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DANIEL'S GREAT SEVENTY-WEEKS PROPHECY: AN EXEGETICAL INSIGHT

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It has often been said, and I believe with truth, that those who shun the study of biblical languages will find themselves at the mercy of the translators. Nowhere is this more true than in the case of the Hebrew OT, as may be seen by the discussions that have been provoked by recent translations of the OT.

One purpose of this study is to encourage an interest in the study of Hebrew exegesis for the purpose of determining the exact meaning of the OT text. Another purpose is to show how the study of one Hebrew word can help to unlock the mysteries of one of the most fascinating prophecies of the entire OT: the Seventy-Weeks Prophecy of Daniel.

The first great problem that confronts us as we seek the interpretation of this prophecy, is the meaning of the Hebrew word **שָׁבוּעַ**, which is translated in our English versions by the word "week." We must now examine the entire prophecy as found in Dan 9:24-27, and as translated in the New American Standard Bible, calling special attention to the word "week," which appears six times within the four verses:

Seventy weeks have been decreed for your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to make an end of sin, to make atonement for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most holy place. So you are to know and discern that from the issuing of a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince there will be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks; it will be built again, with plaza and moat, even in times of distress. Then after the sixty-two weeks the Messiah will be cut off and have nothing, and the people of the prince who is to come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. And its end will come with a flood; even to the end there will be war; desolations are determined. And he will make a firm covenant with the many for one week, but in the middle of the week he will put a stop to sacrifice and grain offering;

and on the wing of abominations will come one who makes desolate, even until a complete destruction, one that is decreed, is poured out on the one who makes desolate.

Our problem is to determine how long a period of time is intended by this word: whether a week of *days*, as the most common usage of the word would suggest, or whether, perhaps, it is intended to be a week of *years*, as the immediate context would seem to demand. The problem is intensified by the fact that nowhere else in the OT, when the word is used by itself, does it mean anything else than a week of *days*.¹

In seeking a solution to this interesting and important problem, we shall study the word שָׁבוֹעַ ("week") in the light of analogous Hebrew usage, comparative chronology, and the context of biblical prophecy.

HEBREW USAGE

The dictionary definition of our English word "week" is "a period of seven successive days."² This is not true of the Hebrew שָׁבוֹעַ. Its literal meaning is "a unit of seven."³ It has no primary reference to time periods at all, whether of days or years. In other words, it is simply a numerical measure. Let us demonstrate what we mean by examining a similar Hebrew word. The word עָשׂוֹר would seem to have the basic meaning of "ten days," because that is its correct translation in thirteen out of the sixteen times it appears in the Old Testament.⁴ But on three occasions it does not mean "ten days" at all, but rather "ten strings" or "an instrument of ten strings": Psa 33:2, 92:3, (92:4, Heb.), 144:9.⁵ Therefore, the word עָשׂוֹר must mean "decad" or "unit of ten," and whether it means "ten days" or "ten strings" must be determined entirely by the context, not by the word itself.⁶

¹The noun שָׁבוֹעַ appears 20 times in 17 verses: Gen 29:27, 28; Exod 34:22; Lev 12:5; Num 28:26; Deut 16:9(2x), 10, 16; 2 Chr 8:13; Jer 5:24; Ezek 45:21; Dan 9:24, 5(2x), 26, 27(2x), 10:2, 3. See Gerhard Lisowsky, *Konkordanz zum Hebräischen Alten Testament* (Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1958) 1395-96.

²*The American College Dictionary*, 1964 ed., s.v. "week."

³See BDB, 988-89; William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 358; KB, 940.

⁴The noun עָשׂוֹר refers to days in Gen 24:55; Exod 12:3; Lev 6:29, 23:27, 25:9; Num 29:7; Josh 4:19; 2 Kgs 25:1; Jer 52:4, 12; Ezek 20:1, 24:1, 40:1. See Lisowsky, *Konkordanz*, 1137.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶See BDB, 797; Holladay, *Lexicon*, 285; KB, 741.

On the basis of analogous Hebrew usage, therefore, we find that our word שְׁבוּעַ may have the basic meaning of "heptad" or "unit of seven," even as עָשׂוֹר must mean "decad" or "unit of ten." This possibility is greatly strengthened by the fact that שְׁבוּעַ appears three times in the OT with the word יָמִים ("days") added, as though to imply that שְׁבוּעַ by itself was not sufficient to show that a period of seven *days* was intended.⁷ The most interesting point, however, is that two of these three combinations of שְׁבוּעַ and יָמִים appear in the second and third verses of Daniel 10,⁸ immediately following the Seventy Weeks prophecy of the preceding chapter, as though to warn the reader that שְׁבוּעַ is now being used in a different sense!

COMPARATIVE CHRONOLOGY

If the Seventy Weeks prophecy refers to weeks (sevens) of *years*, we are then dealing with a time-span of seventy sevens of years, or 490 years. Now according to the second verse of this same ninth chapter of Daniel, the prophet Daniel had been studying the prophecy of Jer 25:11-12, which stated that Israel's captivity in Babylon would last for exactly seventy years. It was because this seventy-year period had now come to an end that Daniel began to pray for the deliverance of his people Israel, in accordance with Jeremiah's prophecy.

The full significance of the seventy-year captivity in Babylon does not come to light, however, until we consider some explanatory passages in Leviticus and 2 Chronicles. Lev 25:2-5 states that every seventh year the children of Israel were to observe "a sabbath of rest" for the land, during which time they were neither to sow their fields nor prune their vineyards for an entire year. Then in chap. 26, vv 34, 35, and 43, a solemn warning was added, that if this commandment was not obeyed, the people would be sent into captivity, and the land would be left desolate for a number of years equal to the number of sabbath-rest years that they failed to observe.

Now when we turn to the account of Jerusalem's destruction by Nebuchadnezzar in 2 Chronicles 36, we read in v 21 that the purpose of the captivity was "to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its sabbaths. All the days of its desolation it kept sabbath, until seventy years were complete." On the basis of these passages, therefore, we may conclude that the seventy-year captivity of Israel in Babylon came about as a result of a lax attitude toward the Law of Moses, as evidenced by her failure to

⁷The terms שְׁבוּעַ and יָמִים occur together in Ezek 45:21; Dan 10:2, and 10:3. See Lisowsky, *Konkordanz*, 1195.

⁸Ibid.

observe a total of seventy different Levitical sabbath-rest years, over a period of 490 years.

These facts lead us to make the following observation: if 490 years of disobedience had brought about 70 years of punishment, is it not *probable* that the testing-period for Israel which was now announced to Daniel would cover another 490 *years*, instead of 490 *days*? How could all of the events described in this prophecy have taken place within a period of less than seventeen months (490 days)? And what comfort would it have brought to Daniel and his people to be told that only a year and a half after the termination of the Babylonian Captivity, their city would be destroyed again? And, finally, where in the history of this period can a destruction of the city and sanctuary be seen? Comparative chronology, therefore, makes it *probable* that sevens of *years*, rather than sevens of *days*, is to be understood by the word שְׁבִיעִי in this prophecy.

THE CONTEXT OF BIBLICAL PROPHECY

Turning first to Dan 7:25, we read of the coming of a wicked person who "will speak out against the Most High . . . and he will intend to make alterations in times and in law; and they will be given into his hand for a time, times, and half a time." Our purpose here is not to discuss the identity of this person but to determine the meaning of the phrase, "a time, times, and half a time," which appears not only here, but also in Dan 12:7 and Rev 12:14.

It is in Revelation 12 that we discover the clear interpretation of that phrase. The fourteenth verse reads as follows: "The two wings of the great eagle were given to the woman, in order that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she was nourished for a time and times and half a time." Comparing this with v 6, we read: "And the woman fled into the wilderness where she had a place prepared by God, so that there she might be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days." This same period of tribulation is mentioned also in Rev 11:3 as being 1260 days in length, while in 11:2 and 13:5 it is given as 42 months. It is, of course, a matter of simple arithmetic to demonstrate that 1260 days is equivalent to 42 thirty-day months, or approximately three and a half years. This proves conclusively that the phrase "time and times and half a time" in biblical prophecy means three and a half years, or, in other words, "a year and two years and half a year."

It goes without saying that this particular time period, which is mentioned in seven different texts, in three different ways, and in two different books, must play a tremendously important part in biblical prophecy. With this in mind, let us turn once again to Daniel's

Seventy Weeks prophecy. The last part of Dan 9:26 speaks of a person who will bring great destruction to the land and people of Israel, especially with regard to Jerusalem and its Temple. Carrying this thought a bit further, the prophecy goes on to explain in v 27 that "he will make a firm covenant with the many for one week, but in the middle of the week he will put a stop to sacrifice and grain offering; . . . even until a complete destruction, one that is decreed, is poured out on the one who makes desolate."

The laws of biblical interpretation demand that single verses or passages of prophecy be interpreted in the light of their immediate context, and ultimately in the light of the entire context of biblical prophecy. Applying this tried and proven principle to the passage under consideration, is it not evident that the destructive person mentioned here is the same as the one in Daniel 7 and also in Revelation? And is it not likewise evident that we have the same period of tribulation here as in the other passages, which we have shown elsewhere to be three and a half years in length? If the probability of these assumptions be admitted, then we are led to the conclusion that the word שְׁבוּעַ in Daniel's Seventy-Weeks prophecy means a period of seven years, not seven days.

Our reason for saying this is not hard to see. Dan 9:27 represents this person as making a covenant with many people that lasts for seven time-units. Then, in the midst of this period, which would correspond to the three and a half time-unit mark, he breaks the covenant and brings about a period of tribulation which lasts for the remaining three and a half time-units until "the full end, and that determined." Since the time period of tribulation in the other passages is definitely three and a half *years* in length, does it not seem reasonable to suppose that the three and a half time-units of tribulation in the prophecy are likewise *years*?

These three different converging lines of reasoning have finally brought us to the place where we can say with confidence that while the Hebrew word שְׁבוּעַ, meaning "unit of seven," has reference to *days* in most of its OT occurrences because of the demands of context, it has reference to *years* in the ninth chapter of Daniel, likewise because of the demands of context. A careful study of this interesting Hebrew word has thus laid for us a solid foundation upon which we may build our further study of one of the most fascinating prophecies in the entire Bible.