilee . . . (Lev. 25:8-9). Nothing could be so important to the Jew as this week of years.³

In other words, Israel already had the concept of Sabbaths of years—seven-year periods—built into her law. Therefore, the argument goes, once it has been made clear that in Dan 9:24-27 *šabu'im* of years rather than days are intended, what could be more natural than to conclude that it is to these Sabbaths of years that the *šabu'im* are referring?

The problem with this conclusion is that the recognized term for Sabbaths of years in the Hebrew Bible is *šabbētôt šānīm* (Lev 25:8-9). If indeed the reference in Daniel 9 is to Sabbaths of years, then it may justifiably be asked why the prophecy uses the peculiar word *šabu'im*, a word that has the "wrong" plural form and appears almost nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible, when there already existed at the time of Daniel a perfectly well understood term whose use was consecrated by the Torah.

This can only be answered by acknowledging that the *šabu'im* or "sevens" are not Sabbaths of years. Instead of leading us to the conventional conclusion that the "sevens" are seven-year periods the standard

² A. J. McClain, *Daniel's Prophecy of the 70 Weeks* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969) 19.

³ *Ibid.*

line of reasoning actually leads to an impasse. We are still left with the problem of what the *šābu^cim* really are.

Etymologically *šābūa^c*, the singular of *šābu^cim*, has the same root as *šeba^c* ("seven"). According to E. J. Young the word *šābu^cim* is really a participial form denoting something that is "sevens" or "besevens":

The form is really a participle meaning *besevens*, i.e. computed by sevens . . . and here gives evidence of the fact that the word was originally masculine. What led Daniel to employ the masculine instead of the feminine, however, is not clear unless it was for the deliberate purpose of calling attention to the fact that the word "sevens" is employed in an unusual sense. The word means divided into sevens.⁴

In this key passage Young has pointed us toward the answer to the puzzle. The *šābu^cim* are periods of time that are computed by sevens or, even more explicitly, divided into sevens. Something that is "computed by sevens" or "divided into sevens" is the same as something that is an integer multiple of seven—that is, seven, fourteen, twenty-one, twenty-eight, and so on. But seven what? Days? Months? Years? Here we must fall back on the analysis of the context of the prophecy. Daniel was thinking in terms of years, the seventy years of captivity. Hence the *šābu^cim* are periods divided into seven years, periods that are integer multiples of seven years. There is no reason to restrict the "sevens" to just seven years as is usually done.

Young did not follow through on his insight. Instead he reached the conclusion that the "sevens" were "symbolical" periods of indefinite length.⁵ As a result his entire approach has been called into question by writers who, naturally enough, insist on taking Daniel's numbers at face value. Leon Wood, for example, has written: "The only view which calls for rebuttal is that 'weeks' is figurative of periods of indefinite length, as held, for instance, by . . . Young. This view makes the definite numbers, seven, sixty-two and one, . . . hard to understand. Why should definite numbers be applied to periods of indefinite length?"⁶

II. SEVEN "SEVENS" AND SIXTY-TWO "SEVENS"

We are now in a position to apply this new understanding of Daniel's "sevens" to the interpretation of the prophecy of the seventy "sevens." Daniel is told that "from the going forth of the command to restore and rebuild Jerusalem" until "Messiah the Prince" there is to be a period of time designated as "seven 'sevens' and sixty-two 'sevens.'" The first problem is to determine when the "command to restore and rebuild Jerusalem" was issued.

History records three separate decrees issued by Persian kings that referred in one way or another to the return of the Jews from Babylon to

⁴ Young, *Prophecy* 195.

⁵ *Ibid.* 206.

⁶ L. Wood, *A Commentary on Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973) 247.

Jerusalem. The first and most important of these decrees was that of Cyrus the Great, the conqueror of Babylon, issued in 538 B.C.⁷ The remaining two decrees were issued by Artaxerxes in 458 and 444 B.C.

It is important to note that Daniel received the revelation of the seventy "sevens" in "the first year of Darius" (Dan 9:1) and that Darius was made king over Babylon by the Persians in the year 539 B.C. In other words Cyrus' decree was issued within less than a year after the "command to restore and rebuild Jerusalem" had been prophesied to Daniel. On this basis alone it would seem reasonable to suppose that the "command to restore and rebuild Jerusalem" is the one issued by Cyrus in the same year that the prophecy was given and not another decree issued some two or three generations later.

The choice of Cyrus' decree as the *terminus a quo* of the seventy "sevens" has frequently been attacked on the grounds that the actual text of Cyrus' decree as reproduced in 2 Chr 36:22-23 refers only to the rebuilding of the temple but does not explicitly mention the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem.⁸ Hence, it is argued, Cyrus' decree cannot be the "command to restore and rebuild Jerusalem" prophesied in Dan 9:25. But this objection fails to address the fact that Cyrus is named explicitly in the prophecy of Isa 44:28 as the man who would cause both Jerusalem to be rebuilt and the foundations of the temple to be laid. Moreover Cyrus' role in rebuilding the city is further emphasized in Isa 45:13. Finally Josephus quotes a letter from Cyrus to the governors in Syria in which Cyrus' authorization to rebuild the city of Jerusalem is spelled out explicitly.⁹ To object to Cyrus' decree on the above grounds seems unjustified in the light of the evidence to the contrary. The real objection to Cyrus' decree as the *terminus a quo* of the seventy "sevens" has always been chronological.

Between Cyrus' decree in 538 B.C. and the birth of Christ in 6 B.C. there are 532 years.¹⁰ On the other hand the prophecy of the seventy "sevens" refers to the length of time between the "command to restore and rebuild Jerusalem" and the coming of "Messiah the Prince" as "seven 'sevens' and sixty-two 'sevens.'" The problem is to reconcile these two statements.

According to the standard interpretation, each of Daniel's "sevens" is assumed to be seven years long. In that case the seventy "sevens" are seventy times seven years or 490 years, and the "seven 'sevens' and sixty-two 'sevens'" must be sixty-nine times seven years or 483 years.

But 483 years is forty-nine years short of the 532 years that separate Cyrus' decree from the birth of the Messiah. This is why commentators who take Daniel's numbers seriously normally reject Cyrus' 538 B.C. decree

⁷ According to 2 Chr 36:22, Cyrus' decree was issued in his first year, meaning his first regnal year, which commenced in April 538 B.C.

⁸ See for example H. W. Hoehner, "Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ: Part 6," *BSac* 132 (1975) 47. Cf. also J. F. Walvoord, *Daniel, the Key to Prophetic Revelation* (Chicago: Moody, 1971) 224-228.

⁹ Josephus *Ant.* 11.1.

¹⁰ The choice of 6 B.C. for the year of Christ's birth is an assumption. There is no generally agreed date but the normally assumed range of years for Christ's birth is 6 to 4 B.C.

as the *terminus a quo* of the seventy “sevens”: The numbers cannot come out right so long as one assumes that the “sevens” are all seven years long. The result has been to focus attention on one or the other of the later decrees of Artaxerxes (458 or 444 B.C.).¹¹

On the other hand, I have shown in the preceding section that Daniel’s “sevens” need not be restricted to uniform seven-year intervals. A “seven” can be assigned any integer multiple of seven years. And with this reinterpretation of Daniel’s “sevens” we shall find that there is no difficulty in reconciling the early date of Cyrus’ decree with the requirements of Daniel’s prophecy.

The simplest possible generalization of the conventional assignment for the “sevens” does the job and leads immediately to the conclusion that the 532 years that elapsed between Cyrus’ decree in 538 B.C. and the birth of Christ in 6 B.C. are a perfect fulfillment of Daniel’s prophetic “seven ‘sevens’ and sixty-two ‘sevens.’” I take each of the “sevens” in the first group to be fourteen years long, the simplest possible integer multiple of seven after seven itself. And for the “sevens” in the second group—the sixty-two “sevens”—I simply take each of them to be the conventional length of seven years. Then I add up the number of years in the two groups:

$$\begin{array}{r} 7 \times 14 = 98 \text{ years} \\ 62 \times 7 = 434 \text{ years} \\ \hline 532 \text{ years} \end{array}$$

This, then, is the result. The decree of Cyrus in 538 B.C. satisfies the terms of Daniel’s prophecy completely. The 532 years that separate Cyrus’ “command to restore and rebuild Jerusalem” from the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem fulfill perfectly the prophecy’s requirement that this interval of time be equal to “seven ‘sevens’ and sixty-two ‘sevens.’”¹²

We should also note the following point: If Daniel’s “sevens” were really all meant to be seven years long, why then does the prophecy distinguish between the seven “sevens” and the sixty-two “sevens”? Why state that there are to be seven “sevens” and sixty-two “sevens” between the decree to rebuild Jerusalem and the coming of the Messiah instead of simply stating that there will be sixty-nine “sevens” between these two events? Does not this division between the seven “sevens” and the sixty-two “sevens” offer the strongest possible hint that the “sevens” in the two groups differ in some way? Why else would the prophecy be worded in this way?

¹¹ The identification of the decree of Dan 9:25 with one or the other of the decrees of Artaxerxes in 458 or 444 B.C. is nearly universal among commentators who take Daniel’s numbers at face value; cf. e.g. H. W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), chap. 6; Wood, *Commentary* 253; Walvoord, *Daniel* 223–228.

¹² Because I have assumed that the year of Christ’s birth is 6 B.C. there is an uncertainty of at most two years attached to this result.

III. CONCLUSIONS

Until now, the assumption that Daniel's "sevens" are all seven years long has restricted evangelical interpretations of the chronology of Daniel's seventy "sevens" to one of two possibilities. One could either accept Cyrus' decree for the *terminus a quo* of the seventy "sevens" but reject the possibility of making any sense out of Daniel's numbers, which is essentially the choice of E. J. Young, who regards the numbers as "symbolical" periods of indefinite length.¹³ Or else one could take the numbers seriously but reject Cyrus' decree as the right choice in favor of one of the later decrees of Artaxerxes.

The new interpretation of Daniel's "sevens" presented here allows us to retain Cyrus' decree as the *terminus a quo* of the seventy "sevens" while at the same time taking Daniel's numbers at their face value. Once we realize that the "sevens" can be any integer multiple of seven years, we can see that Cyrus' 538 B.C. decree fits the terms of Daniel's prophecy perfectly.

Finally, while it is not my purpose here to enter into the vexed question of the meaning of Daniel's final or seventieth "seven," the following brief remarks are in order. Daniel's seventieth "seven" must, like all the other "sevens," be an integer multiple of seven years. There is no *a priori* reason to suppose it to be just seven years long as is normally assumed. It may therefore prove useful to reconsider the various conflicting interpretations that have been proposed for the seventieth "seven," bearing in mind the possibility that it might be a higher integer multiple of seven years.

Consider for example the interpretation of Daniel's seventieth "seven" that assumes that the latter was completely fulfilled in the events of NT history.¹⁴ If the seventieth "seven" began at the birth of Christ in 6 B.C. and was fulfilled in the events of NT history when Christ "confirmed a covenant" with the Church in fulfillment of the prophecy of Dan 9:27, one obvious possibility is that the seventieth "seven" lasted seventy years and ended in A.D. 65, one year before the start of the Jewish war against Rome.¹⁵ The midpoint of such a seventy-year "seven" is A.D. 30, the commonly-accepted date for the crucifixion, which according to this school of interpretation corresponds to the cessation of "sacrifice and offering" in fulfillment of Dan 9:27.

¹³ Young, *Prophecy* 206.

¹⁴ Cf. e.g. *ibid.* 208-219.

¹⁵ There are exactly seventy years between 6 B.C. and A.D. 65 since there is no year "zero." 1 B.C. is followed immediately by A.D. 1.