The Decree to Rebuild Jerusalem - Daniel Chapter 9

The seventy weeks of Daniel chapter nine begin with a decree. In checking the fulfillment of the Seventy Weeks, finding such a decree is an important step.

This decree – as a time marker – may allow us to pinpoint it to a date in time. *“25 from the issuing of a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince there will be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks. .”*

Regrettably, there are no ancient Persian records that preserve anything like the decree we are looking for, much less a date. Fortunately, the writers of the Scriptures preserved this information for future generations. But this introduces a new problem – we have more than one decree in the Bible.

So our new problem is to first determine which decree fits the needs of Daniel 9:25 and how we can date it so as to begin the Seventy Weeks in a calendar.

How were these multiple decrees evaluated down to one candidate for the prophecy?

**Persian Royal Decrees**

Ezra 1:1-4

Ezra 5:3-7

Ezra 7:11-16

Nehemiah 2:1-8

**Ezra 1:1 – from Cyrus**

*“Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, . . . he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying:   2 "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, `The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and He has appointed me* ***to build Him a house in Jerusalem,*** *which is in Judah.   3 . . . Let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah* ***and rebuild the house of the LORD****, the God of Israel; . . .   4. . .* ***let the men of that place support him with silver and gold, with goods and cattle, together with a freewill offering for the house of God*** *which is in Jerusalem.' "*

While this decree has the benefit of being identified as the decree prompted by God to Cyrus, it does not contain any authorization to rebuild the city, merely the temple edifice and foundations.

Now some will argue that you can’t build a temple without a city being built at the same time. But this is not a necessary conclusion from the way affairs were conducted in ancient times, even though it makes sense to us two and a half millennia later. There are reasons why Cyrus may have left off allowing the Jews to build a fortified city at this point in time.

**Ezra 5:3-7 – Re-affirmation from Darius**

*“At that time Tattenai, the governor of the province . . .came to them and spoke to them thus, "Who issued you a decree to rebuild this temple and to finish this structure?"   4 Then we told them accordingly . . .*

 *5 But the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them until a report could come to Darius, and then a written reply be returned concerning it.   6 This is the copy of the letter . . "To Darius the king, all peace.   8 "Let it be known to the king that we have gone to the province of Judah, to the house of the great God, which is being built with huge stones, and beams are being laid in the walls; and this work is going on with great care and is succeeding in their hands.   9 "Then we asked those elders and said to them thus, `Who issued you a decree to rebuild this temple and to finish this structure?' . . 11 "Thus they answered us, saying, . . 13 . . . in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, King Cyrus issued a decree to rebuild this house of God.”*

In these records we therefore find that locals are later complaining to Darius about the substantial work done on the temple and do not mention anything about city constructions, gates or walls. Darius issues a confirmation that the locals are to leave this work on the temple alone and support it both materially and financially (Ezra 6:7ff).

**Ezra 7:11-16 – Re-affirmation from Artaxerxes**

Here we find an account of Ezra summarizing events that reach back into chapter 6, as to how he gained additional permission across the reigns of Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes to take people and supplies to Jerusalem to finish the work on the temple. Here in chapter 7 he cites the decree of Artaxerxes which was the last of the royal confirmations allowing them to finish the temple in Jerusalem:

*11 Now this is the copy of the decree which King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe, learned in the words of the commandments of the LORD and His statutes to Israel:   12 "Artaxerxes, king of kings, to Ezra the priest, the . . .   13 I have issued a decree that any of the people of Israel and their priests and the Levites in my kingdom who are willing to go to Jerusalem, may go with you.  . . 16 with all the silver and gold which you find in the whole province of Babylon, along with the freewill offering of the people and of the priests, who offered willingly* ***for the house of their God which is in Jerusalem****;   17 with this money, therefore, you shall diligently buy bulls, rams and lambs, with their grain offerings and their drink offerings* ***and offer them on the altar of the house of your God which is in Jerusalem****.   . .*

*19 "Also the utensils which are given to you* ***for the service of the house of your God,*** *deliver in full before the God of Jerusalem.   20 "****The rest of the needs for the house of your God,*** *for which you may have occasion to provide, provide for it from the royal treasury.   21 "I, even I, King Artaxerxes, issue a decree to all the treasurers . . let it be done* ***with zeal for the house of the God of heaven****, so that there will not be wrath against the kingdom of the king and his sons. . . 27 Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart,* ***to adorn the house of the LORD*** *which is in Jerusalem,*

As you can see, this last decree also limits itself to the work on the temple and more to its dedication, but does not mention restoring the city.

But the most effective argument is that the city had not been rebuilt as late as the time of Nehemiah and this later Persian king Artaxerxes, since Nehemiah finds the city in utter ruins when returning under a decree from that king. Whatever our inferences might be in modern times as to what must have been understood for the city, work on it had not been understood by the returning exiles and leaders, and the city itself remained a subject for a later decree.

**Further Problems with the Termination of the Decree of Cyrus**

The other chief argument against these prior decrees is their assumed dates. Even if we stay at the level of the year involved Ezra 1:1 is very near if not within the year 539 B.C. 483 years forward brings us only to 56 B.C. several decades before the birth of Christ, which cannot serve the needs of Daniel’s prophecy.

We must also take into account that we must convert the duration time of 483 years from Jewish lunar years to Julian solar years so the correct time span can be counted between the two end points which are designated in B.C./A.D. This then converts the 483 years duration in Daniel to approximately 476.057 solar years, giving us a termination in 62 B.C. rather than in 56, making it’s termination date even worse.

Now it is true that the succeeding decrees above have termination points later so as to be within the life of Christ and therefore appear to be candidates, but we must remember that they are not separate decrees to that of Cyrus, but are re-affirmations of Cyrus’s initial decree. So they fail in not mentioning the restoration of the city

**Nehemiah 2:1-8 – from Artaxerxes Concerning the City**

This then is the only decree of all contained in Scripture that specifically mentions the city. Obviously, if the city was implied in prior decrees, why the need to this one? And of course this is explained in Nehemiah’s concern on occasion of the report from Jerusalem, despite to success of the temple’s reconstruction:

*2 So the king said to me, "Why is your face sad though you are not sick? . . .   3 I said to the king, . . . Why should my face not be sad when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies desolate and its gates have been consumed by fire?"*

We then see the king asking what can be done and Nehemiah requesting letters (a decree)

*4 Then the king said to me, "What would you request?" . . 5 I said to the king, "If it please the king, and if your servant has found favor before you, send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it." . . 7 And I said to the king, "If it please the king, let letters be given me for the governors of the provinces . . and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to* ***make beams for the gates of the fortress which is by the temple****, for the wall of the city and for the house to which I will go."* ***And the king granted them to me b****ecause the good hand of my God was on me. . . .*

Subsequently, we see Nehemiah returning with supplies and people and describing the conditions of a city not restored or rebuilt from the time of the Babylonian destruction:

*13 So I went out at night by the Valley Gate in the direction of the Dragon's Well and on to the Refuse Gate, inspecting* ***the walls of Jerusalem which were broken down and its gates which were consumed by fire.*** *14 Then I passed on to the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool,* ***but there was no place for my mount to pass****. . . . 17 Then I said to them, "****You see the bad situation we are in, that Jerusalem is desolate and its gates burned by fire.******Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem*** *so that we will no longer be a reproach."*

If the situation remained as described by Nehemiah is describing, we are simply in no defensible position to conclude that the restoration and rebuilding of the city was included in the prior decrees.

In other words, if we hold to taking Ezra 1:1 as the assumed decree, we will be scratching our heads to understand why things are as they are reported so much later in Nehemiah – untouched and as they were for decades.

We are safe then to properly conclude that Nehemiah 2:1-8 is the one and only decree fitting the needs of Daniel.

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