

## THE EZRA-NEHEMIAH CHRONOLOGY PROBLEM AND ITS EFFECT ON DANIEL'S 70 WEEKS PROPHECY

Dr Floyd Jones in his book "The Chronology of the Old Testament" discusses what could be described as a chronological nightmare that is found in the post-exile books of Ezra and Nehemiah. He writes:

It has long been recognized that the books of Ezra and Nehemiah exhibit a built-in yet distasteful quandary. The Book of Ezra begins in the 16th year of Cyrus, about 536 BC (Ezra 1:1), and the Book of Nehemiah ends around the 32nd year of a Persian king designated as "Artaxerxes" (Neh. 2:1; 13:6). As nearly all scholars identify this monarch as being Artaxerxes Longimanus [Artaxerxes I], the Book of Nehemiah is seen to close near 434 BC (his 32nd year).

Thereby these two books apparently span nearly 102 years ( $536 - 434 = 102$ ). Within them, the names "Ezra" (Neh. 12:1, cp. Ezra 1:1-2:2) and "Nehemiah" (Ezra 2:2) are found throughout beginning from the first year of Cyrus, at which time the men bearing these names are listed among the leaders returning from the Babylonian captivity with Zerubbabel, unto the end (or very nearly so, Neh. 12:36, etc.).

The "unpleasantness" produced by this is that although the context of the narrative seems to depict them as being the same two men, their ages become uncomfortably large. Being portrayed as leaders demands a minimal age of 30 in the first year of Cyrus, and when the 102 year span is added to this, **Nehemiah would have been at least 132 and Ezra, who is last mentioned in the 20th year of "Artaxerxes" (c. 445?), a minimal of 121 years ( $536 - 445 = 91 + 30$ ) by the story's end.** This is a problem for most as biblical life spans between these dates had shortened, coming in line with those of today (Ps. 90:10). The fact that the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah were originally only one volume makes this all the more troublesome...

The predicament arises from a comparison of the lists of priests and Levites returning with Zerubbabel in the first year of Cyrus as sole rex of Persia and Babylonia (536 BC, Neh. 12:1-9) with the list of priests who sealed a covenant with Nehemiah (Neh. 10:1-10). The consensus of nearly all scholarship is that this latter event of sealing the covenant took place in the 20th year of Artaxerxes (445 BC).

The correlation reveals that at least 16 and possibly as many as 20 of those who returned [in Cyrus' 1st year] with Zerubbabel in leadership positions (hence 30 and older) were still alive in the 20th year of Artaxerxes [Artaxerxes I], if indeed most scholars are correct in assigning the Nehemiah covenant to that date. If this "Artaxerxes" were Longimanus [Artaxerxes I], as is currently taught, then this generation of leaders would still have been alive 91 years ( $536 - 445 = 91$ ) after they returned to Jerusalem (p.240-241).

The only way to truly resolve this chronological nightmare is if the Artaxerxes at the end of the book of Nehemiah is a different Artaxerxes than Artaxerxes I. Could a previous Persian king before the first recognised Artaxerxes possibly be the correct Artaxerxes of Nehemiah? If so, then this has a major knock-on effect for the famous 70 weeks prophecy of Daniel 9.

Most churches interpret the beginning of the 70 weeks prophecy from the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple to the Messiah as one of the decrees of Artaxerxes I. In the case of my own church it interprets the starting decree as the one in Ezra 7:7 in Artaxerxes' 7th year. The 7th year of Artaxerxes I is believed to be 457 BC and going forward 483 years (69 x 7) from this date brings one to 27 AD when Jesus began His ministry. If this Artaxerxes is not Artaxerxes I then this decree occurred somewhat earlier than 457 BC.

The name Artaxerxes used in Ezra and Nehemiah is the Greek equivalent of Ahasuerus in the book of Esther. This is a title rather than a proper name and means "mighty king". It could be used for any Persian king in the same way that Pharaoh can be used for any Egyptian king.

A king referred to as both Ahasuerus and Artaxerxes is petitioned by the Jews' enemies to have the work in Jerusalem stopped (Ezra 4:6-7). The petition is successful and the work is stopped until the 2nd year of Darius. Only one Persian king is noted as reigning between Cyrus the Great and Darius I and that is Cambyses. Cambyses is the king accepted here as the Ahasuerus of Ezra 4:6 and also the same as Artaxerxes in the next verse. **So here, we have another king commonly accepted as Artaxerxes who was not Artaxerxes I.**

Dr Floyd Jones in his book "The Chronology of the Old Testament" makes a great case for Darius I being the Ahasereus who married Esther. He uses two details relating to the number of provinces in the empire and another detail relating to some islands showing this can only apply to Darius I, not Xerxes who most scholars believe was Esther's husband.

The first Book of Esdras recites verbatim Esther 1:1-3, the only change being that of replacing the name "Ahasuerus" with "Darius" (1 Esdras 3:1-2). This Darius is later firmly identified as Darius Hystaspis by relating that it was in the sixth year of this king's reign that the temple was completed (1 Esdras 6:5, Ezra 6:15).

While Dr Jones supports Artaxerxes I as the Artaxerxes of Nehemiah, his evidence for Darius being the Ahasereus who married Esther can be used to support the possibility of Darius I also being the Artaxerxes of Nehemiah since the titles Artaxerxes and Ahasereus are one and the same.

While not using Dr Jones evidence from Esther, Fred Coulter in his book "The Appointed Times of the Messiah" believes Darius I is the Artaxerxes of Nehemiah who became king in 522 BC.

If we calculate the date for the 7th year of Artaxerxes decree in Ezra 7 which involved the supply of gold and silver and other treasures to decorate the Temple identifying this Artaxerxes as Darius I we have a date of 515 BC - almost immediately after the Temple was completed in 6th year of Darius noted in the previous chapter in Ezra 6.

**Logically decorating the Temple would happen right after the Temple is built, NOT 60 years after with the conventional identification of Artaxerxes as Artaxerxes I.**

By identifying Artaxerxes in Ezra 7 as Artaxerxes I scholars have added an artificial gap of 60 years into this book/s. Ezra 6 has the Temple being completed in Darius I's 6th year and right after in Ezra 7 the decree to decorate the Temple happens the year after in his 7th year. It is illogical for there to be a 60 year gap here and then they decorate the Temple.

By identifying Artaxerxes in Ezra 7 as Darius I we nicely resolve the chronological problem in Nehemiah where Nehemiah and many of the same priests are there at the time of Cyrus and also at the time the wall is completed supposedly 90 years later.

Dr Floyd Jones says that some chapters are inset chapters that are flashbacks to the time of Cyrus and that Ezra and Nehemiah lived very long lives. However, this would make Nehemiah a very elderly man when he was Artaxerxes I's cupbearer. Identifying Artaxerxes in Ezra/Nehemiah as Darius I is a far more comfortable fit.

By identifying Esther's husband as Darius I and not Xerxes means that she became queen (in Ahasereus' 3rd year) the year after Darius I (in his 2nd year) allowed the Temple to be rebuilt that was completed 4 years later. The unchangeable law of the Medes and Persians worked in favour of the Jews as Darius could not rescind the Temple rebuild decree once given. Thwarted by that, the Jews' enemies then tried to use the unchangeable law of the Medes and Persians against the Jews. Since they couldn't stop the Temple they went all out to destroy the people.

If Darius I is the Artaxerxes of Nehemiah then Nehemiah hears of the state of the city and petitions Darius I in his 20th year in 502 BC to rebuild the city and the wall. Nehemiah and the Jews complete the building of the wall 10 years later. Nehemiah deals with the issue of sabbath-breaking in the last chapter of Nehemiah 13 before he completes his time as governor overseeing the completion of the city and the wall in 490 BC.

The starting point of Daniel 9's 70 weeks prophecy is a command to restore and build Jerusalem.

Daniel 9:25 says: "Know therefore and understand that from the going out of the word **to restore and build Jerusalem** to the coming of an anointed one, a prince, there shall be 7 weeks. Then for 62 weeks it shall be built again [completed] with squares and moat, but in a troubled time."

It is Jerusalem and NOT just the Temple that is specified in the starting decree. It speaks of the streets and the wall being built in troublesome times. In relation to Jerusalem and the Temple there are 4 decrees recorded in the post-Exile period noted in the Bible.

The first is Cyrus' decree in his 1st year to rebuild the Temple which Josephus confirms also included rebuilding Jerusalem as stated in Isaiah's prophecy about Cyrus and this is dated to 539 BC.

The second is Darius I's decree in his 2nd year to complete the Temple dated to 520 BC which saw its completion a few years later in 516 BC. This one is only related to the Temple, not to Jerusalem.

The third is the decree commonly identified with Artaxerxes I in his 7th year in 457 BC. Many churches choose this one because 483 years (69 x 7) neatly fits between this one and the start of Jesus' ministry.

However, the nature of this decree was only to beautify the Temple (Ezra 7:7-28). It had NOTHING to do with building either the Temple which was completed before it was given or building Jerusalem. It does not fit the criteria laid out in Daniel 9 for the starting decree.

The last decree is that in Artaxerxes' 20th year to rebuild the city and its walls. If this Artaxerxes is Darius I then the 20th year decree was given in 502 BC.

Daniel 9 says that there is a combined 69 "sevens" between the command to restore Jerusalem and the coming of Messiah. This combination is formed of two blocks of 7 "sevens" and 62 "sevens". There must be some purpose to these two groupings of 49 years (7 "sevens") and 434 years (62 "sevens").

**The only two decrees that match the criteria of Daniel 9:25 as the starting point are Cyrus' decree of 539 BC and Darius I's 20th year decree in 502 BC.**

Even going forward from the latter one in 502 BC by 483 years you come to 19 BC so there almost certainly appears to be a break or hiatus between the first 7 sevens and the remaining 62 sevens which is a rather uncomfortable thought as there is no clear scriptural indication as to when the second grouping of 62 sevens would then begin.

By using Darius I as the Artaxerxes in Ezra/Nehemiah we find that Nehemiah and company complete the job of restoring Jerusalem and Nehemiah finishes his governorship in 490 BC - exactly 49 years after Cyrus' decree initial decree to rebuild both Jerusalem and the Temple in 539 BC. This physical restoration of Jerusalem completes the 7 "sevens" of the prophecy.

Fred Coulter has a break between the two blocks of 7 and 62 "sevens" and the second block of 62 "sevens" which he believes in is about spiritual judgment, he has starting with Malachi's proclamation of the coming Messiah shortly before 400 BC. There is no definitive date for the book of Malachi. Fred Coulter favours 409 BC with the 62 "sevens" ending in 26 AD with the start of the ministry of Christ.

In closing this look into the Ezra-Nehemiah chronology problem, a brief word about Jewish chronology.

The Seder Olam was compiled by Rabbi Yose ben Halafta in the 2nd century AD and is the basis for the current Jewish chronology. The year 2000 was, according to the Jewish chronology, the year 5751 since the creation of mankind, around 210 years short of the correct Bible chronology.

The Jewish chronology misses 60 years from misunderstanding how old Terah was when he begat Abraham. The Jewish chronology reckons Terah as being 70 years old when Abraham was born. Genesis 11:26 tells us that "Terah lived 70 years and begot Abraham, Nahor and Haran." This gives the impression that Terah was 70 years old when he begat Abraham though we are plainly told in Acts 7:4 that Abraham was 75 years old when Terah died when aged 205 (Genesis 11:32). It obviously had to be one of the brothers of Abraham who born when Terah was 70 years old.

The remaining difference of around 150 years comes from shortening the Kingdom of Persia from over 200 years to a little over 50 years. The kings after Darius II are completely left out. Darius II is incorrectly noted as the king Darius who Alexander the Great defeated. The kings of the decadent phase of the Persian empire - Artaxerxes II, III and IV are all left out as well as Darius III even though we have all their royal tombs. In addition, the existing kings' reign lengths are greatly compressed.

## TIMELINE OF EZRA, NEHEMIAH AND ESTHER SYNCHRONISED

DATE	EZRA	ESTHER	NEHEMIAH	EVENT
539 BC	Ezra 1-3			Cyrus the Great's decree to rebuild the Temple and journey back to begin this work.
c. 525 BC	Ezra 4			Opposition from enemies that stopped work for several years in Cambyses' reign (529-522 BC)
520 BC	Ezra 5			Darius I's 2nd year to recommence work on the Temple
519 BC		Book of Esther		In Darius' 3rd year the Jews' enemies try to destroy the Jews. Esther becomes Darius' wife and helps prevent genocide.
516 BC	Ezra 6			Completion of Temple in Darius' 6th year
515 BC	Ezra 7-8			In Darius' 7th year the Temple is decorated with gifts of gold and silver given by Darius I, who married Esther.
502 BC			Nehemiah 1-2	Nehemiah hears of the state of the city and petitions Darius I in his 20th year to rebuild the city and the wall.
c. 500-495 BC			Nehemiah 3-5	The wall is built under continual opposition from the enemies of the Jews.
492 BC			Nehemiah 6-7	After 10 years the wall is completed in the 6th month of the year.
492 BC	Ezra 9-10		Nehemiah 8-11	Ezra reads the Law of Moses. The people confess to intermarrying pagan wives and make covenant to put them away.
492 BC			Nehemiah 12	The wall is then dedicated.
492-490 BC			Nehemiah 13	Nehemiah deals with sabbath-breaking and completes his 12 year governorship in Darius' 32nd year.

## DANIEL'S 70 WEEKS PROPHECY

**Daniel's 70 weeks prophecy in Daniel 9 breaks the 70 sevens into 3 groups:**

**7 sevens  
62 sevens  
Final seven**

**The events of Ezra-Nehemiah matches the first grouping of 7 sevens (7x7 years)**

**49 YEARS  
(539-490 BC)**

### EARLY PERSIAN KINGS AND THEIR DECREES

Cyrus the Great  
539-529 BC



Cyrus' decree in his 1st year (Ezra 1:1-3) to rebuild the Temple dated to 539 BC.

Cambyses  
529-522 BC



Darius decree in his 2nd year to complete the Temple (Ezra 6:1-12) dated to 520 BC which saw its completion a few years later in 516 BC.

Darius I  
522-486 BC



Xerxes  
486-465 BC



The decree commonly identified with Artaxerxes I in his 7th year to rebuild the Temple (Ezra 7:1-22) usually dated to 467 BC.

Artaxerxes I  
465-424 BC



The decree commonly identified with Artaxerxes I in his 20th year to Nehemiah to rebuild the city and its walls (Nehemiah 2:1-17). This is usually dated to 445 BC. Dr. Floyd Jones dates this 454 BC if you count the 20th year from the time that Artaxerxes I became co-regent with Darius I.

### DANIEL 9:25

Know therefore and understand that from the going out of the word to restore and build Jerusalem to the coming of an anointed one, a prince, there shall be 7 weeks. Then for 62 weeks it shall be built again [completed] with squares and moat, but in a troubled time.

Spiritual restoration? (62 x 7 years = 434 years): 409 BC (Time of Malachi) to 26 AD (Jesus ministry)