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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

The Seventy Weeks of Daniel 9:24-27

by R. J. M. Gurney

The interpretation of the prophecies in Daniel is a matter of considerable debate among scholars of all schools of thought, and evangelical expositors can differ widely among themselves. Dr Gurney, a medical missionary in Kenya, has devoted much attention to the problem, the fruits of which have recently appeared in his book God in Control: An Exposition of the Prophecies of Daniel (Worthing: Henry E. Walter, 1980).

In two previous articles¹ I have argued that Daniel's prophecies look forward primarily to the first coming of Christ. I suggested that chapters 2, 7, 8, 11 and 12 predict the *historical setting* of His coming, and that chapter 9 predicts the *actual date*.

I argued that the "four kingdoms" of Daniel 2 and 7 are Babylon, Media, Persia and Greece; and that Daniel predicted that Christ's coming was to be preceded by the total destruction of the Greek empire. *This was the historical setting.* It brings us right up to the time of Christ, because Egypt, the last remaining part of the Greek empire, became a Roman province in 27 BC, only about twenty years before His birth. The annexation of Egypt is specifically referred to, or hinted at, in 11:42,43.²

The destruction of Antiochus Epiphanes (8:25) corresponds to the stone striking the image on its feet of iron and clay (2:34) and also to the slaying of the fourth beast and its "little horn" (7:11). The break-up of the Greek empire began during the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes, but it was completed much later, when Rome annexed Syria and then Egypt (11:40-43). This annexation of Syria and Egypt probably corresponds to the break-up of the image's body (2:35). The annexation of *Syria* (11:40,41) very specifically corresponds to the destruction of the body of the fourth beast (7:11).

In the present article I want to deal with the prophecy of chapter 9. I shall concentrate on the last four verses, and I shall confine myself almost entirely to the question of whether they contain a prediction of the actual date of Christ's first coming.

THE SEVENTY YEARS

Before dealing with these verses, however, I would like to make two suggestions concerning the prophecy of Jeremiah referred to in Dan. 9:2 — the prophecy of the seventy years. I suggest firstly that this prophecy was fulfilled both literally and accurately. And secondly, I suggest that if this is so, it is likely that the prophecy of the "seventy weeks" also was fulfilled both literally and accurately.

¹ *T.S.F. Bulletin*, Spring 1967; *Themelios*, January 1977.

² See my article in *T.S.F. Bulletin*, Spring 1967.

Jer. 25:8-12 (written in 605 BC) indicates that the nations round about Judah were to “serve the king of Babylon seventy years”. At the end of seventy years the king of Babylon and his people were to be punished. In Jer. 29:10 we are told that when seventy years are “completed for Babylon”, God would cause the Jews to return to their own land.

Now although Judah came under the Babylonian heel in 605 BC (Dan. 1:1), Babylon’s ruling of nations actually dated from the overthrow of Assyria a few years earlier. After the fall of Nineveh in 612 BC (to the allied Medes and Babylonians), Ashur-uballit established his government at Harran. This city fell to the Babylonians in 610 BC, and Assyria was finally obliterated when Ashur-uballit failed to recapture it in 609 BC. *Seventy years* after she had finally conquered and destroyed Assyria, Babylon herself was conquered by Cyrus in 539 BC.

30 In Jer. 29:10 we are told that seventy years would be “completed for Babylon”. I suggest that the full seventy years are to be identified with *Babylon’s period of power*. The nations bordering Judah did not serve Babylon for quite the *full* period of seventy years, but there were other peoples who did. Babylon’s supremacy lasted a little *more* than seventy years in the eastern part of her empire and a little *less* in the western part. And in between was an area where it lasted just about exactly seventy years. It can be seen, therefore, that there are good grounds for maintaining that Jeremiah’s prophecy of the “seventy years” was fulfilled both literally and accurately. But even if we regard the number seventy as an approximate or “round” figure, we should note that it is still a *literal* seventy.

I submit that these facts, together with the generally literal and straightforward nature of Daniel 9, should lead us to expect a literal and accurate fulfilment of the prophecy of the “seventy weeks”.

The vision of Daniel 9 took place in 538 BC, shortly after the completion of Babylon’s seventy years. Daniel “perceived in the books the number of years which, according to the word of the Lord to Jeremiah the prophet, must pass before the end of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years”. Daniel then pleaded with God to remember his promise and to fulfil it. He pleaded with God to let the Jews return to their land and rebuild it.

We read then that the angel Gabriel came to Daniel and said, “. . . At the beginning of your supplications a word went forth, and I have come to tell it to you . . . therefore consider the word, and understand the vision” (v.23). The identity of the “word that went forth” seems rather uncertain, but it could refer to God’s commandment, in response to Daniel’s prayer, that the Jews be allowed to return to their own land and rebuild the temple. Cyrus issued his edict that very same year.

Gabriel then went on to deliver a further prophecy which yet again involved the number seventy. This was the prophecy of the “seventy weeks” (verses 24-27).

THE SEVENTY WEEKS

Radical scholars have no doubt that this prophecy points to the time of Antiochus Epiphanes and no further. The “anointing of a most holy place” is said to be the re-anointing of the altar of sacrifice by the victorious Judas Maccabeus. The “anointed one” who was “cut off” was the murdered high priest, Onias III. The “prince who is to come” was Antiochus Epiphanes, whose armies partially destroyed Jerusalem and massacred many of its inhabitants. He made a “covenant” with the Hellenising Jews and for “half a week” (three and a half years) he abolished the “sacrifice and offering”. His crowning “abomination” was the erection of a heathen altar on the great altar of burnt sacrifice.

Conservative scholars, on the other hand, point out that these verses apply even better to the time of Jesus Christ and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. “An anointed one, a prince” is said to be Jesus Christ, the Messiah (“the anointed one”). He was “cut off” when he died on the cross, and the Jews were punished when the armies of Titus (“the people of the prince who is to come”) destroyed the city and temple of Jerusalem. “He shall make a strong covenant with many” refers to the establishing of the New Covenant by Christ. And Christ caused “sacrifice and offering to cease” through his all-sufficient sacrifice on the cross. Furthermore, his public ministry may well have lasted just three and a half years (half a week).

Conservatives point out further that if the “seventy weeks” refers to weeks of years (*cf.* Gen. 29:27,28) and is therefore a period of 490 years (seventy times seven), the events of 170-164 BC occurred *far too early*. They also point out that verse 24 was perfectly fulfilled by Christ, and Christ alone. “Everlasting righteousness” was certainly not brought in by the Maccabees! They also point out that Antiochus destroyed only part of Jerusalem, and he did not destroy the temple at all (v.26). But these arguments have little effect on the radical scholar. The period of seventy weeks is said to be an “error of calculation”, and verse 24 is merely the expression of a noble but rather over-optimistic hope. The prediction that the temple would be destroyed is more difficult to explain away, and is therefore quietly ignored! (A second-century author would have seen with his own eyes that Antiochus did not destroy the temple.)

Now although conservative scholars can claim that the “seventy week” dating vastly favours the time of Christ rather than that of

Antiochus, they themselves have not, in my opinion, produced a fully satisfactory explanation. If we follow the punctuation of the AV, RV margin and NIV in verse 25, we understand that there were to be sixty-nine weeks "from the going forth of the word to restore and build Jerusalem to the coming of an anointed one, a prince." Those who try to find an exact fulfilment usually identify the "going forth of the word to restore and build Jerusalem" with Nehemiah's commission in 445 BC. They then have to resort to the rather dubious expedient of calculating in "prophetic" years of 360 days. If we count 483 of these years (69 weeks = 483 years) from 445 BC we come to 32 AD for the appearance of the "anointed one".

I (and many others) find this solution unsatisfactory. Resorting to a 360-day year seems to me to be rather a "wangle", and although 32 AD *may* have occurred during the lifetime of Jesus (but this is unlikely, as he was probably crucified in 30 AD), this date does not fit in with the other details of the prophecy. Rather than trying to find an exact interpretation, many prefer to say that the seventy weeks is "a round number" and/or "symbolical".

32

Now it has been noted³ that there are exactly 483 normal years between 458 BC (the Biblical date of Ezra's coming to Jerusalem) and 26 AD (the year in which Jesus probably began His public ministry). Very little has been made of this, and yet I believe that this is the answer to our problem — and a truly wonderful answer it is too.

We are told that the sixty-nine weeks are dated from the "going forth of the word to restore and build Jerusalem". This *could* refer to the word of 538 BC, permitting the Jews to return and rebuild the temple — but not necessarily. The "word" of verse 25 concerned the building of *Jerusalem*, whereas Cyrus's edict (the result of God's "word") only concerned the *temple*. Daniel had prayed, "Cause thy face to shine upon thy *sanctuary*, which is desolate . . . behold our desolations, and the *city* which is called by thy name" (vv.17, 18). Daniel first asked for the restoration of the *temple*, and then he asked for the restoration of the *city*. As Daniel made two requests, so God may have given two answers. The first was the word to build the temple (v.23?). The second was the word, then future, to build the city (v.25).

The exiles who returned in about 537 BC did rebuild the temple; but they achieved very little else. Jerusalem continued to lie in ruins, and both physically and spiritually the people remained at an extremely low ebb.

³ See, for example, *The Westminster Dictionary of the Bible* (1944), p.128.

Now Ezra 4:7-23 indicates that the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem (as opposed to the temple) was initiated by a group of Jews who came to Jerusalem during the reign of Artaxerxes I before the coming of Nehemiah. The only such group of Jews mentioned elsewhere is the group led by Ezra. According to Ezra 7:7, Ezra came to Jerusalem in the seventh year of Artaxerxes — that is, 458 BC. Furthermore, Ezra 9:9 indicates, I believe, that Ezra certainly had it in his mind to rebuild Jerusalem. Indeed, I suggest that he had already exhorted the Jews to start rebuilding when he made this prayer.

It is in fact widely accepted by both conservative and critical scholars that the Jews began rebuilding the city of Jerusalem during the reign of Artaxerxes I, before the arrival of Nehemiah, as described in Ezra 4:7-23. Critical scholars consider this Aramaic section to be particularly authentic and reliable. And according to the conservative *New Bible Commentary Revised*, Ezra 4:12 “is highly important evidence for a migration of Jews in the reign of Artaxerxes. If the traditional dating of Ezra’s return (c. 458 BC) be accepted, the verse could well indicate the group which returned with him. The cessation of the building, which was unauthorised, may have been that reported to Nehemiah (Ne. 1:1ff.). Ezra may have realised that no effective reform could be achieved without the security of a wall, but he had no commission for this, hence the appeal to Nehemiah . . .”⁴

33

(Note that the controversy over the date of Ezra’s coming to Jerusalem is, to a large extent, irrelevant to this discussion. I am trying to show that the *Bible* predicted the date of Christ’s coming. We are concerned, therefore, with the *Biblical* date of Ezra’s arrival.)

The prayer of Ezra 9:9 was made around the end of November or the beginning of December, 458 BC. I suggest therefore that the Biblical evidence points to a date in the region of September-November, 458 BC for the “going forth of the word to restore and build Jerusalem.” (Ezra arrived in Jerusalem towards the end of July 458 BC, but his immediate concern at that time was the care of the temple.)

If we count 483 years from the latter part of 458 BC, we come to the latter part of 26 AD. *It was at about this very time that Christ probably began His public ministry.*

Other details of the prophecy fall into place. Astronomical calculations indicated that Jesus was crucified very probably on 7th April, 30 AD.⁵ If we count back three and a half years from this date (see v.27), we come to the latter part (October) of 26 AD. If we count forwards three and a half

⁴ *The New Bible Commentary Revised* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1970), p.401.

⁵ See Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Times* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1967), chapter 7.

years, we come to the latter part of 33 AD. If the foregoing interpretation is correct, this is the date which marks the end of the seventy weeks — and also the end of the final, seventieth week in which the “strong covenant” was established.

Now we are told that the seventy weeks were “decreed” concerning the Jews and Jerusalem (v.24). The idea seems to be one of judgment. The Jews and Jerusalem had only seventy weeks to go! Babylon was given seventy years, but Jerusalem was given seventy times seven years! It is likely therefore that the end of the seventy weeks marks 1) the point in time at which the kingdom of God was taken away from the Jews (Mat. 21:43) and 2) the completion of Christ’s work of establishing the New Covenant. One event which could have marked this point of time was Paul’s commissioning as the apostle to the Gentiles.

In the chronological table at the end of *New Testament Times*, by Merrill C. Tenney, the following dates are given as the most probable in the light of the evidence we have at present. Opening of Jesus’s ministry, 26 AD. Crucifixion of Jesus, 30 AD. Death of Stephen; conversion of Paul, 32/33 AD. These dates agree precisely with the predictions of Dan. 9:24-27.

34

Thus Christ “established the covenant” for seven years (one week). Half-way through this period he was “cut off”, causing the “sacrifice and offering to cease”. Throughout this period the Jews rejected him as the Messiah (the stoning of Stephen was a climactic demonstration of this) and so finally the Jews themselves were rejected from being God’s special, chosen people.

The 490 years between 458 BC and 33 AD could well represent the “one more chance” which God gave the Jews in Jesus’s parable of Luke 13:6-9. It is a remarkable fact that the period of time between Abraham and Ezra was three times as long (give or take a few years) as the 490-year period between Ezra and Christ — the period of the post-exilic theocracy. (We need to remember that the coming of Ezra was an event of enormous importance which marked a turning point in the history of Israel. John Bright says that Ezra emerged as a figure of “towering importance” who came to be regarded as “no less than a second Moses”. “If Moses was Israel’s founder, it was Ezra who reconstituted Israel . . .”⁶)

The Jewish War, culminating in the siege and destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD (Dan. 9:26b, 27b), was the direct result of the Jews’ rejection of Christ, and was God’s punishment (Mat. 21:37-43; 22:2-7;

⁶ John Bright, *A History of Israel* (SCM Press, 1960), p.374.

23:31-38; 24:15-21; Luke 19:41-44; 21:20-24). But it was the outward and visible evidence of something which had already taken place several years earlier — namely, the rejection of the Jews as God's special, chosen people.

CONCLUSION

Because the fulfilment of the “seventy weeks” is not immediately obvious, and because there has been so much disagreement and confusion over this prediction, there are many who declare that it is wrong to look for an exact, literal fulfilment.

But in a sense, all Daniel's prophecies are something of a riddle; and perhaps God made it this way deliberately. Jesus sometimes made his message obscure by teaching in parables — and he did it deliberately (Mat. 13:10-17). We must not abandon the search simply because the answer is not laid on a plate before us.

There are some who maintain that if the date of Christ's coming had really been predicted in this remarkable way, it would have been mentioned in the New Testament. It is true that the “seventy weeks” are not specifically mentioned, but there can be no doubt that as far as the New Testament is concerned, the prophecy as a whole applies to the time of Christ. This is particularly true of verse 24. Also, on the occasion when Jesus mentioned Daniel by name (Mat. 24:15-21; Mark 13:14-19; Luke 21:20-24), he appeared to link Dan. 9:27 with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD — indicating in a very specific way that 9:24-27 *does* look beyond Antiochus to the time of Christ.

Now it is true that parts of the prophecy seem to apply to the time of Antiochus; but there are other parts which definitely do not. It is only when the prophecy is applied to Christ that the fulfilment is seen to be perfect and complete. Of course if we believe that the prophecies are full of errors and were composed in the second century BC, a few discrepancies here and there do not worry us. But if, in the process, we shut our eyes to a perfectly good fulfilment which has no discrepancies, are we not being rather unwise? Especially when Jesus Christ repeatedly endorsed the reliability of the scriptures, and repeatedly emphasised that they had prophesied about Him.

Ezra 4:7-23 and 7:7 and 9:9 do imply very strongly indeed that the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem was initiated by Ezra. And it is an irrefutable fact that there were exactly 483 years (69 weeks) between the Biblical date of Ezra's coming to Jerusalem and 26 AD, the year in which Jesus Christ, the Messiah, probably began his public ministry. Some prefer to think that this is pure coincidence. To me, a “coin-

vidence'' of this magnitude is so unlikely as to be totally out of the question.

But suppose evangelicals are mistaken about the date of authorship of Daniel. Suppose the book *was* written in the second century BC. Need this alter our interpretation? I do not believe so. Even if a second century date were proved (which is highly unlikely), I would still insist that the prophecies point to the coming of Christ. We could concede that the author may have *thought* that he was not looking beyond the time of Antiochus in 9:24-27; he may have *thought* that he was predicting the fate of Antiochus in 11:40-45; he may have *thought* that the kingdom of God would be established in its full glory immediately after the death of Antiochus. But guided by the Holy Spirit, he was actually pointing to the coming of Jesus Christ more than a century and a half later.