

# The 390 and Forty Day Time Periods of Ezek 4:5, 6, and 9

Copyright (c) 2010 by Frank W. Hardy, Ph.D.

## Introduction

The traditional use of Ezek 4 among Seventh-day Adventists has been to show that the forty days/years of vs. 6, together with the forty years/days of Lev 14:34, demonstrate the validity of the year-day principle by which a prophetic day stands for a literal year. Here our attention is focused primarily, though not exclusively, on the other time period in the chapter--the 390 days/years of vss. 5 and 9.

Ezekiel is a difficult book. The problems in this case are such that some have abandoned all hope of making historical or chronological sense out of the details of the present narrative. C. F. Keil, for example, states,

These numbers, however, cannot be satisfactorily explained from a chronological point of view, whether they be referred to the time during which Israel and Judah sinned, and heaped upon themselves guilt which was to be punished, or to the time during which they were to atone, or suffer punishment for their sins.<sup>1</sup>

It is correct, as Keil says, that so long as we insist on applying the periods in question either to Israel's sin alone or to its punishment alone no chronological solution is forthcoming. When the two are combined there is a chronological solution but we are left asking why Ezekiel should deal with the history of the northern kingdom so long after the fall of Samaria. In all of this there is a missing dimension. Both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah had in common a covenant relationship with one God. The prophecy is not given exclusively from Israel's point of view, or from Judah's point of view, or Ezekiel's point of view. That is not its orientation. It is given in part from the above but in part from God's own point of view. God's role in what happens must be taken into account. When the implications of this fact are acknowledged a cohesive set of historical reminiscences does indeed emerge from the prophet's vivid enactment.

The benefit that follows from taking the numbers in Ezek 4 seriously is not confined to Ezek 4 or to the rest of Ezekiel. It extends to other books. For example, the problems associated with dating Jeroboam's apostasy after the death of Solomon are clarified by reference to Ezek 4. Apart from this there is a good deal of theological insight to be gained from our study. And a basis is provided for evaluating some well known principles of prophetic interpretation. The prophecy before us is not one that we can afford to ignore or take lightly.

## The Year-Day Principle

We begin with the principle of year-day time symbolism on which the present prophecy is based. In light of the fact that God clearly says, "I have assigned you the same number of

days as the years of their sin" (Ezek 4:5), it would be hard to deny that a day is being used here to represent a year. Anyone who comments on Ezek 4 must take this obvious equation into account. John B. Taylor, Episcopal bishop of St. Albans in England, meets the issue simply and directly.

The number of years represented by the 390 days for Israel and the 40 days for Judah presents problems both of the text and of its interpretation. That it is reckoned on the basis of *a day for each year* is straightforward and needs little comment. The same symbolism is found in Numbers 14:34; Daniel 9:24ff.<sup>2</sup>

Because of the importance that the year-day principle has had for Seventh-day Adventists I will spend more time on it than Taylor does, keeping in mind all the while that this is an introduction to the paper's topic and not the topic itself.

### The broad scope of year-day symbolism

William H. Shea, in his book, *Selected Studies on Prophetic Interpretation*,<sup>3</sup> points out that, far from being confined to such passages as Ezek 4:5, 6, and 9; Num 14:34; and Dan 9:24-27, the year-day symbolism they contain reflects a broad undercurrent of Hebrew thought. Days stand for years, and years also stand for days, in a variety of Hebrew literary genres--including historical narratives, poetry, legal documents, and prophecy. It is a recurring and pervasive motif.

*Historical narratives.* As regards historical narratives, "days" can refer to events repeated annually (Exod 13:10; Judg 11:40; 1 Sam 1:21; 2:19; 20:6), to the period of a single year (Num 9:22; 1 Sam 27:7), or to an individual's life span (Gen 6:3; 47:9; 1 Kgs 1:1).

The formula that is repeated ten times over for the antediluvian patriarchs listed there [in Gen 5] is: "X lived so many years and begat Y. And X lived so many years after he begat Y and begat sons and daughters. And all the *days* of X were so many *years*, and he died."<sup>4</sup>

*Poetry.* As regards Old Testament poetry, in which one idea is commonly stated twice with different but equivalent words, consider Deut 32:7; Job 10:5; 15:20; 32:7; 36:11; Ps 77:5; 90:9-10. Two examples are quoted below.

"Are your **days** like those of a mortal  
or your **years** like those of a man, . . ."  
(Job 10:5)

All our **days** pass away under your wrath;  
we finish our **years** with a moan. (Ps 90:9-10)

*Legal documents.* Two of the most prominent and widely known laws in the Mosaic corpus rely crucially on year-day symbolism and cannot have avoided influencing the thought of later Jewish historians, poets, and prophets. One of these was the law of the sabbatical year (Lev 25:1-7). In this case one day represents one year.

"For six years sow your fields, and for six years prune your vineyards and gather their crops. (4) But in the seventh year the land is to have a sabbath of rest, a sabbath to the Lord. Do not sow your fields or prune your vineyards. (5) Do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the grapes of your untended vines. The land is to have a year of rest." (Lev 25:3-5)

The other was the law of the jubilee (Lev 25:8-17). In this case one day represents seven years.

"Count off seven sabbaths of years—seven times seven years—so that the seven sabbaths of years amount to a period of forty-nine years. (9) Then have the trumpet sounded everywhere on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement sound the trumpet throughout your land. (10) Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants." (Lev 25:8-10)

The cycles of seven days, seven years, and seven weeks of years did not escape the notice of foreigners. Josephus quotes Julius Caesar as follows:

"Gaius Caesar, Imperator for the second time, has ruled that they shall pay a tax for the city of Jerusalem, Joppa excluded, every year except in the seventh year, which they call the sabbatical year, because in this time they neither take fruit from the trees nor do they sow."<sup>5</sup>

*Prophecy.* I now return to a fact, mentioned above, but which needs more emphasis. That fact is that the above cycles did not escape the notice of Jews either. Legislators, historians, poets, prophets, biblical writers of every description, all grew up in an intellectual environment steeped in year-day symbolism. It was something that no Jew could help taking entirely for granted.

In prophecy this use of the year-day principle is paralleled most directly by Dan 9:24-27. A different word (*šābū'aq*) is used in that prophecy, but it means the same thing that the "sabbaths" mean in Lev 25:8, that is, "weeks." The applicability of the year-day principle to the time periods of Dan 9:24-27 is especially evident, therefore, from the parallel construction of the Levitical instruction on the jubilee year. One could almost say that the time period involved in Dan 9:24-27 was modeled after the jubilee legislation.<sup>6</sup>

### The appropriateness of using year-day symbolism

Another prophecy besides that of Dan 9 which incorporates year-day symbolism is Ezek 4, discussed here. The linguistic connection between Ezek 4:6 and Num 14:34 in turn is too broad to miss.<sup>7</sup> The latter passage reads as follows:

"For forty years—one year for each of the forty days you explored the land—you will suffer for your sins and know what it is like to have me against you.' (35) I, the Lord, have spoken, and I will surely do these things to this whole wicked community, which has banded together against me. They will meet their end in this desert; here they will die" (Num 14:34-35).

Seventh-day Adventists should not be criticized for seeing how well Ezek 4:6 and Num 14:34 support their position that year-day symbolism is a legitimate exegetical tool available for use in interpreting prophecy. The criticism we deserve is not that we have used these texts but that we have confined our attention to them. Beyond lies a vast fund of other passages that should be included in the discussion as well. One of these is in the verse preceding Ezek 4:6, i.e., vs. 5.

## The 390 Day Time Period of Vss. 5 and 9

If the 390 days of Ezek 4:5 and 9 refer to a period of 390 years, as God tells Ezekiel they do in the first part of vs. 5, there is a question exactly which 390 year period they refer to. This might be considered a round number. If it is, we can stop here. But how round is 390? And why should both periods together (390 days and forty days) add up to 430? The connection here between Ezek 4:5 and Exod 12:40-41 should be noted.

Now the length of time the Israelite people lived in Egypt was 430 years. (41) At the end of the 430 years, to the very day, all the Lord's divisions left Egypt. (Exod 12:40-41)

God is trying to convey a lesson through his prophet in Ezek 4 and if we dismiss the numbers he uses to illustrate His point, we will surely miss the point He is illustrating by means of them.<sup>8</sup>

### The text of the passage

Ezekiel plays a dual role in the enacted prophecy or prophetic parable of chap. 4. On the one hand he represents God's point of view by showing hostility toward a clay map or model of Jerusalem (vss. 1-3). On the other hand he represents his people's point of view by lying first in Israel's sin on his left side for 390 days (vss. 4-5) and then in Judah's sin on his right side for an additional forty days (vss. 6-8).<sup>9</sup> The part of the illustration having to do with food (vss. 9-17) continues the second line of thought. "The people will eat rationed food in anxiety and drink rationed water in despair, . . ." (vs. 16). Here also Ezekiel stands in his oppressed people's place by undergoing tokens of discipline.

The siege of Jerusalem provides the setting for the illustration here, but more is being represented by it than the siege of Jerusalem. No siege lasts 390 years, much less 430 years. There is a question therefore when the period begins, when it ends, and what it refers to in between those two points. Answering the first two questions is not the same as answering the third.

### The historical application

Below I suggest that the 390 years begin in 929/28 B.C. with Israel's apostasy under Jeroboam,<sup>1</sup> that they represent a period of mutual estrangement between God and His people,

---

<sup>1</sup> Jeroboam counted his years from 931/30, but reigned from 929/28.

and that they end in 539 B.C. when any Jews wishing to do so are allowed by Cyrus to return home from exile.

*The period begins with an apostasy.* Ezekiel is commanded to bear sin for the 390 plus forty day period during which he must enact the above drama. From this I draw that the period has something to do with sin. God's response, which would follow as a natural consequence of Israel's sin, is included within the scope of the illustration (vs. 3). Thus, the time period includes both the sin of God's people and the response of their God. It is not confined to either set of factors in isolation.

A number of facts support the conclusion that Ezekiel's 390 days look back symbolically to the apostasy of Jeroboam. First, since all the people were caught up in the results of apostasy, all the people must have been involved in the actions leading to those results. However bad it might have been, we are not talking about the sin of a single individual but with a national apostasy--a corporate act of falling into and remaining in sin--that involves a substantial cross-section of the population. Second, because a definite time is used to describe the onset of apostasy it would be reasonable to assume that it did in fact occur at a set time rather than developing imperceptibly over decades or centuries. The nature of the prophecy does not lead us to speak in generalities about time. And third, a majority of the total period of 430 days (88%) has to do with Israel rather than Judah.

If we examine Jewish history prior to Ezekiel for (1) an apostasy that was (2) nationwide, (3) occurred at an identifiable time, and (4) involved the northern kingdom of Israel, the search need not detain us for long. After Solomon died, leaving Rehoboam as his successor, Jeroboam son of Nebat rebelled and ruled the northern tribes. After the kingdom divided in 931/30 BC, the Jeroboam's first order of business was to fortify "Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim," so he could live there (1 Kgs 12:25). The next order of business was to keep the northern tribes from worshiping in Jerusalem (vs. 28). If 930 was taken up with fortifying Shechem, 929 would be a reasonable time for him to deal with the religious needs of his subjects.

Jeroboam thought to himself, "The kingdom will now likely revert to the house of David. (27) If these people go up to offer sacrifices at the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem, they will again give their allegiance to their lord, Rehoboam king of Judah. They will kill me and return to King Rehoboam."

(28) After seeking advice, the king made two golden calves. He said to the people, "It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." (29) One he set up in Bethel, and the other in Dan. (30) And this thing became a sin; the people went even as far as Dan to worship the one there. (1 Kgs 12:25-30)

Jeroboam became the prototype of every apostate king that followed him on the throne of Israel. He is known, not merely as a king who sinned, but as one who caused all Israel to sin. Thus, of Baasha it is said that "He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, walking in the ways of Jeroboam and in his sin, which he had caused Israel to commit" (1 Kgs 15:34). Nor is the reference here to some philosophical or moral state of sinfulness. The issue God is dealing with is open and avowed apostasy. Similar statements are found in later chapters concerning Zimri (16:19), Omri (16:26), Ahab (21:22), and Ahaziah (22:52). Each in turn is compared to Jeroboam, who caused Israel to sin.

Some Israelite kings were not so wicked as others. But even reformers such as Jehu "did not turn away from the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit--the worship of the golden calves at Bethel and Dan" (2 Kgs 10:29, 31).<sup>10</sup> In the end Israel is given over to Assyria and ceases to exist as a political entity. The compiler of the narrative concludes this part of his history by reminding us one last time that,

When he [God] tore Israel away from the house of David, they made Jeroboam son of Nebat their king. Jeroboam enticed Israel away from following the Lord and caused them to commit a great sin. (2 Kgs 17:21)

If there is any single motif that runs through the entire history of Israel, as an entity separate from Judah, this is it. That is one point. Another point is that it is entirely appropriate for God to remind His people of these things through Ezekiel's enacted parable as he lies on his left side for 390 days besieging a clay representation of the other city so soon to fall for precisely the same reasons that had led to Samaria's ruin. Apostasy had destroyed Samaria and now apostasy was destroying Jerusalem. It was a connection that needed to be made. The cases of the two cities were virtually identical.

In what Ezekiel says and does God is explaining His actions toward Jerusalem. The people need to understand why God is doing what He does. There are reasons. Jerusalem is not being handed over to the Babylonians because God dislikes Jerusalem or is unable to protect its residents any longer. On the contrary, God leaves His people to their own devices because they insist on turning away from Him. The results are not arbitrary but follow naturally from the nature of the sin they have committed. What was soon to happen to Jerusalem during Ezekiel's lifetime had all happened to Samaria before. History was repeating itself. There were not two sets of reasons for these events but one set of reasons set in place on two different occasions. Jerusalem would have itself to thank for what was happening to it.<sup>11</sup>

*The period is one of estrangement.* The first part of vs. 5 says, "I have assigned you the same number of days as the years of their sin." But the sin referred to is not confined to that of the northern or southern kingdom in isolation and, whoever commits it, sin is not the only factor included in the time period. If it were, we would be left with periods of approximately 206 years from Israel's apostasy (928 B.C.) to the fall of Samaria (723/22 B.C.), 342 years from Israel's apostasy to the fall of Judah (586 B.C.), or an indefinite number of years from Judah's apostasy, which was more gradual, to the fall of Jerusalem. The 390 years do not make historical sense until the two kingdoms are combined for purposes of discussion and until their period of punishment is included along with their sin.

The two factors of sin and punishment brought together here are widely different when taken in isolation. But there is a point at which they meet that goes beyond the matter of cause and effect. Both man's sin and God's inevitable response to it reflect a state of estrangement. In either case there is separation. Sin cannot be understood meaningfully without reference to the aggrieved party. "We all, like sheep, have gone astray" (Isa 53:6)--from the good Shepherd. We have all been the prodigal son. We have left our Father and wasted His substance living as we pleased. He stands looking "a long way off" (Luke 15:20), scanning the horizon for some indication that we will come back. And whenever one of us does come back, we must say, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you." (Luke 15:21). The father in the story allowed his son to say this much. We have not just sinned; we have sinned against God.

It is not enough to appeal to the necessity for clean academic distinctions if we wish to eliminate the second part of this formula. It does not make good academic sense to mistake the half for the whole any more than it makes good practical or spiritual sense to do so. Sin is a willingness to go our own way and wound the Father's heart. It results in separation and God longs to bring it to an end. He is willing to receive us back but we must respond to His love and return. This matter of separateness is fundamental to the concept of sin and, more than any other one factor, is what makes sin so thoroughly offensive and unacceptable to God.

We do not see things as God does (Isa 55:8). It is true that God "does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else" (Acts 17:25-26). But He does have needs. He needs us.

"I have no need of a bull from your stall  
or of goats from your pens,  
(10) for every animal of the forest is mine,  
and the cattle on a thousand hills." (Ps 50:9-10)

Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with ten thousand rivers of oil?  
Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?  
(8) He has showed you, O man, what is good.  
And what does the Lord require of you?  
To act justly and to love mercy  
and to walk humbly with your God. (Mic 6:7-8)

We read the above passage from Micah and grasp the part about acting justly and loving mercy. These are things we either do, or must do, or cannot do, or whatever. But that is not where the passage ends. God goes on and asks us to walk humbly with Him. In this way He invites us to walk with Him, to be with Him, to enjoy being with Him as He enjoys being with us. There is a personal component here that must be appreciated. Sin does not take place in some abstract manner and salvation from sin is not limited to an act of self control. The sinner is not the only one involved even if no one ever learns what he has done. There is estrangement in sin. If we leave God alone, it is true that He will eventually leave us alone, but the point is that the Father longs for and values our companionship.

Making the application now to the passage under discussion, the 390 days/years of Ezek 4:5, and the forty days/years of Ezek 4:6, are a period, not of sin only or of punishment only, but of separation. They represent a time of mutual estrangement between God and His people.

*The period ends with a restoration of favor.* If I have correctly identified the nature of the above events, a reconciliation would provide the natural ending point for Ezekiel's 390 day time period. Again it would not be a reconciliation of individuals only but an event affecting a substantial cross-section of the entire nation by which God's blessings are renewed and His people accept the terms of those blessings once more. Understood from this point of view the historical application made here to the end of the period is just as prominent and obvious as the apostasy that marked its beginning. The corporate reconciliation between God and His wayward

people occurred when they were allowed to come home once more from all the places where they had been sent into exile.

"This is what the Lord says-  
 your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb:  
 I am the Lord,  
 who has made all things,  
 who alone stretched out the heavens,  
 who spread out the earth by myself, . . .  
 (27) who says to the watery deep, 'Be dry,  
     and I will dry up your streams,'  
 (28) who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd  
     and will accomplish all that I please;  
     he will say of Jerusalem, "Let it be rebuilt,"  
     and of the temple, "Let its foundations be  
         laid.'"  
 (Isa 44:24, 27-28)<sup>12</sup>

The northern ten tribes with their capital in Samaria had been defeated and exiled by Shalmaneser. "In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria captured Samaria and deported the Israelites to Assyria. He settled them in Halah, in Gozan on the Habor River and in the towns of the Medes" (2 Kgs 17:6). Halah (Assyrian Halahhu) was northeast of Ninevah and gave its name to one of the gates of that city.<sup>13</sup> The Habor River drained an area between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and flowed into the middle Euphrates. The city of Gozan (ancient Guzana), built on the Habor river, was west of Ninevah roughly midway between Ninevah to the east and Charchemish to the west. Its ruins (modern Tell Halaf) are in northern Syria.<sup>14</sup> The "towns of the Medes" would include an area in the western part of modern Iran.

Babylon ruled these same places after Assyria and when Cyrus conquered Babylon on October 12, 539 B.C. both sets of Jewish exiles came under his power in turn. In the following decree he speaks of Jerusalem rather than Samaria, but the survivors of both sieges lived side by side within his domain and would both be included without distinction when he invites them to return.

"This is what Cyrus king of Persia says:

"The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. (3) Anyone of his people among you—may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem. (4) And the people of any place where survivors may now be living are to provide him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem."<sup>15</sup> (Ezra 1:2-4)

The apostasy of Jeroboam son of Nebat marks the beginning of the 390 years of Ezek 4:5 and the return of the exiles—from both Judah and Israel—after the former's Babylonian captivity marks the end of that period. If these are the events in question, it only remains to relate them chronologically. We would expect them to be 390 years apart. And in fact they are.

## Some Chronological Matters

Below I review the available evidence for the date of Jeroboam's apostasy and for the Jews' return under Cyrus after their time in Babylonian exile.

When did Jeroboam apostatize?

There is a question exactly when the apostasy of Jeroboam occurred. The event is well known but presents a fascinating chronological puzzle. The end of Solomon's reign and therefore the beginning of his son Rehoboam's reign can be very confidently dated to 931/30 B.C., i.e., sometime between the months of Tishri in the fall of 931 B.C. and Nisan in the spring of 930 B.C.<sup>15</sup>

The armies of Cyrus, under Ugbaru, conquered Babylon on October 12, 539<sup>16</sup> and according to Ezra 1:1 the decree allowing all Jewish captives to return home was written in Cyrus' first regnal year (538/37 B.C.) (see below). Now 931/30 to 538/37 B.C. is not 390 years but 393. On the other hand, however, it is so close to 390 that the possibility of a solution along these lines cannot be merely set aside. There is something here worth looking for. So far we have approached the passage from Ezek 4 in the context of Jeroboam's apostasy. It will now be useful to approach Jeroboam's apostasy in the context of Ezek 4. Examining this relationship closely will have value for both passages.

According to 2 Chr 11:17 Jeroboam and the northern ten tribes of Israel did not rebel against Rehoboam immediately after Solomon's death. There was a short time during which the whole nation remained loyal to Rehoboam.

They strengthened the kingdom of Judah and supported Rehoboam son of Solomon three years, walking in the ways of David and Solomon during this time. (2 Chr 11:17)

The "three years" mentioned in this verse are subject to more than one interpretation and so require comment. Jeroboam might have chosen to date his reign from the break between himself and Rehoboam when he actually started to rule, thus conceding the legitimacy of Rehoboam's rule over the northern kingdom up to that time. If the "three years" ended in 931/30 B.C., the death of Solomon would have to be moved back three years earlier to 934/33 B.C. This is impossible.

If, on the other hand, Jeroboam dated his reign retroactively from the time of Solomon's death and not from his break with Rehoboam, then the three years of 2 Chr 11:17 begin in 931/30 B.C. and end later.<sup>17</sup> I here assume that 931/30 B.C. was when Rehoboam started to rule, not when Jeroboam rebelled. The people of Israel "strengthened the kingdom of Judah and supported Rehoboam son of Solomon three years" starting in 931/30 B.C. and it was during this same three years that they walked "in the ways of David and Solomon." The significance of this last clause is that for three years the northern and southern tribes all worshiped Yahweh together in Jerusalem as David and Solomon had.

The above facts create a paradox that only a careful student of ancient chronology will appreciate, i.e., that Jeroboam actually began the process of ruling during what he would come to count as his third regnal year. The beginning point for the series of regnal years that he

eventually claimed was established after the fact and this is why it extends back to Solomon's death--not because he started ruling then.

Once Jeroboam rebelled against Rehoboam he lost no time in encouraging his subjects to make the break with Jerusalem complete in every way--religiously as well as politically. Thus, the period of united worship after Solomon's death is roughly coterminous with the period of united rule. The time during which the people walked "in the ways of David and Solomon" was three years and the time during which they "strengthened the kingdom of Judah and supported Rehoboam son of Solomon" was the same three years. The date we select for Jeroboam's apostasy depends crucially on that for his rebellion. All available evidence indicates that the two are very nearly the same.

It should be noted that different systems were used in Judah and Israel respectively for counting the years of a king's reign. Rehoboam used the accession year method of dating and his regnal years began in the fall. Jeroboam did not use the accession year method and his regnal years began in the spring. But in either case when years are counted the count must be performed inclusively. Thus, three years means any part of three years or within the third year. The third year of Jeroboam, as Jeroboam would eventually count it, was 929/28 B.C. spring to spring. The same regnal year as counted by a Judean scribe would be 928/27 B.C. fall-to-fall. The two do not overlap at any point.<sup>18</sup> If we assume that the year referred to in 2 Chr 11:17 was counted in the northern manner, then the 390 years we expect to find on the basis of Ezek 4:5 would be closer to 391 years. If we assume that it was counted in the southern manner, with Jeroboam's rebellion and apostasy coming late in 928 B.C., the period is exactly correct.

Let me summarize the argument so far. Ezekiel was caused to enact a parable in which God and His people would be estranged in various ways for 390 years. The apostasy of Jeroboam occurred in 928/27 B.C. God brought His captive people from Babylonian captivity in 538/37 B.C. The difference between 928 and 538 is 390. These are the raw materials for a conclusion. The conclusion I draw from those materials is that Ezekiel's prophetic parable incorporates both Israel's historic apostasy and Judah's ongoing captivity.<sup>19</sup> The period symbolized did not end when the enactment of it ended, but several years later when Cyrus captured Babylon and permitted all the Jews within his realm who wished to do so to return to their ancestral homeland under God's renewed blessing.

When did Cyrus allow the Jewish exiles to return home?

I have stated above that the city of Babylon fell to Cyrus' general Ugbaru (Gubaru) on October 12, 539 B.C. Thus, Cyrus' accession year, if counted from Nisan in the spring, would extend from October 12, 539 to March 23, 538 B.C. and "the first year of Cyrus king of Persia" (Ezra 1:1) would begin on March 24, 538 B.C. If counted from Tishri in the fall, his accession year would extend from October 12, 539 beyond March to September 16, 538 B.C. and his year 1 would begin on September 17, 538 B.C.<sup>20</sup>

The question is, which method did Ezra use for counting "the first year of Cyrus"? I have discussed the background for this question elsewhere.<sup>21</sup> The evidence from Ezra is subject to more than one interpretation. Fortunately the evidence from Nehemiah is not; Nehemiah clearly uses a fall-to-fall calendar.<sup>22</sup> On the strength of the similarity between these closely related books it is reasonable to conclude that Ezra also used a fall-to-fall calendar. For the above

reasons I suggest that "the first year of Cyrus" (Ezra 1:1) refers to some point during the thirteen months starting with September 17, 538 and ending October 5, 537 B.C.<sup>23</sup>

Earlier it was pointed out that our choices for the third year of Jeroboam (1 Chr 11:17) are between 929/28 spring-to-spring on the one hand and 928/27 B.C. fall-to-fall on the other. The Chronicler clearly did not have a northern origin. He was from Judah. Thus, the third year of Jeroboam (1 Chr 11:17) is 928/27 B.C. fall-to-fall. And whether Ezra is or is not himself the Chronicler, he also uses the ancient fall-to-fall calendar of Judah, if we accept the parallel evidence from Nehemiah. (What would require an explanation is not accepting such evidence.) Thus, the first year of Cyrus (Ezra 1:1) is 538/37 B.C. fall-to-fall. The interval between 928/27 and 538/37 B.C. is 390 years.

We have already indicated the appropriateness of these two events (the apostasy of Israel and the return of Judah) as the starting and ending points respectively for the 390 year period that Ezekiel represents to his fellow exiles. We have established historically defensible beginning and ending points for this period (928/27 B.C. and 538/37 B.C.). We have seen that the difference between the proposed beginning and end is 390 years. I conclude that God was conveying something of historical as well spiritual worth through His prophet in Ezek 4:5 and 9. The prophecy is natural in its significance and factually accurate.

## The Forty Day Time Period of Vs. 6

So far our attention has been confined to the 390 days of Ezek 4:5. This is the most significant number in the chapter. Verse 6 must be taken in this context and yet there are some differences. According to Keil,

the number *forty* already possessed the symbolical significance of a measured period of divine visitation. This significance it had already received, not through the 40 years of the desert wandering, but through the 40 days of rain at the time of the deluge (Gen. vii.17), so that, in conformity with this, the punishment of dying in the wilderness, suspended over the rebellious race of Israel at Kadesh, is already stated at 40 years, although it included in reality only 38 years; see on Num. xiv.32 sqq. If now, however, it should be supposed that this penal sentence had contributed to the fixing of the number 40 as a symbolical number to denote a longer period of punishment, the 40 years of punishment for Judah could not yet have been viewed apart from this event.<sup>24</sup>

Counting forty years from the reforms of Josiah, begun in the eighteenth year of his reign (2 Kgs 22:3) (623/22 B.C.), takes us nine years beyond the time of Ezekiel's prophetic enactment, which began sometime between Jul 21, 592 (1:1, 2) and Sep 7, 591 B.C. (8:1).<sup>25</sup> Nothing of any significance that I know of happened in 583/82 B.C. And there is a question why we would want to count the forty years starting with an attempted reform. This is not a useful direction for further inquiry.

If we count forty years from the first attack of Nebuchadnezzar in 605 B.C., we come to 565 B.C., twenty-six years before Cyrus captured Babylon. If we count from the exile of Jehoiachin in 597 B.C., we come to 557 B.C., twenty-nine years after the fall of Jerusalem and

eighteen years before the fall of Babylon. Nothing was happening then. Considerations such as these prompt Taylor to suggest that, "The 40 years assigned to Judah's punishment is a round number and need not be taken too literally."<sup>26</sup>

All of this assumes, however, that the 390 years of vs. 5 and the forty years of vs. 6 are the main data and that they coincidentally total 430 years. In my view the total is crucial to understanding the remaining forty years. There are 390 years of estrangement between God and His people from Jeroboam to Cyrus. The total of 430 years corresponds to the earlier period of affliction in Egypt. And the forty years are reminiscent of the wilderness wanderings that immediately followed the period of Egyptian enslavement. None of these associations or national memories would be lost on the Jewish exiles who heard and saw Ezekiel do what is described in chap. 4. With them he was communicating very well. It is we who have to study these things out before we know what they mean.

## Conclusion

The 390 days of Ezek 4:5 and 9 are the main historical element in the prophecy. In introducing this first time period God links it to a specific set of events: "I have assigned you the same number of days as the years of their sin. So for 390 days you will bear the sin of the house of Israel" (vs. 5). As regards the house of Judah, on the other hand, God says merely, "'I have assigned you 40 days, a day for each year'" (vs. 6). We are left to wonder, a day for each year of what? In his prophetic enactment Ezekiel lies on his left side (facing north) during the first period and on his right side (facing south) during the second. We should not take this to mean, however, that Israel sinned for 390 years and that Judah sinned for only forty. If that were the case, which forty was it? The longer period is not confined to Israel, nor is it confined to sin. It includes Judah as well as Israel and God's response to what both groups insisted on doing as well as the actions themselves.

God is accomplishing a number of things at once in Ezek 4 and for us what He does there might not be obvious at the outset. By having the prophet lie on both sides for specified periods both kingdoms are brought within the scope of the prophecy. Both had sinned to an equal degree and in an equivalent manner. What happened to the one would happen to the other and for the same reasons. Without justifying Samaria's actions no one who grasped this point could justify those of Jerusalem. If God was fair in dealing as He did with Samaria, He was fair in dealing as He would soon have to with Jerusalem.

In addition, by allowing the time during which Ezekiel lies on both sides to total 430 days God calls to mind the earlier period of Egyptian captivity, which lasted 430 years (Exod 12:40-41).<sup>27</sup> The Egyptian captivity was followed by a time of release and renewed blessing. In the same way the Babylonian captivity was not the end for God's people but would in turn be followed by a time of release and renewed blessing.

By causing the remainder over and above 390 days to equal forty days God brings together the themes of hardship and deliverance. The exodus was a dramatic experience for those who lived through it, but beyond it was a blessing conceived on an equally large scale. Through Ezekiel God was appealing to His people's minds. He wanted them to understand His benevolent motives--the reasons for what He was about to do.

This one simple enactment, therefore, served to recall a wide variety of national memories and was rich in associations for the Jewish exiles to whom it was presented. I suggest that they understood Ezekiel's intent quite well--as well as they could while not wishing to do so.

There was nothing in the experience of the exiles who heard and saw Ezekiel's presentations that would correspond to the 390 days/years of vs. 5 alone. They would invoke no memories at present. That would come later after all the events predicted had taken place. Then the instruction given on this one occasion would be renewed to each succeeding generation who learned of it. In fact the 390 year period indicated would not come to an end for at least another fifty-three years. But the instruction it contained would remain as long as time would last. It has remained until now. In the short term, however, it was the other numbers (the forty day remainder and 430 day total) that were most instructive.

There is instruction for us in Ezek 4 as well as for later generations of Jews. The topics of sin and punishment, brought together by the nature of the time periods, are both clarified in the present context. The one indicates a willingness and the other an equally strong unwillingness to accept mutual separation. Sin involves separation and separation must always involve two parties. The 390 day period includes both, as it should. Sin does not occur in the abstract. When we sin we sin against God and both parties are hurt in the process.

Approaching Jeroboam's apostasy in the books of Kings and Chronicles in terms of Ezekiel's prophecy enables us to resolve some fascinating chronological problems associated with that earlier historical event. Jeroboam's final break with Jerusalem occurred in what he would later count as his third regnal year--three years after Solomon's death (1 Chr 11:17). And the chronology of the exiles' return under Cyrus is clarified by approaching it in the context of Jeroboam's apostasy, as portrayed in the present chapter. The "first year of Cyrus" (Ezra 1:1) is not that king's first calendar year but his first regnal year, which did not begin for Ezra's purposes until almost a year after the fall of Babylon. As an aside it should also be pointed out that Ezek 4 has a unique contribution to make in the area of Qumran studies.<sup>28</sup> There is a lot of depth in this particular prophecy--perhaps more than has been commonly realized.

NOTE: All Scripture quotations in this paper, except when noted otherwise, are from the Holy Bible, New International Version. Copyright (c) 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society.

<sup>1</sup>C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), vol. 9: *Ezekiel, Daniel*, pp. 72-73.

<sup>2</sup>Taylor, *Ezekiel: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1969), p. 78.

<sup>3</sup>Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1982), pp. 56-93.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>5</sup>R. Marcus, transl., *Antiquities*, vol. 7, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1943), 14.202; see Hardy, "Historical Overview of Dan 11:23-28," *Historicism* No. 15/ Jul 88, pp. 15-16, 46-48. <sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>7</sup>See Shea, *Selected Studies*, pp. 72-74.

<sup>8</sup>In vs. 4, where NIV has, "You are to bear their sin for the number of days you lie on your side," the Septuagint specifies the number and gives it as 150. That is for the right side. Then in vs. 5 it states that the total number (not the number for the right side) would be 190 days. Both the Hebrew and the Greek subsequently agree in vs. 6 that Ezekiel would have to lie

on his left side for forty days. So in the Greek the numbers are  $150 + 40 = 190$ . In the Hebrew, which I follow here, they are  $390 + 40 = 430$ . Note that in the Greek the number given in vs. 5 (190 days) includes the forty days of vs. 6, while in the Hebrew the number given in vs. 5 (390 days) does not include the forty days of vs. 6. So there is a question whether the two periods run concurrently (see Taylor, *Ezekiel*, pp. 79-80). Here I assume that they do not: "After you have finished this [the first 390 days], lie down again, this time on your right side, and bear the sin of the house of Judah" (Ezek 4:6).

<sup>9</sup>"The symbolism of *upon your left side* was probably helped out by the prophet's lying on the ground in an east-west direction, with his head towards Jerusalem, and facing northwards as if towards Israel while on his left side and southwards towards Judah while on his right" (Taylor, *Ezekiel*, p. 78). Thus, Ezekiel faced north as he prophesied about the northern kingdom of Israel and south as he prophesied about the southern kingdom of Judah.

<sup>10</sup>See also the remarks made concerning Jehoahaz (2 Kgs 13:2, 6), Jehoash (13:11), Jeroboam II (14:24), Zechariah (15:9), Menahem (15:18), Pekahiah (15:24), and Pekah (15:28).

<sup>11</sup>When we say that God's punishment of sin is not arbitrary that is different from saying it is not punishment or that it is not something God does. God punishes sin, but He does not do so in an arbitrary manner.

<sup>12</sup>The reference to Jerusalem in vs. 28 is problematic. Seventh-day Adventists have consistently distinguished decrees to restore and rebuild the temple in Jerusalem from decrees to restore and rebuild Jerusalem itself. One reason for maintaining this careful distinction is that the latter marks the beginning of the seventy weeks prophecy of Dan 9, and with it the 2300 day prophecy of Dan 8. So the question for any Seventh-day Adventist expositor of Isa 44:28 is whether Cyrus also issued a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem or if Artaxerxes was the only one to do so (Ezra 7:12-26; see Hardy, "The Chronology of Ezra 4," *Historicism* No. 10/Apr 87, pp. 18-41, esp. p. 25). Our answer must take into account the fact that the two clauses, ""he will say of Jerusalem, 'Let it be rebuilt,' and of the temple, 'Let its foundations be laid'" (Isa 44:28), represent a poetic parallel. Thus, unless we say they have opposite meanings we must conclude that their meanings were seen as being substantially identical. The two clauses must be allowed to interpret each other. Restoring the temple within Jerusalem does truly constitute an act of restoration, but does not imply that the whole city could be rebuilt—walls included. What part of "Jerusalem" would Cyrus permit the Jews to restore? The temple. Where was "the temple" whose foundations Cyrus would lay? In Jerusalem. Cyrus did not allow the Jews to rebuild the walls around the city, but only the temple, and the above passage from Isaiah does not say or imply anything more than this.

<sup>13</sup>New Bible Dictionary, 2nd ed. (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1982), s.v. "Halah."

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., s.v. "Gozan."

<sup>15</sup>See Edwin R. Thiele, *A Chronology of the Hebrew Kings* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), pp. 23-32.

<sup>16</sup>Shea, "An Unrecognized Vassal King of Babylon in the Early Achaemenid Period," part 3, *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 10 (1972): 112.

<sup>17</sup>In a similar manner Pekah would later date his reign retroactively from the time of Zechariah's death (son of Jeroboam II), thus ignoring the reigns of Shallum, Menachem, and Pekahiah (2 Kgs 15:8, 27) and producing an unusually difficult set of problems for later students of these events (see Edwin R. Thiele, *A Chronology of the Hebrew Kings* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), pp. 46-51; Siegfried H. Horn, "The Chronology of King Hezekiah's Reign," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 2 (1964): 40-52).

<sup>18</sup>See Hardy, "A Timeline for the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah," *Historicism* Supplement/Nov 86, p. 18.

<sup>19</sup>The two datelines of Ezek 1:1 and 2 both point to Jul 21, 592 B.C. fall-to-fall (Jul 21, 592 and Jul 31, 593 B.C. spring-to-spring). See Hardy, "The Context for Ezra's Use of a Fall-to-Fall Calendar," *Historicism* No. 8/Oct 86, table 7, p. 28.

<sup>20</sup>Richard A. Parker and Waldo H. Dubberstein, *Babylonian Chronology 626 B.C.-A.D. 75*, Brown University Studies, vol. 19 (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1956), p. 29.

<sup>21</sup>See Hardy, "Fall-to-Fall Calendar," pp. 39-44, 51.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., pp. 44-46.

<sup>23</sup>There was a second Elul that year, at least in the Babylonian records available for comparison. It occupied September 6 to October 4, 537 B.C.

<sup>24</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary* 9:75-76.

<sup>25</sup>It could be that the chapters are not presented in chronological order, but there is no textual evidence to support such an alternative hypothesis. The datelines that occur in Ezek 1:1, 2; 8:1; 20:1; 24:1-2; 26:1; 29:1, 17-18; 30:20-21; 31:1; 32:1, 17; 33:21; 40:1a, 1b are all in proper sequence and, assuming a fall-to-fall calendar, range over a nineteen year period from July 21, 592 (1:1) to October 22, 573 B.C. (40:1a) (see Hardy, "Fall-to-Fall Calendar," p. 28, table 7).

<sup>26</sup>Ezekiel, p. 78.

<sup>27</sup>The Septuagint in Exod 12:40 reads, "But the dwelling of the sons of Israel, which they dwelt in Egypt and in Canaan [*kai en tē chanaan*], [was] 430 years." There is a question whether all of the 430 years were spent inside Egypt.

<sup>28</sup>A period of 390 years is referred to in the extrabiblical Damascus Document found at Qumran. Approaching that and other similar statements in the present biblical context completely solves the problem of how to apply the 390 years in that document and offers a useful historical framework for examining other similar problems of historical background involving Qumran documents. See Isaac Rabinowitz, "A Reconsideration of 'Damascus' and '390 Years' in the 'Damascus' ('Zadokite') Fragments," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 73 (1954): 11-35; Norman Walker, "Concerning the 390 Years and the 20 Years of the Damascus Document," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 76 (1957): 57-58. Walker applies the Damascus Document's 390 years as I have suggested doing here (928 to 538 B.C.), based on Ezek 4, and the twenty years as the remaining time (538 to 518 B.C.) before the temple was rebuilt by Zerubbabel.

These facts in turn clarify what the phrase "beyond Damascus" means at Qumran. It is a reference to the historic Babylonian exile and not to anything in the immediate experience of the authors. In this regard consider Amos 5:27 ("Therefore I will send you into exile beyond Damascus,' says the Lord, whose name is God Almighty"). See also Acts 7:43, which is based on the passage from Amos ("Therefore I will send you into exile" beyond Babylon"). Interpreting the Qumran references in a biblical rather than entirely local context helps to recover the meaning of more than one of the scrolls.