

NEW TESTAMENT CHRONOLOGY AND THE DECREE OF DANIEL 9

RENALD E. SHOWERS
Professor of Church History
Philadelphia College of Bible

According to the angel Gabriel, the seventy weeks of years mentioned in Daniel 9:24-27 would begin with the issuance of a commandment or decree to restore and to build Jerusalem. The first sixty-nine of these weeks (483 years) would end during the life of Messiah, and sometime after their end Messiah would be "cut off" or put to death.

Most Dispensationalists have concluded that the decree which began the seventy weeks historically was King Artaxerxes' decree issued to Nehemiah in 445 B.C. If this decree is to be accepted as the fulfillment of Daniel 9, then it must be demonstrated that 483 years from 445 B.C. ended during the life of Christ and before His death. The only way in which that can be demonstrated is through the chronological data relating to the life of Christ which are given in the New Testament. This study, then, is dealing with the following question: does the New Testament confirm the conclusion that Artaxerxes' decree to Nehemiah in 445 B.C. was the starting point of the seventy weeks of Daniel 9?

It is crucial to note again at the outset that the first 483 years (sixty-nine weeks) of the seventy weeks was to end before Christ was put to death. That would mean, then, that the latest possible time in which that period could end was the year in which Christ died. If 483 years from 445 B.C. goes to a time later than the year in which Christ died, then Artaxerxes' decree to Nehemiah would have to be rejected as the fulfillment of Daniel 9. It is very crucial, then, that we try to determine the year in which Christ died. The traditional view has been that Christ was crucified in 30 A.D. But, when prophetic years are used, 483 years from 445 B.C. brings time to 32 A.D.¹ Is it possible to place the death of Christ as late as 32 A.D.? In order to determine that, it will be necessary to investigate New Testament chronological data relating to several events in the life of Christ.

First, we must try to determine when Christ was born. The gospels make it evident that He was born while Herod the Great was living. We know that Herod died late in March or early in April, 4 B.C.² Thus, Christ

had to have been born before that time. Most scholars narrow the date down to 6 to 4 B. C. Finegan, following what he feels to be the best old sources, places the birth in midwinter of 5-4 B. C. --either December, 5 B. C., or January 4 B. C.³

Second, we must try to determine when Christ was baptized and began His public ministry. Inasmuch as Christ was approximately six months younger than John the Baptist, it would be logical to assume that He began His ministry about six months after John began his (Lk. 1:36). According to Luke 3:1, John began his ministry in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar. At first glance one would assume that it would be a very simple matter to determine exactly the time span covered by the fifteenth year of Tiberius. But such is not the case. Finegan demonstrated how there are sixteen different time spans that could possibly have been that fifteenth year.⁴ The reasons for so many possibilities are such variables as the choice between regnal or non-regnal years, Julian or non-Julian calendars, accession or non-accession year systems and 12 A.D. or 14 A.D. as the starting point of Tiberius' reign. The earliest possible time span that could have been the fifteenth year was January 1 to December 31, 26 A.D. The latest possible span was March-April, 29 A.D. to March-April, 30 A.D.⁵

In trying to determine which of the sixteen possibilities was the most likely, the first crucial thing to settle is the time when Tiberius began to reign. Augustus served as emperor until 14 A.D., but he had appointed Tiberius to be his second in command in 12 A.D. When Augustus died on August 19, 14 A.D., Tiberius succeeded him as emperor either on that date or on September 17, 14 A.D.⁶ Now the question is: is Tiberius' reign to be reckoned from his appointment as second in command in 12 A.D., or from his becoming emperor in 14 A.D.? Those who hold to the traditional view that Christ was crucified in 30 A.D. choose the 12 A.D. date. This would mean that John would have begun his ministry in the Spring and Christ in the Fall of 26 A.D. But, Tacitus and Suetonius, two Roman historians who lived during the first and second centuries, recorded information about Tiberius that rules out the 12 A.D. date. They stated that Tiberius was not joint emperor with Augustus from 12 to 14 A.D.; instead, he was associated with Augustus only in respect of the provinces and armies (Suetonius, *Tiberius* xxi; Tacitus, *Ann.* i.3.3; compare i.11.2 and iii.56.2). Tacitus also made it clear that, when Augustus died, "Tiberius was not regarded by himself or by others as already Emperor" (*Ann.* i.5-7). Suetonius supported this by stating that, for a time after Augustus' death, Tiberius refused the Roman senate's offer of the imperial office (*Tib.* xxiv.). In addition to this, "No instance is known of reckoning the reign of Tiberius from his association with Augustus." Some coins from Antioch which supposedly did so reckon have been shown by Eckhel not to be genuine. There are genuine coins from Antioch that date the reign of Tiberius from

Augustus' death (note: Antioch was Luke's home town, so Luke would be prone to use 14 A.D. as the starting point).⁷ Josephus, the Jewish historian of the first century A.D., followed the 14 A.D. date.⁸ So did Sir William Ramsay, G. Ogg and A. R. Burn.^{9,10,11} Finegan also saw this date as being more probable than 12 A.D.¹² It is the opinion of this study, then, that Tiberius' reign began in 14 A.D.

With 14 A.D. as the starting point, the fifteenth year of Tiberius' reign would have been either in (1) 28 A.D. or (2) 29 A.D. or (3) in part of 28 and part of 29 A.D., depending upon whether the accession or non-accession system was used, and whether the Julian or non-Julian calendar was used.¹³ When these three possibilities are studied thoroughly, it is seen that two out of the three choose 28 A.D. as the year in which both John and Christ began their ministries.¹⁴ G. Ogg and Will Durant agreed with the 28 A.D. date.^{15,16} Later it will be seen that other chronological data in the gospel records fit well with this date.

Because of the extreme heat in the Jordan depression during the summer, it is likely that John performed the major part of his ministry there during spring and fall.¹⁷ Statements that he made near the beginning of his ministry may indicate that he began that ministry in the spring. Such a statement as: "And even now the axe also lieth at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire" would point to the month of April. Fruit trees were pruned in March; thus, by April it would become evident which trees were no longer productive and needed to be cut down. The statement: "whose fan is in his hand, thoroughly to cleanse his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his garner," points to the harvest season. In the deep hot valley of the Jordan the harvest season came early--in June.¹⁸

Since great crowds had been attracted to John before Jesus came to him (Mark 1:5), and since Christ was six months younger than John, it is probable that Christ was baptized and began His ministry in the late fall season.¹⁹ This would mean that Christ began His ministry in the fall of 28 A.D. Epiphanius, a bishop on Cyprus during the fourth and fifth centuries, declared that Christ was baptized in November of 28 A.D.²⁰ It is the conclusion of this study that Christ was baptized and began His ministry in the late fall of 28 A.D.

The third New Testament chronological datum which must be investigated is that which is found in Luke 3:23. This verse deals with the age of Christ when He was baptized and began His ministry. The King James Version translates the verse as follows: "And Jesus himself began to be about thirty years of age, . . ." This translation gives the impression that Jesus was not quite thirty when baptized, but that He would be thirty on His next birthday. Upon this basis some who follow the tradition that Christ

died in 30 A.D. construct the following chronology: Christ was born perhaps in December, 5 B.C. In the fall (perhaps November) of 26 A.D. Christ was baptized and began His ministry. This would mean that He was twenty-nine years old when baptized and would become thirty in just another month or so. Over three years later, He was crucified in 30 A.D. when thirty-three years old.²¹

The above chronological scheme falls together very well, but there is one big problem with it: it is based upon an incorrect translation of Luke 3:23. Plummer pointed out that the King James translation of this verse "is impossible" in light of the Greek text. Cranmer led the way in this mistaken translation in the Bible of 1539, and the later versions followed it. According to Plummer, the proper translation is: "'Jesus himself was about thirty years of age when He began.'"²²

Alford said the verse should be translated: "'Jesus was about thirty years old when He began' (His ministry); not, 'began to be about,' & c., which is ungrammatical."²³

A. T. Robertson wrote that the translation "'began to be about thirty years of age,' is an impossible translation."²⁴

The incorrect King James translation indicates that Christ was under thirty when baptized, but the correct translation also leaves room for Christ to have been over thirty when baptized. Indeed, Alford went so far as to say that the expression "about thirty" allowed latitude "only in one direction; viz. over thirty years. He could not well be under, seeing that this was the appointed age for the commencement of public service of God by the Levites: see Num. iv. 3, 23, 43, 47."²⁵

How much time can be read into the word "about"? Those who hold the traditional view say that very little time can be read into it. They interpret the word in a narrow, more exact sense, indicating that it means that Christ was only a month or so under thirty and that He would be exactly thirty on His next birthday. But, in contrast to this view, Plummer wrote: "It is obvious that this verse renders little help to chronology. 'About thirty' may be anything from twenty-eight to thirty-two, -- to give no wider margin."²⁶

Nicoll stated that the term "about" means: "about, nearly, implying that the date is only approximate. It cannot be used as a fixed datum for chronological purposes. . . ."²⁷

A. T. Robertson expressed it this way:

Luke does not commit himself definitely to precisely thirty years as the age of Christ. The Levites entered upon full service at that age, but that proves nothing about Jesus. God's prophets enter upon their task when the word of God comes to them. Jesus may have been a few months under or over thirty or a year or two less or more.²⁸

It is legitimate, then, to interpret the word "about" in a more broad, less exact sense than does the traditional view. Indeed, the broader interpretation may be the preferred one.

Our conclusion on Luke 3:23, then, is this: when Christ was baptized, He may have been as much as thirty-two years of age. If Christ was born near the end of 5 B.C. and baptized in the fall of 28 A.D., then He would have been thirty-one when baptized and would have been approaching His thirty-second birthday.²⁹

The fourth New Testament chronological datum which must be investigated is that which is found in John 2:20. During the first Passover of Christ's ministry (John 2:11-13), Christ cleansed the Temple in Jerusalem.³⁰ When the Jews demanded from Him a sign to substantiate His authority for this cleansing action, Christ said: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

Thinking that Jesus referred to the Temple that He had cleansed, the Jews replied: "Forty and six years was this temple in building, and wilt thou raise it up in three days?"

Many historians agree that Herod's Temple was not finally completed until 64 A.D.³¹ In the light of this, the Jews' statement in John 2:20 meant that, at the time of their statement, Herod's Temple was in the forty-sixth year of its building. If we could determine when Herod began his Temple, we could also determine the year in which the Jews made the statement in John 2:20. This in turn would help us determine when Christ was baptized and began His ministry.

According to Josephus (Antiquities xv), Herod "undertook to build" his Temple in the eighteenth year of his reign.³² Herod began to reign in 37 B.C., so his eighteenth year would have been 20 or 19 B.C.^{33,34} On the basis of Josephus' statement, those who hold the traditional view that Christ died in 30 A.D. conclude that Herod actually began to build the Temple in 20 B.C. Forty-six years from 20 B.C. would bring one to 27

A. D. According to their way of reckoning, Christ was baptized in the fall of 26 A.D. Thus, the first Passover of Christ's ministry (when the statement of John 2:20 was made) would have been in the spring of 27 A.D.

Once again the traditional chronological scheme works out very well; however, once again there is a problem with it. Exactly what did Josephus mean when he wrote that Herod "undertook to build" his temple in the eighteenth year of his reign? Did he mean, as the traditionalists conclude, that Herod actually began to build in that year? Or did he mean that Herod began to lay plans and to make preparations in that year? There is a big difference between the two. Josephus' language could very well mean the latter.

As a result of his research, Caldecott concluded that two years were spent in preparation for building the Temple. Actual building began in 18 B.C. after:

A thousand priests had been taught to be masons and carpenters; and thousands of sacerdotal garments had been got ready for them; ten thousand skilled workmen had also been chosen, nine hundred of whom had been working in the quarries and forests to procure great blocks of stone that were white and strong, and timber in abundance; a thousand wagons had transported the necessary new material to the spot. . . .³⁵

Ogg also concluded that Herod spent a couple years in preparation before actual building began.³⁶ It is our conclusion that Herod actually began to build the Temple in 18 B.C.

Forty-six years from 18 B.C. would bring one to 29 A.D. According to our way of reckoning, Christ was baptized in the fall of 28 A.D. Thus, the first Passover of Christ's ministry (when the statement of John 2:20 was made) would have been in the spring of 29 A.D. From this it can be seen that the statement in John 2:20 substantiates very well our earlier conclusion that Christ was baptized in 28 A.D.

The fifth New Testament chronological datum which must be investigated concerns the length of Christ's earthly ministry in His first coming. The only way that that can be determined with any degree of accuracy is by searching the gospel records to see how many Passovers were observed during Christ's ministry. The synoptic gospels mention only one Passover--the final one during which Christ was crucified (Mark 14:12; Matt. 26:17; Luke 22:7).³⁷ On this basis one might conclude that Christ's ministry lasted only one year or less. But Irenaeus blasted such

an idea in his work Against Heresies.³⁸ This may indicate that the early church considered the ministry to have lasted longer than one year.

In addition, another synoptic passage (Mark 2:23; Matt. 12:1; Luke 6:1) seems to refer to another springtime prior to the final one (the disciples plucked grain during the spring harvest season). This would mean a second Passover in Christ's ministry. "Since the baptism (Mk. 1:9) was obviously prior to that, perhaps in the preceding fall, the total ministry was at least somewhat over one year in length."³⁹

Inasmuch as the synoptic gospels may have allowed one Passover to go unmentioned, it could very well be that they allowed other Passovers to go unmentioned. Another possibility is that the synoptic records may have covered only a part of a longer ministry--the part deemed most important. Thus, Christ's ministry may have been several years in length.⁴⁰

The Gospel of John mentions three Passovers (John 2:13; 6:4; 11:55). John 4:35 may imply a fourth. In that verse Jesus referred to a harvest (April or May) which was four months away. That would mean that He made His statement around January or February. In between the time of the statement and the time of the harvest a second unmentioned Passover would have fallen. This would make a total of four Passovers during Christ's ministry.⁴¹ With Jesus having been baptized and having begun His ministry in the fall preceding the first Passover "it seems that a total ministry of three years plus a number of months is indicated." Epiphanius considered the ministry to have lasted three years plus several months. Eusebius seemed to hold the same.⁴² Most conservative Bible scholars today seem to agree with this. It is the conclusion of this study that Christ's earthly ministry lasted three years and several months--perhaps about three and one-half years.

When traditionalists, who believe that Christ began His ministry in the fall of 26 A. D. , apply this three and one-half years to their chronological scheme, they end with Spring of 30 A.D. as the time of Christ's death. When this study, which believes that Christ began His ministry in the fall of 28 A.D. , applies this three and one-half years to its chronological scheme, it ends with Spring of 32 A.D. as the time of Christ's death. In the fourth century A. D. Bishop Epiphanius also concluded that Christ died in Spring, 32 A.D.⁴³

Earlier in this chapter we asked the following question: is it possible to place the death of Christ as late as 32 A.D. ? Our reason for having asked that question was found in two simple facts. First, if 483 years from 445 B.C. goes to a time later than the year in which Christ died, then Artaxerxes' decree to Nehemiah would have to be rejected as the fulfillment of Daniel 9. Second, when prophetic years are used, 483 years from 445 B.C. brings the time to 32 A.D.

Our investigation of the New Testament chronological data relating to the life of Christ has demonstrated that it is possible to place the death of Christ as late as 32 A. D. Thus, both the death of Christ and the end of the period of 483 years which began in 445 B. C. could have taken place in the same year.

Sir Robert Anderson has demonstrated how, since Artaxerxes issued his decree to Nehemiah in the month of Nisan, 445 B. C. (Neh. 2:1), 483 prophetic years from that time ended in the month of Nisan, 32 A. D.⁴⁴ It is evident that Christ died in the month of Nisan, for that's when the Jewish Passover was observed. Thus, the period of 483 years that began in 445 B. C. could have ended in the same month that Christ died. This would mean that that period of 483 years not only did not end in a year later than Christ's death, but also did not end in a month later than Christ's death.

Could the period of 483 years have ended on some day later than the day on which Christ died? Perhaps an examination of some chronological data in Ezra and Nehemiah will help us answer this question. Ezra 7:9 indicates that it took Ezra from Nisan 1 to Ab 1, 458 B. C., to travel from Babylon to Jerusalem. Within this period was a three day holdover near Ahava (8:15, 31). In other words it took Ezra three days less than four full months to travel from Babylon to Jerusalem.

According to Nehemiah 6:15, the Jews finished rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem on Elul 25, 445 B. C., fifty-two days after they had begun. This means that they began rebuilding the walls on Ab 3 or 4, the day that Nehemiah confronted the Jewish leaders with the task of rebuilding (Neh. 2:17). According to Nehemiah 2:11, Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem three days before Ab 3 or 4, or on Ab 1 or 2 (note: this was almost on the same day of the same month that Ezra arrived in Jerusalem thirteen years earlier). If Nehemiah's journey to Jerusalem took as long as did Ezra's, then Nehemiah started his journey somewhere around Nisan 3 or 4, 445 B. C.

Someone might argue that Nehemiah's journey would not have taken as long as Ezra's, because Nehemiah didn't have women and children with him as did Ezra. However, it is very probable that Nehemiah did have women and children with him on his journey, for several times he mentioned his servants who had come with him (Neh. 4:16, 23; 5:10, 16). Surely some, if not many, of these men had wives and children. He also mentioned his "brethren" in the same passages. This term probably refers to his kinsmen and the members of his house who had come with him.⁴⁵ Here again, women and children must have been involved.

Even if Nehemiah had not had women and children with him, his journey probably would have taken as long as Ezra's, for he had a longer

distance to travel than did Ezra. Ezra began his journey at Babylon, but Nehemiah began his at Shushan (Neh. 1:1), which was approximately 200 miles further from Jerusalem than was Babylon.⁴⁶ Thus, we still conclude that Nehemiah began his journey around Nisan 3 or 4, 445 B.C.

It is extremely improbable that Nehemiah left on the same day that Artaxerxes gave his approval for him to go. Certainly it would have taken several days to make preparations for such a long journey. Because of this, it is our conclusion that Artaxerxes issued his decree to Nehemiah around Nisan 1. Schultz also concluded that the king took this action on Nisan 1, and that the preparation and journey took about four months.⁴⁷

Sir Robert Anderson has shown how that 483 prophetic years which began on Nisan 1, 445 B.C., ended on Nisan 10, 32 A.D.⁴⁸ Most scholars are agreed that Christ was crucified either on Nisan 14 or 15. Therefore, the period of 483 years which began with the issuance of Artaxerxes' decree to Nehemiah did not end on some day later than the day on which Christ died. It ended several days before Christ died--perhaps on the day of His triumphal entry into Jerusalem.⁴⁹

In this study it has been demonstrated that the 483 years that began with the issuance of Artaxerxes' decree to Nehemiah in 445 B.C. ended during a very significant year in the life of Christ (the year of His death), and also ended before His death. It is our conclusion, then, that the New Testament does confirm the concept that Artaxerxes' decree to Nehemiah was the historic starting point of the seventy weeks of Daniel 9.

DOCUMENTATION

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