

THE שָׁבָעִים OF DAN 9:24-27—“WEEKS,” “SEVENS,” OR “WEEKS OF YEARS?”

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Abstract:

In Dan 9:24, the word שָׁבָעִים (plural of שָׁבוּעַ) has been variously translated as “weeks,” “sevens,” or “weeks of years,” various schools of interpretation generally preferring though rarely requiring one translation or the other for support. In terms of its root relationships and nominal pattern, it is clear that the singular word has the basic meaning of a unit of seven. On the other hand, it is never used in such a way that there is any doubt about what elements comprise the unit. This fact goes against the suggestion that שָׁבָעִים should here be translated as “sevens.” In all previous instances in Biblical Hebrew, שָׁבוּעַ means a week of days. However, the distinctive use of the masculine plural form in Dan 9:24 suggests that a different nuance may be present here. The chiasmus between vss. 2 and 24 and the background of both verses in the cycle of annual sabbaths confirm that weeks of years are here in view. Suggestions are made as to how best to translate שָׁבָעִים since the expression “of years” is not found in the original.

Key Words: Biblical Studies, Biblical interpretation, Sabbatical years, Sabbath

Introduction

In Dan 9:24, the word שָׁבָעִים (plural of שָׁבוּעַ) has been variously translated as “weeks,”¹ “sevens,”² or “weeks of years.”³ Many different ways of reading Dan 9:24-27 have been proposed; so many that the history of its interpretation has been famously called “the dismal swamp of OT criticism.”⁴

There are correlations between the preferred translations of שָׁבָעִים and different categories of preferred interpretive options for the passage as a whole. Few interpreters apply the prediction to a period of 490 literal days.⁵ However, historicist interpreters have

¹So the KJV, NEB, NJB, and *Young’s Literal Translation*.

²So the NIV. The NASB has “weeks” in its main text but “units of sevens” in the margin. Berkeley has “weeks” in the main text but “sevens” in a footnote.

³So the RSV, Moffatt, and the Amplified Bible. The Jerusalem Bible has “weeks of years” in a footnote, and the NJPS has “viz. of years” in a footnote.

⁴James A. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1927), 400.

⁵Gerhard F. Hasel cites just two interpreters: C. Wieseler, *Die 70 Wochen und die 63 Jahrwochen des Propheten Daniel* (Göttlingen, 1839); J. Sladen, *The Seventy Weeks of Daniel’s Prophecy* (mimeographed; London, 1925). See Gerhard F. Hasel, “Interpretations of the Chronology of the Seventy Weeks”, in *The Seventy Weeks, Leviticus, and the Nature of Prophecy*, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, vol. 3, ed. Frank B. Holbrook, (Washington, DC: Biblical Research Institute, 1986), 6, fn. 9.

traditionally applied the so-called “year-day principle” to Daniel’s visions. According to this principle, each day in the prediction corresponds to a year of actual fulfilment. These interpreters may prefer to retain the translation “weeks,” so that the traditional Historical-Messianic interpretation of Dan 9:24-27 becomes a prime example of this principle at work.⁶ Interpreters who see no historically exact fulfilment of the time periods may prefer the flexibility afforded by the translation “sevens.”⁷ Interpreters who want to read the time period literally and to apply it exactly would naturally prefer the translation “weeks of years.”

These correlations exist, but they are not all necessary ones. Some historicists do not believe that the year-day principle should be applied to a passage as devoid of visionary symbolism as Dan 9:24-27. They then interpret the שָׁבָעִים as weeks of years.⁸ If schematisation is present in the passage, the meaning of שָׁבָעִים may be specific, without entailing a technically precise chronology.⁹ “Sevens” could be “seven of years” as much as “sevens” of anything else, especially if “sevens of years” fit the chronology proposed.

The proponents of the different interpretive options need to stand back from their interpretations long enough to undertake an objective assessment of the actual linguistic evidence for the best translation of the word שָׁבָעִים in Dan 9:24.

On the interpretation of the time period as a period of 490 years as early as Qumran and the rabbinic period, see Brempong Owusu-Antwi, *The Chronology of Daniel 9:24-27*, Adventist Theological Society Dissertation Series, vol. 2 (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Theological Society, 1995), 118-121.

⁶Most notably Owusu-Antwi, 106-11; but note also Zdravko Stefanovic, *Daniel: Wisdom of the Wise—Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Nampa, ID; Oshawa, Ontario: Pacific, 2007), 354; and William H. Shea, *Daniel: A Reader’s Guide*, (Nampa, ID; Oshawa, Ontario: Pacific, 2005), 75, 76. John Bernard Taylor gives no indication that he is an historicist, but speaks of the symbolism of “a day for each year” found in Ezek 4:5, 6, also being found in Dan 9:24. See John B. Taylor, *Ezekiel: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (London: Tyndale, 1969), 78.

⁷So from very different perspectives, H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Daniel* (Columbus, OH: Wartburg, 1949), 409, 421-429; John E. Goldingay, *Daniel*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 30 (Dallas, TX: Word, 1989), 226, 266-268.

⁸E.g., F. D. Nichol, ed., *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1977), 4:851.

⁹A classic instance of schematization is found in Matt 1:1-17, where three consecutive periods of fourteen generations are presented as going from Abraham to David, from David to the deportation to Babylon, and from the deportation from Babylon to Christ. This threefold division of fourteens is maintained only by omitting a number of generations from the second period.

This essay accepts James Barr's seminal insights into the so-called "root fallacy," according to which the later use of a word is interpreted primarily according to its etymology.¹⁰ At the same time, it accepts that etymology gives insight into the use of a word at one point of time. It also accepts the insights of relevance theory as to how new uses of a word may arise as the need arises.¹¹

The Relationship between שבעים and שבוע

It is a commonplace observation that most Hebrew words are built on trilateral consonantal roots. It is also a commonplace observation that classical Hebrew works with a far more limited vocabulary than English, but provides for a variety of nuances through the application of varied nominal and verbal patterns to the same or identical stems. There may be a conceptual link in English between the word "week" and the number "seven," but there is certainly no linguistic link. On the other hand, no one doubts that there is a linguistic relationship in Hebrew between the words שבע (the cardinal number "seven") and שבוע. It is the exact nature of the relationship that is debated.

In opposition to the translation of שבעים as "sevens", it is sometimes argued that שבוע is not derived from שבע/שבעה. Instead, both words are said to come from a common root.¹² This position reflects the reticence of some grammarians to speak of any Hebrew form being derived from another, because of the unintended hierarchies that may be implied.¹³ On the other hand, other contemporary grammarians speak freely of deverbalized nouns and denominated verbs.¹⁴ Adherents to this model readily continue to subscribe to a model in

¹⁰James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961).

¹¹E.g., see Gene L. Green, "Lexical Pragmatics and Biblical Interpretation," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50 (2007): 799-812; and Karen H. Jobes, "Relevance Theory and the Translation of Scripture," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50 (2007): 773-797.

¹²Oswu-Antwi, 92, citing Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Hebrew Masculine Plural for Weeks in the Expression 'Seventy Weeks' in Daniel 9:24, *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 31 (1993): 109.

¹³For example, Waltke and O'Connor object to speaking of the *Qal* as the stem from which all other stems are derived, since the *Qal* in fact stands in the same relationship to the system as a whole as any other stem. See Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, ID: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 351, 352.

¹⁴E.g., Paul Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, trans. & rev. T. Muraoka, repr. of 1st ed., with corrections, *Subsidia Biblica* 14 in 2 vols. (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1993), 1:111.

which שְׁבוּעַ is said to be a denominated abstraction of שֶׁבַע.¹⁵ In neither model is anything implied at all about the historical development of the language. Each model has strengths and weaknesses, each is merely a way of organising the material, and each is somewhat arbitrary. The adoption or rejection of either model has no implications for the translation of שָׁבָעִים in Dan 9:24.

Frank Hardy notes that the consonants שְׁבָעִים in Dan 9:24 could be repointed as שְׁבָעִים (the plural of שֶׁבַע) rather than as שָׁבָעִים. On the other hand, in the Hebrew idiom the plural of שֶׁבַע would denote “seventy” rather than “sevens”, leading to the expression “seventy seventies” rather than “seventy sevens”.¹⁶ Hardy also notes that in Dan 9:27 the plene spelling of the singular שְׁבוּעַ is used twice. This spelling is based on the consonants שְׁבוּעַ rather than שֶׁבַע, so that irrespective of vowel pointing, “the only possible interpretation there is ‘week.’”¹⁷ He concludes that to be consistent שָׁבָעִים in Dan 9:24 must also mean “weeks.”¹⁸

Hardy’s argument is a red herring, since he cites no advocate of the translation of שְׁבָעִים as “sevens” who proposes it be repointed as שָׁבָעִים. The semantic range of a word in one language cannot automatically be equated with the semantic range of a word in another. In English the word “seven” does not always function as a cardinal number; it can alternatively function as a noun denoting “anything representing, represented by, or consisting of seven units.”¹⁹ There are no grounds for insisting that the same Hebrew form be used for both English meanings. The question is instead whether the nominal patterns found in שֶׁבַע, שְׁבוּעַ, and שָׁבָעִים might be suggestive of such a difference in meaning.

The word שְׁבוּעַ exhibits the standard form of a segholate noun. On the other hand, “šāḇu‘a is primary noun of the *qatul/qatûl* formation.”²⁰ *Qatul* nouns are typically understood as the equivalent of Qal passive participle forms.²¹ E. J. Young has proposed

¹⁵E.g., E. Otto, “שֶׁבַע,” *TDOT* 14:341.

¹⁶Frank W. Hardy, “The Hebrew Singular for ‘Week’ in the expression ‘One Week’ in Daniel 9:27,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 32 (1994): 199.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 198.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 199.

¹⁹*Collins English Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (1991), s.v., “seven.”

²⁰Owusu-Antwi, 92.

²¹Waltke and O’Connor, 88.

that שבעים has the meaning of “besevened.”²² It is true that no grammarian or lexicon explicitly supports this proposal.²³ None is likely to, since there appear to be no examples in Hebrew or cognate languages of a verbal form of שבע denoting the action of grouping into sevens. However, the force of Young’s argument is not thereby diminished. A word for the action of “sevening” would be rare in just about any language.

Of course the meaning of שבעים cannot ultimately be determined by root relationships or by its nominal pattern; it must ultimately be determined by its actual use.

The Use of שבעים in the Old Testament

Outside of Dan 9 and 10, forms of שבע are consistently used in the Old Testament to denote a literal week or literal weeks.²⁴ The presence of an unprecedented nuance in a particular passage cannot be ruled out *a priori* for any word; otherwise language could never grow and develop as it does. However, the burden of proof must lie with those interpreters who see something new.

That something new may indeed be present in Dan 9:24 is suggested by its unprecedented use of a *masculine* plural form of שבע. In all previous instances in the Old Testament, the plural form is consistently feminine. Gerhard Hasel cites a number of instances of non-animate plural nouns with both masculine and feminine forms, where the masculine form underscores the unity of the noun while the feminine form underscores its disunity or separateness. He then proposes that in Dan 9 the use of שבעים rather than of

²²Edward J. Young, *The Prophecy of Daniel: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949), 195.

²³So Hasel, “Hebrew Masculine Plural for Weeks,” 107, n. 1.

²⁴Notice uses of the singular in Gen 29:27, 28; the dual in Lev 12:5; and the feminine plural in Exod 34:22; Num 28:26; Deut 16:9, 10, 16; 2 Chron 8:13; Jer 5:24. For a convenient visual summary of these texts, see the table in Owusu-Antwi, 94. Owusu-Antwi, 93, notes that the two uses of שבע in Gen 29:27, 28, have been taken as referring to years by A. J. Ferris, *Daniel’s Seventieth Week or the Years 1951 to 1958 in Prophetic Chronology* (London: Ferris, 1951), 31; M. R. DeHaan, *Daniel the Prophet* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1947), 254; and Robert M. Gurney, *God in Control* (Worthing: H. E. Walter, 1980), 100. However, he convincingly argues that the seven days of bridal festivities for Leah are in view, rather than seven years of subsequent labour for Rachel. See Owusu-Antwi, 93-96. Ezekiel 45:21 appears to use the feminine plural construct, שבעות, but refers to a period of just seven days. There may be text critical problems here. Certainly, “its problematic nature seems to count out its usefulness as an argument towards the definition of *šābu’im* in Dan 9:24-27.” Owusu-Antwi, 98.

שָׁבָעוֹת in Dan 9 points to the unity of the time period.²⁵ Hasel makes a good case for his theory as one explanation for plural gender doublets. However, it is not an adequate coverall theory for the phenomenon.²⁶ Like gender doublets in the singular,²⁷ gender doublets in the plural may denote nothing more specific than that something different to the norm is happening. In discussing the possible contrasts in meaning between שָׁבָעִים and שָׁבָעוֹת, Hasel cites no instance where שָׁבָעוֹת denotes a disunity or sepateness. In and of itself, the use of the masculine plural שָׁבָעִים does not indicate that anything other than standard weeks are in view. However, it may reinforce the significance of any other evidence that may point in that direction.²⁸

Jacques Doukhan notes that the expression שָׁבָעִים שָׁנָה (“seventy years”) in Dan 9:2 forms a chiasmus with שָׁבָעִים שָׁבָעִים (“seventy שָׁבָעִים”) in vs. 24. “This chiasmus elucidates the

²⁵Hasel, “Hebrew Masculine Plural for Weeks,” 107-120.

²⁶In the KJV, Isa 51:9 reads, “Awake as in the ancient days, as in the generations of old.” Both יוֹם (“day”) and דּוֹר (“generation”) have masculine and feminine plural forms. Here a masculine plural form of the first is used and a feminine plural form of the second. See *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, ed. E. Kautzsch, trans. A. E. Cowley, 2nd English ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910), 243. By Hasel’s proposal, the meaning would be that God is to awake “as in the ancient days”, a single block without any break along the way; “as in the generations of old”, a cluster of generations with gaps along the way. It would make sense to see the larger time segments as unbroken and the smaller ones as broken. It makes no sense to see matters the other way around.

²⁷Waltke and O’Connor, 102.

²⁸Daniel 10:2, 3, uses the word שָׁבָעִים with reference to seven-day weeks. However, in both instances it is immediately qualified by the appositional noun, יָמִים, “days”. The primary meaning is undoubtedly that of three full weeks, i.e., a period that is reckoned inclusively rather than exclusively. See the table in Owusu-Antwi, 99, citing instances of such pleonastic use of יָמִים in Gen 29:14; 41:1; Num 11:20; Deut 21:13; 2 Sam 13:23; 14:28; 2 Kgs 15:13; and Jer 28:3, 11. Nevertheless, the appositions in Dan 10:2, 3, remain instances of the genitive of material. See Ronald J. Williams, *Hebrew Syntax: An Outline*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1976), §68. With a concept of “sevenness” inherit in שָׁבָעִים, it is clear that weeks of literal days are also in view. The use of שָׁבָעִים instead of שָׁבָעוֹת in Dan 10:2, 3, may emphasize the continuity between the chapters of the basic meaning of a unity of seven, while the use of שָׁבָעוֹת יָמִים may emphasize a different time scale, as well as the “fullness” of the time period involved. On this double purpose of the use of שָׁבָעִים and שָׁבָעוֹת in Dan 10:2, 3, see Jacques B. Doukhan, *Daniel: The Vision of the End*, rev. ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1989), 34.

nature of the weeks; as *šib'im* is equivalent to *šib'im*, so *šābu' im* is equivalent to *šānāh*.²⁹ The chiasmus is formed by placing שבעים before שבעים in reverse of the normal order of numeral followed by noun. Special emphasis is thus placed on שבעים,³⁰ and on its continuity with and contrast to שנה.

A parallel is drawn in Exod 34:10-12 between the seven-year cycle of sowing and rest for the land and the seven-day cycle of work and rest for human beings. This parallel is immediately suggestive of weeks of years that correspond to weeks of days,³¹ and is implicitly brought into the context of Dan 9:2 via the affirmation that during the seventy years the land fulfilled the Sabbath rests that it had missed (2 Chron 36:21; cf. Lev 26:34, 35). In confirmation of this position, the period of seventy שבעים in Dan 9:24 forms an obvious counterpart to the period of seventy annual Sabbaths compensated by the seventy years of desolation in Dan 9:2.³²

Against such a reading, Owusu-Antwi notes that there “is no intimation that the land will be resting during the ‘seventy weeks.’”³³ This is an instance of special pleading. The whole point of the new set of seventy שבעים is not that the land will rest the whole time as in the seventy years, but that Israel will not transgress the sabbatical years as in the previous four hundred and ninety years. It is a truism that Dan 9:24-27 does not use the expression “sabbath years.”³⁴ However, such reasoning negates the power of allusion, as if only exact quotation were authoritative. Daniel 9:24 could simply have referred to a period of 490 days rather than to seventy, if no such allusion were intended.

²⁹Doukhan, 34.

³⁰Hasel, “Interpretations of Chronology,” 11.

³¹Ibid.

³²For an acknowledgment from an historicist perspective of the significance of the cycle of sabbatical years in interpreting the seventy שבעים, see Jacques B. Doukhan, “The Seventy Weeks of Dan 9: An Exegetical Study,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 17 (1979): 1-22.

³³Owusu-Antwi, 92.

³⁴Ibid.

Conclusion

How then should the word שָׁבָעִים in Dan 9:24 be translated? In terms of its root relationships and nominal pattern, it is clear that the word שָׁבָעִים has the basic meaning of a unit of seven. On the other hand, it is never used in such a way that there is any doubt about what elements comprise the unit. This fact goes against the suggestion that שָׁבָעִים should here be translated as “sevens.”

In all previous instances in Biblical Hebrew, שָׁבוּעַ means a week of days. However, the distinctive use of the masculine plural form in Dan 9:24 suggests that a different nuance may be present here. The chiasmus between vss. 2 and 24 and the background of both verses in the cycle of annual sabbaths confirm that weeks of years are here in view. The word שָׁבָעִים in Dan 9:24 clearly denotes weeks of years. However, the text does not actually say “of years.” This subtlety should probably be reflected in translation. In English translations, the word “years” in vs. 2 and “weeks” in vs. 24 could be italicized to reflect the link between them. The word “weeks” in vss. 24-26 could be placed in quotation marks here and in the following verses, to reflect the fact that a different nuance is suggested by the distinctive use of the masculine plural form. The cycle of sabbatical years could be brought into play by citing Exod 34:10-12; 2 Chron 36:21; and Lev 26:34, 35 in footnotes or marginal references for Dan 9:2. Contemporary readers can then be led along the same pathway that would have led original readers to see that weeks of years are here in view, without having the conclusion forced up.