

The Decrees of Artaxerxes I and the Seventy-Weeks Prophecy—Part One

Can the beginning date for the seventy-weeks prophecy be determined from the historical narrative presented in Scripture? Can the seventy-weeks prophecy be explained by a day-for-a-year principle based on a supposed decree issued by Artaxerxes I?

During the reign of Xerxes I the Egyptian satrapy was devastated by the Persians, and the satrapy of Babylon was subjected to years of repression that effectively impoverished the Babylonians. This expectedly led to revolts against the Persian Empire, and an even greater repression that would set the background for two decrees issued by Artaxerxes I in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah.

So let's see why that was.

From the biblical account we learn that Ezra the scribe left Babylon on the first day of the first month of the year, which was in the spring of the year, and it would seem apparent that on that day Ezra was in possession of a letter from Artaxerxes I. And in that "copy of the letter that the king Artaxerxes gave unto Ezra," we have Ezra's official commission, which made Ezra the king's representative to enquire into the affairs of Judah and to deliver the king's offerings to the "God" who was in Jerusalem (Ezra 7:11). (See also, Ezra 4:11.)

Such was the intent of the letter.

And this intent is clearly expressed by Artaxerxes' decree when he proclaimed: "I make a decree, that all they of the people of Israel, and of his priests and Levites, in my realm,

which are minded of their own freewill to go up to Jerusalem, go with thee. Forasmuch as thou art sent of the king, and of his seven counsellors, to enquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem, according to the law of thy God which is in thine hand; And to carry the silver and gold, which the king and his counsellors have freely offered unto the God of Israel, whose habitation is in Jerusalem, And all the silver and gold that thou canst find in all the province of Babylon, with the freewill offering of the people, and of the priests, offering willingly for the house of their God which is in Jerusalem" (Ezra 7:13-16). [Author's emphasis throughout.]

Obviously then the focus of this decree was to establish freewill offerings in addition to the offerings given by the king and his counselors, and these offerings were to be given at the temple in Jerusalem. But given that there were several years of Persian repression in the satrapy of Babylon under Xerxes I, it is reasonable to conclude that there was not much silver and gold remaining in Babylon, considering also that the Persians had taken and melted down the gold statue of Marduk.

We get the sense of this from Artaxerxes' proclamation as he offered the returning people of Israel "all the silver and gold that thou canst find" in the province of Babylon.

Which brings us to another decree of Artaxerxes.

This decree was directed to the treasurers of the provinces beyond the river—that is the Euphrates—and it instructed the treasurers to supply Ezra with the necessary offerings on behalf of the king, which we have verified in the letter given to Ezra.

And so we read that: "I Artaxerxes the king, do make a decree to all the treasurers which are beyond the river, that whatsoever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, shall require of you, it be done speedily, Unto an

hundred talents of silver, and to an hundred measures of wheat, and to an hundred baths of wine, and to an hundred baths of oil, and salt without prescribing how much. Whatsoever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be diligently done for the house of the God of heaven: for why should there be wrath against the realm of the king and his sons?" (Ezra 7:21-23.)

Plainly then these provisional offerings were to be given at the temple, along with whatever was "commanded by the God of heaven," and these provisions were not intended to supply the needs of those who traveled with Ezra on a four-month journey to Jerusalem. But even then the king had limited the amount of the offerings—particularly the salt offering—which was a precious commodity in the Middle East.

Summarily then what we have in Ezra's letter—preserved for us in Scripture—is the verification of two decrees given by Artaxerxes I.

The first decree established a collective offering, which further depleted the wealth of Babylon, and the second decree provided provisional offerings from some of the provinces, all of which would be given at the temple by Ezra on behalf of the king and the king's sons—his successors—with the hope of assuring the favor of the "God" in Jerusalem (Ezra 7:19).

So the impression is—in view of these decrees—is that Ezra's commission had little to do with a revival of the religion of ancient Israel. And even though Ezra planned to reinstitute a civil government based on the law, Ezra's commission from the king—as understood from the decrees—strongly reflected a political strengthening and attempted revival of the Persian Empire, which had been in decline since the Babylonian repression in the latter years of Xerxes I.

Consequently, Artaxerxes I issued more than one decree to promote the continuing restoration of the temple, but he did

not issue a decree initiating a restoration or reestablishment of the city-state of Jerusalem.

And this gives us something to consider.

The letter that Ezra received from the court of Artaxerxes I makes reference to two decrees, and this letter was in Ezra's possession by the first day of the first month, which implies that the decrees were issued prior to the day Ezra left Babylon.

So let's examine this a little more.

The decrees of the Persian rulers became effective at the time they were signed and sealed in front of the court officials who witnessed the establishment of the decrees, and we find that this was the case when Daniel was cast into a den of lions by reason of a decree issued by Darius.

Now some of the king's potential successors and regional civil rulers had manipulated the king into establishing a decree, which became official when he signed it, and so "when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime. Then these men assembled, and found Daniel praying and making supplication before his God" (Dan. 6:10-11).

And what this tells us is this.

The decrees of the Persian kings were officially issued at the signing and sealing of the documents, and after that copies were made for those who would receive the decrees, wherever they were in the empire.

An example of this is found in the story of Esther when a decree had been issued that put the Jews in peril and in danger of being killed. And so King Ahasuerus ordered that a

second decree be issued to allow the Jews to defend themselves against those who plotted with Haman to take their properties and to kill them or to exile them from the provinces of the Persian Empire.

Therefore Mordacai hurriedly sent a decree in “the king’s name,” and it was sealed and made official “with the king’s ring,” and to accomplish this they called for the “king’s scribes,” and “it was written according to all that Mordecai commanded unto the Jews, and to the lieutenants, and the deputies and rulers of the provinces which are from India unto Ethiopia, an hundred twenty and seven provinces, unto every province according to the writing thereof, and unto every people after their language, and to the Jews according to their writing, and according to their language. And he wrote in the king Ahasuerus’ name, and sealed it with the king’s ring, and sent letters by posts on horseback, and riders on mules, camels, and young dromedaries” (Esther 8:8-10).

This gives us a picture of how the decree of Ahasuerus was prepared and sent throughout the provinces by several different means until the “copy of the writing for a commandment” was “published unto all people, and that the Jews should be ready against that day to avenge themselves on their enemies. So the posts that rode upon mules and camels went out, being hastened and pressed on by the king’s commandment. And the decree was given at Shushan the palace” (Esther 8:13-14).

So the decree was delivered by those who rode camels, and mules, and even horses, which meant that some time was needed for the copies of the decree to reach the intended destinations within the Persian Empire. And, also, we cannot help but notice the influence of Mordecai at the court of the king—at Shushan—who took into account the necessity of having the decree translated before it was posted to the provinces from India to Ethiopia.

Which allows us to say that some significant time was needed before a decree could be translated, copied and delivered.

And this has bearing on the decrees issued by Artaxerxes I.

Because undoubtedly the same process was done for the decrees of Artaxerxes I, whose decrees were by necessity translated and posted by various means to the treasurers in the provinces, and to those who lived in Babylon who would be willing to give an offering at the temple in Jerusalem. And in this regard, we should keep in mind that Ezra was in Babylon before he began his journey to Jerusalem, but the decrees were issued from the seat of government that was at Shushan.

Therefore the decrees of Artaxerxes I would have been issued prior to the first day of the first month, which was Nissan, which means that we cannot know when the decrees were signed and sealed by Artaxerxes I. Also, we cannot know when the decrees were translated, and copies made, or when they were posted to the various provinces, including to Ezra and the others who were in Babylon.

However, we can reasonably conclude that the issuance of the decrees was a lengthy process, and it would have taken some time for the decrees to be prepared and posted before Ezra left Babylon at the beginning of the seventh regnal year of Artaxerxes I.

And this is important to our understanding of the seventy-weeks prophecy.

Because it is evident—by Ezra's letter—that it is not possible to date the issuance of the decrees to the seventh year of Artaxerxes I, because Ezra had the letter by the first day of the first month, which is the month Nissan, which is the first month of the year, and the month by which we reckon the reigns of the Persian kings. This is implied as such in the book of Esther, which tells us that—relative to the reign of King

Ahasuerus—the first month is “the month Nisan [also, Nissan]” (Esther 3:7).

Therefore because Ezra and the others left on and after the first day of the first month, we can conclude that the decrees were issued prior to the month of Nisan, noting that at that time “there went up some of the children of Israel, and of the priests, and the Levites, and the singers, and the porters, and the Nethinims, unto Jerusalem, in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king” (Ezra 7:7). (Ezra was referring to the king’s years (regnal), which places the seventh year beginning in the spring c. 458 BCE and not the fall of c. 457 BCE.

Also, Ezra was clearly not making an obscure reference to a civil/agricultural Jewish calendar as some would claim in order to preserve their interpretations of the seventy-weeks prophecy.)

So, then, in what year did Ezra leave Babylon?

What is almost certain is that not everyone left Babylon on the same day as Ezra, and yet we know for certain that Ezra left Babylon proper “upon the first day of the first month,” and then a few months later “on the first day of the fifth month came he to Jerusalem, according to the good hand of his God upon him” (Ezra 7:9).


And this was in Artaxerxes’ seventh year of reign.

Therefore to know the year Ezra left Babylon—and the probable year the decrees were issued—we need to determine the date for Artaxerxes’ seventh regnal year in Shushan. Understanding of course that a king’s regnal years are counted from a specific time within a given dated year—spring to spring, or fall to fall—but the years of his office are dated to the end of the previous king’s rule, such as when Artaxerxes’ government was officially seated at Shushan.

This then becomes relevant to the seventy-weeks prophecy, because it is to Artaxerxes’ seventh year that various

interpretations date the beginning of the seventy-weeks, basing the count of the weeks on a contrived day-for-a-year principle and the supposed year Artaxerxes issued a decree to rebuild Jerusalem.

However, as we have seen, Artaxerxes did not issue a decree for the rebuilding of Jerusalem, and also the issuance of Artaxerxes' decrees cannot be dated to his seventh regnal year, leaving the only certain thing that can be dated to the king's seventh regnal year—Ezra's departure from Babylon.

So when was the seventh regnal year of Artaxerxes I? When were the decrees issued by the king? How can we understand Nehemiah's "twentieth year" in Shushan, and reckon it with the "twentieth year of Artaxerxes" reign, when Nehemiah went before the king to explain the continuing problems at Jerusalem? And does this help us explain the seventy-weeks prophecy and the political future of some modern-day nations in the Middle East?  (andrewburdettewrites.com)
(Continued in part two of this series.)

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