

Revisiting the Seventy-Weeks Prophecy—Part One

What can we know about the seventy-weeks prophecy? Does it represent a 490-year period of time pointing to the birth and ministry of Jesus? Is it somehow related to the return of Jesus the Christ?

Following the customary practice of recognizing and appeasing the gods of other lands, Artaxerxes I and seven of his trusted counselors made an offering of gold and silver to the God of Israel. So eager were they to seek the favor of this God who lived at Jerusalem that Artaxerxes I commanded that all the gold and silver remaining in the province of Babylon should be conscripted and given with the people's willing offering to "the house of their God which is in Jerusalem."

Such was the nature of Artaxerxes I (Longimanus) decree in the time of Ezra the scribe.

Notably, this type of offering was a long-standing practice among Babylonian and Persian rulers thinking to forestall calamity to their empires by appeasing the gods of other lands. An example of this is recorded in Scripture in respect to Cyrus the Great, king of Persia.

"The Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Who is there among you of all his people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel, (he is the God,) which is in Jerusalem. And whosoever remaineth in any place where he sojourneth, let the men of his place help him with silver, and with gold, and with goods, and with beasts, beside the freewill offering for the house of God that is in Jerusalem" (Ezra 1:2-4). [Author's emphasis throughout.]

Confirmation of this type of decree can also be found on the Akkadian cuneiform inscription known as the Cyrus Cylinder that was discovered during excavations within the ruins of ancient Babylon (Ezra 5:13-17).

Part of the inscription reads: "I returned them unharmed to their cells, in the sanctuaries that make them happy. May all the gods that I returned to their sanctuaries, every day before Bel and Nabu, ask for a long life for me, and mention my good deeds, and say to Marduk, my lord, this: "Cyrus, the king who fears you, and Cambyses his son, may they be the provisioners of our shrines until distant (?) days, and the population of Babylon call blessings on my kingship. I have enabled all the lands to live in peace."

Now, in Ezra's account regarding Cyrus' decree, following the [period of Babylonian domination](#) as foretold by the prophet Jeremiah, we see that the rebuilding of a Temple would take many years to complete. This was partly the result of the continual opposition the returning Jews experienced from those who were then living in the land once dedicated to the Commonwealth of Israel (Neh. 4:1-3).

Eventually the opposition became so great that the Jews had to appeal to Darius to allow them to continue restoring the Temple, which required a search of the records kept at Ecbatana where it was discovered that Cyrus had indeed made a decree for the restoration of temples and religious sanctuaries in his realm, which would have included the Temple at Jerusalem.

Then Darius reaffirmed the decree of Cyrus by making his own decree: "Moreover I make a decree what ye shall do to the elders of these Jews for the building of this house of God: that of the king's goods, even of the tribute beyond the river, forthwith expenses

be given unto these men, that they be not hindered” (Ezra 6:8).

And so the Temple was finished in the sixth year of Darius I (the Great).

Now, when we examine [the decree of Artaxerxes I](#) we find that it also had a specific purpose with the intent to please the God who lived in Jerusalem. For we read that “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 7:23.)

We see here that Artaxerxes’ decree was fundamentally the same as the decrees of Cyrus and Darius before him, which Ezra confirmed by stating that the king’s purpose was to make an offering to “beautify the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem” (Ezra 7:27).

Now, we shouldn’t think that the reason for Artaxerxes’ decree was for the purpose of rebuilding Jerusalem into a city-state. The Persian kings had no intentions of relinquishing their authority over Jerusalem, granting the people of the land their independence. We can conclude this from the king’s threat of severe judgment upon those who failed to do “the law of the king” (Ezra 7:26).

This meant that the people of Jerusalem, and remnants of the other Israelite tribes who continued to return to this part of the Middle East, were still under the complete authority and dominance of the Persian rulers (Neh. 9:36-37).

What is interesting about the decrees of these Persian kings is that there is no mandate to rebuild the city-state of Jerusalem, even though this was obviously done as much as possible while the Jews restored the Temple and governor’s house (Neh. 2:8). Nonetheless, we know that Artaxerxes decree was an extension of the decrees made by Cyrus and Darius, which

allowed a Temple to continue to be restored and beautified in Jerusalem.

Therefore, we read that: “the elders of the Jews builded, and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they builded, and finished it [Temple], according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the commandment of Cyrus, and Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia” (Ezra 6:14). (All [three kings are seen as affirming the same decree.](#))

Now, some people might reason that Artaxerxes’ decree was given for the restoration of the city of Jerusalem, and thereby they conclude that his decree was the starting point for the controversial seventy-weeks prophecy, which was given to Daniel the prophet during the reign of Darius the Mede of Babylon (Ezra 7:12-26; Dan. 9:1, 24-25).

But is this really the beginning of the seventy-weeks prophecy?

If so, then why are the decrees of these three kings the same regarding the Temple at Jerusalem and why then do people assume the seventy-weeks prophecy is to be associated only with Artaxerxes’ decree?

The reason is that some people assume they can match the intent and meaning of the decree given by Artaxerxes I with the intent and meaning of the command to restore Jerusalem in troubled times as recorded in the book of Daniel. But this is not possible because the reasoning used to associate the seventy-weeks prophecy with Artaxerxes’ decree is based on an unsubstantiated foregone conclusion supported by an unusual means of interpreting prophecy.

Let’s examine this issue further.

There is the belief that the seventy-weeks prophecy can be understood—in regard to knowing when it will be fulfilled—by using a “day-for-a-year” principle. This belief has its roots in Judaism and among historical

biblical expositors, and is commonly used among Sabbatarians and those in the broader Protestant communities today.

But is there really a [“day-for-a-year” principle](#) related to prophecy found in Scripture?

In Ezekiel we read that he was to use a large clay brick as a model of the city of Jerusalem and show a mock siege of the city as a way to warn the people of the impending conquest of Jerusalem. He was also to set an iron plate between him and the model city and lay siege against it as a sign to the people. Moreover, Ezekiel was to lie on his left side for 390 days and on his right side for 40 days. And God told Ezekiel that for each day he would lie on his side he would personally and symbolically bear the iniquity of the two houses of Israel, and each day that he did this would represent a year of judgment on the people.

Therefore God said to Ezekiel, “I have appointed thee each day for a year” (Eze. 4:6).

So the purpose for which Ezekiel did these things was for “a sign to the house of Israel,” and God used a day to represent a year as a means to convey a message of warning about the severity and length of the people’s punishment. Therefore the purpose of this principle was not for calculating the beginning and ending of prophetic events in Scripture, but to symbolically and vividly warn the people—because Ezekiel couldn’t lie on his left and right sides for 390 years and 40 years respectively.

In fact, nowhere in Scripture are we instructed or directed to use such a method to predict or calculate the day of fulfillment or outcome of any prophecy given to Daniel.

Let’s look at another relative example.

Because the people of ancient Israel rebelled at entering the Promised Land due to the false reports of the spies, the people would bear their iniquity by wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. Because God told

them that “after the number of the days in which ye searched the land, even forty days, each day for a year, shall ye bear your iniquities, even forty years, and ye shall know my breach [revoking] of promise” (Num. 14:34).

The purpose for using a day-for-a-year was to show how God would measure out his judgment against the people, and to show how long God would withhold his promise, making it 40 more years before they could enter the land of Canaan.

Consequently there is no mention of applying this day-for-a-year principle to any starting date to determine the time and fulfillment of a prophecy.

Notably then only God can determine the use and purpose for a day-for-a-year principle and its application. (It makes one wonder why those who sometimes use this principle in their interpretations of prophecy are also selective about which of the prophecies they will apply the principle.)

Summarily, the seventy-weeks prophecy is assumed to be understood in the light of a day-for-a-year principle, which is a personal and arbitrary interpretation, and it is also assumed to be correct because of a foregone conclusion that further assumes that this interpretive method can calculate the day Christ began his ministry, and the year of his crucifixion, and even more by accounting for a period of 490 so-called “prophetic years.” (Some who use this method also take the liberty of making the years nonconsecutive in order to make it work out to their personal views of history and the future.)

But is this what the seventy-weeks prophecy is talking about?

To better understand the seventy-weeks prophecy we must first establish a biblical background for addressing this prophecy.

Now, the prophet Jeremiah had a vision after Nebuchadnezzar had taken Jeconiah and the princes of Judah away to Babylon.

In the vision Jeremiah saw two baskets of figs. The one basket had good ripe figs and the other had rotten figs, and both baskets of figs represented those who would go into captivity. The good figs meant that some would be helped by God while they were in captivity and they would be given the opportunity to return to the land of Judah. The bad figs represented the then ruling family and others unworthy to return to Judah who would die as a result of their captivity.

Speaking of the latter group, God says, “I will send the sword, the famine, and the pestilence, among them, till they be consumed from off the land that I gave unto them and to their fathers” (Jer. 24:10).

(Such a vision as this tells us that Judah’s—and all the tribes’—right to live in the land was conditional, which does not lend much support to the current political climate in Israel today. For even in current times the idea of Israel’s right to exist as an independent nation in Palestine is based to some degree on the conclusion that it has a right by God to be there at this time in history. However the Bible indicates that that time is not yet fully at hand, and so we find that Israel today is not there by faith according to the promise made to Abraham. Consequently, the people of Israel today must lean on self-reliance as a means for national survival.)

Also, the vision of the baskets of figs in Jeremiah’s prophecy was related to the time when Judah and the surrounding peoples and countries would be subject to the Babylonian rulers within a seventy-year period of time. “And this whole land shall be a desolation, and an astonishment; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. And it shall come to pass, when seventy years are accomplished, that I will punish the king of Babylon, and that nation, saith the Lord, for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans, and will make it

perpetual desolations. And I will bring upon that land all my words which I have pronounced against it, even all that is written in this book, which Jeremiah hath prophesied against all the nations” (Jer. 25:11-13).

Thus, after many years passed, and after the elderly prophet Daniel had witnessed the overthrow of the Babylonian Empire, he reviewed the prophecies of Jeremiah to determine the end of the seventy years of desolation upon Jerusalem. “In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, of the seed of the Medes, which was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans; In the first year of his reign I Daniel understood by books the number of the years, whereof the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah the prophet, that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem” (Dan. 9:1-2). (This Darius the Mede is thought to have been a regent over Babylon under Cyrus the Great.)

Then we learn of Daniel praying to God about the sins of the people of Israel, and while he was praying the angel Gabriel came to him with a message: “And he informed me, and talked with me, and said, O Daniel, I am now come forth to give thee skill and understanding. At the beginning of thy supplications the commandment came forth, and I am come to shew thee; for thou art greatly beloved: therefore understand the matter, and consider the vision. Seventy weeks are determined [set aside] upon thy people and upon thy holy city...” (Dan. 9:22-24).

When then do these seventy weeks begin, and when do they end? What takes place during these seventy weeks that will affect the city and people of Jerusalem in the future? And if the decree noted in the seventy-weeks prophecy is in regard to the restoration of Jerusalem, why is there no mention of this mandate in the decrees of Cyrus, Darius or Artaxerxes?  andrewburdettewrites.com