

## THE HEBREW SINGULAR FOR "WEEK" IN THE EXPRESSION "ONE WEEK" IN DANIEL 9:27

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### *Introduction*

In a recent paper,<sup>1</sup> using a grammatical argument, Gerhard Hasel has shown that the seventy weeks of Dan 9:24-27 must be viewed as a whole and that it is inappropriate to apply the 70th week to an era different from that of the other 69. He also asserts that the Hebrew word *šābū'im* in vv. 24-26 properly means "weeks" rather than "sevens"—a point on which there is much difference of opinion.<sup>2</sup> My

<sup>1</sup>Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Hebrew Masculine Plural for Weeks in the Expression 'Seventy Weeks' in Daniel 9:24," *AUSS* 31 (Summer 1993): 105-118.

<sup>2</sup>The broader meaning of Dan 9:24-27 has been and will continue to be disputed by scholars of all persuasions (see James A. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, ICC [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1927], 390-401). Here we deal only with *šābū'im*. The following papers all address the question of what *šābū'im* means and lend more or less support to the traditional rendering "weeks": R. J. M. Gurney, "The Seventy Weeks of Dan 9:24-27," *EVQ* 53 (1981): 29-36; Antti Laato, "The Seventy Yearweeks in the Book of Daniel," *ZAW* 102 (1990): 212-225; Robert C. Newman, "Daniel's Seventy Weeks and the Old Testament Sabbath-Year Cycle," *JETS* 16 (1973): 229-234; J. Barton Payne, "The Goal of Daniel's Seventy Weeks," *JETS* 21 (1978): 97-115; idem, "The Goal of Daniel's Seventy Weeks: Interpretation in Context," *Presbyterian: Covenant Seminary Review* 4 (1978): 33-38; Ronald E. Showers, "New Testament Chronology and the Decree of Daniel 9," *Grace Journal* 11 (1970): 30-40; Jeffrey P. Tuttle, "The Coming Mashiah/Messiah," *Calvary Baptist Theological Journal* 2 (1986): 23-28. Applying Daniel's "weeks" as years is not synonymous with applying the prophecy to Christ. For Laato the culminating figure is Onias III, but the *šābū'im* in vv. 24 and 25 are still "yearweeks." Norman W. Porteous takes a similar position (*Daniel: A Commentary* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965], 141-144). John C. Whitcomb applies the prophecy of Dan 9 to Christ and accepts the gloss "weeks" as a starting point but tries to avoid the symbolism implied by doing so ("Daniel's Great Seventy-Weeks Prophecy: An Exegetical Insight," *Grace Theological Journal* 2 [1981]: 259-263). To reach the time of Christ the period must consist of years rather than days. Evangelical literalism is not drawn to the idea that days might stand symbolically for years in a prophecy such as Dan 9. But this is precisely the key to understanding the passage. If we wish to retain

purpose here is to support Hasel's position on the lexical meaning of the word by drawing v. 27 into the discussion.

*Reasoning from the Singular to the Plural*

Hasel concludes that the 70 weeks constitute a single uninterrupted period of time by arguing that a masculine plural ending on a noun where either masculine or feminine endings can occur emphasizes the unity of the group of elements being pluralized. Here the whole has three parts, such that  $70 = 7 + 62 + 1$ . What makes this fact important in this context is that, while the numbers 70, 7, and 62 all require a plural argument, the number 1 in this series lets us examine the corresponding singular.

While the word for "week" can be spelled *šbw'* (*šābūā'*) with waw or *šb'* (*šābūā'*) without, the word for "seven" can only be spelled *šb'* (*šēbā'*) without waw. This is an important difference because it involves the presence or absence of a vowel letter (a *mater lectionis*, an element visible in unpointed text). And in fact the spelling in v. 27—twice over—is plene (*šbw'*), which means that the only possible interpretation there is "week."<sup>3</sup>

The footnote NIV offers at v. 27 (text: "seven"; note: "Or 'week'") is indefensible. Having once rendered *šābū'im* as "sevens" in v. 24, however, consistency does require some such note.

If consistency is so overwhelming a force within Dan 9:24-27 that it can lead competent scholars to accept that *šbw'* means "seven," then having established that it means something else, we should be able to follow (we should be unable not to follow) the same line of reasoning

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both Daniel's wording and the church's time-honored application to Christ, the "weeks" of Dan 9 must be applied symbolically. Such symbolism remains part of the fabric of the Hebrew text until we revocalize or otherwise alter it. Ben Zion Wacholder shows that Dan 9—applied symbolically in the above manner—was the basis for some of the messianic expectations surrounding John the Baptist ("Chronomessianism: The Timing of Messianic Movements and the Calendar of Sabbatical Cycles," *HUCA* 46 [1975]: 201-218).

<sup>3</sup>KB defines *šābūā'* with Dan 9 in view. The gloss in question is "Einheit von Sieben, Siebent *unit* (period) of seven." ("Siebent" means "seventh.") Thus, "week" is not the meaning of *šābūā'* but a special case of its meaning which refers to a unit or period of seven days. An implication of saying this is that, given the right context, it could refer to seven of something else. What other units of seven does it refer to? The word appears 20 times in the OT. Nine times *šābūā'* describes a literal period of seven days (see Gen 29:27, 28; Lev 12:5; Deut 16:9, 9; Jer 5:24; Ezek 45:21; Dan 10:2, 3). Five times it refers to the Feast of Weeks—a celebration held seven literal weeks after the beginning of harvest (Exod 34:22; Num 28:26; Deut 16:10, 16; 2 Chron 8:13). The remaining six examples are all in Dan 9 (vv. 24, 25, 25, 26, 27, 27), whose meaning we are trying to establish. Given the data cited, the gloss *Einheit von Sieben* is not justified; based on actual usage, it should be *Woche*.

in reverse. On the one hand, if *šābu'im* means many "sevens," *šābūa'* must mean one "seven." This does not work. On the other hand, since *šbw'* very obviously means "week," it would be reasonable to claim that the *šb'ym* in v. 24, which does not mean "seventy," means "weeks." Thus, *šābu'im šib'im*, "seventy weeks."

No lexical or grammatical argument would prevent accepting this second line of reasoning—from a known singular to a debated plural. The argument from gender has been addressed in Hasel's paper. And so, with a broader understanding of those nouns that allow either masculine or feminine endings, the text of Dan 9:24-26 is perfectly clear just as it reads. I know of no other considerations that would keep us from accepting the face value meaning of *šābu'im* as "weeks."<sup>4</sup>

### *The Alternatives*

The fact that there is another *šb'ym* in v. 24 (*šib'im*, "seventy") raises an interesting point. If the first *šb'ym* (vocalized *šābu'im*) consists of *šb'* ("seven") + *ym*, what about the second one? It also has the root *šb'* and the plural ending *-ym*. How is this second word different from the first? One would have to translate "sevens sevens." Actually neither word can possibly mean "sevens."<sup>5</sup> If *šš* (3) + *ym* = 30; *'rb'* (4) + *ym* = 40; *hms'* (5) + *ym* = 50; and *šš* (6) + *ym* = 60; then *šb'* (7) + *ym* = 70, as any standard lexicon will confirm. This merely shifts the problem to another venue, because now we must translate "seventy seventy" (= "seventy seventies"?). Neither reading makes sense. It is not possible to say that the one word means "seventy" and the other "sevens" when both are derived by identical processes from the same root. Nor can it be said that either word means "sevens" when the plural of every other Hebrew numeral from 3 to 9 is the original amount times ten.

<sup>4</sup>In John Walvoord's view, "The English word 'weeks' is misleading as the Hebrew is actually the plural of the word for seven, without specifying whether it is days, months, or years" (John Walvoord, *Daniel: The Key to Prophetic Revelation* [Chicago: Moody, 1971], 219). But, as Hasel correctly points out, "The plural for 'seven' (*šeba'*) is *šib'im*, not *šābu'im*" (109). Thus, under Walvoord's analysis the words in question would have to be vocalized *šib'im šib'im*. And vocalized in this manner, they would have to be translated "seventy seventy," which means nothing.

<sup>5</sup>Consider Dan 8:14, where the words *'ereb bōqer* ("evening morning"), both singular, are followed by the number 2300 (*'alpayim ūš'loš mē'ôt*). In this example a singular argument is followed by a number greater than one and conveys a plural sense, i.e., "2300 evening-mornings." The entity being counted is an "evening-morning," of which there are 2300, i.e., "2300 days." (A "day" in the Old Testament is that unit of time whose constituent elements are an "evening" and a "morning," as seen in Gen 1:5, "and there was evening, and there morning, one day.") It might be possible to convey the idea "seventy sevens" in unit are in view—*šeba' šib'im*. But the text does not say this.

Perhaps we are dealing with something more grammatically sophisticated than the pluralization of a numeral. Leon Wood suggests that *šābū'im* is a participle meaning "besevened."<sup>6</sup> In this case *šābū'a* would be the *pā'ûl* form of a hypothetical root \*šb'.<sup>7</sup> Supposing this were so, there is a question whether Daniel was thinking in such strongly etymological terms in this passage. If he was, he might have been etymologizing the word for "week." Wood's suggestion is best refuted by accepting it. What he has done is to explain the origin of the word he wishes to avoid. Not only the four examples of *šābū'im* in Dan 9:24-26, but all examples of the singular *šābū'a* in the Old Testament and all examples of the feminine plural *šābū'ôt* mean "besevened" now. If Wood's suggestion has merit, its success is his undoing for we must apply his insight to every form which has a common origin with the one he discusses. All of which leaves us where we started.

In appealing to the Greek for help, we must avoid the temptation to use *hebdomades* ("weeks, sevens") as a substitute for *šābū'im* ("weeks").<sup>8</sup> The relationship between the two words is one that must be explained. If the sense of the Greek is different from that of the Hebrew, the difference may come from a different underlying text, which would then need to be reconstructed. If the difference was introduced gratuitously by the translators, what they propose is wrong as a reflection of the author's intent. In any event, we cannot merely set the Hebrew aside, even when discussing the Greek, or especially when discussing the Greek.

There is a question whether the two words really mean different things in the sense of lacking a shared semantic element. What, after all, is a "hebdomad" (Gk *hebdomas*)? According to Friedrich Preisigke, a

<sup>6</sup>*A Commentary on Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 105.

<sup>7</sup>*Pā'ûl* is generally regarded as a survival of a passive of Qal, which still exists throughout in Arabic, but has been lost in Hebrew. . . . But instances of the form *quttāl* are better regarded as remnants of the passive participle Qal (see § 52s), so that *pā'ûl* must be considered as an original verbal noun. . . ." (Gesenius-Kautzsch, *Grammar*, 136, §50a).

<sup>8</sup>We must be even more careful to avoid using "heptads" as a substitute for *šābū'im*. H. C. Leupold strongly asserts that Daniel's "seventy weeks" are really "seventy *heptads*" (*Exposition of Daniel* [reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969], 407), by which he means an abstract group of seven. Thus, the meaning of *šābū'im* would be an abstract group of seven. But the Greek does not say \**heptades*; it says *hebdomades*—in both Theodotion and LXX. This fact is not accidental. I have been unable to find an entry in any Greek lexicon from any period of the language that brings together the letters \**heptad*, either as a separate entry or as the first part of any longer word; there is no Greek word \**heptad*. It is an English word, based on the Greek \**hepta*, "seven."

"hebdomad" (Gk *hebdomas*) is a *siebtägige Woche*—"seven-day week."<sup>9</sup> This is not a comprehensive definition of course. Liddell and Scott expand this definition to include such meanings as "the number seven; a number of seven; period of seven days, week; period of seven years."<sup>10</sup> While the Heb *šābuʿ*<sup>a</sup> only means "week," the Gk *hebdomas* means a number of things having to do with seven, only one of which is "week." The semantic range of the Greek word is broader than that of its Hebrew counterpart, but our starting point is the Heb *šābuʿ*<sup>a</sup>, and the question is how to carry the sense of that term over into Greek. *Hebdomas* is a natural way to say "week" in Greek.<sup>11</sup> Finding the Greek word for "weeks" in v. 24 is not evidence that the Hebrew word for "weeks" there is incorrect.

A number of scholars hold that Daniel was translated from an Aramaic original. A notable spokesperson for the translation hypothesis is Frank Zimmermann.<sup>12</sup> Behind the Heb *šābuʿîm* he sees the Aramaic *šābuʿîn*,<sup>13</sup> which also means "weeks." But his point has to do with the masculine gender of *šābuʿîm*, which, he says, can be explained on the assumption that the translator took an Aramaic word (with the ending *-în*) into the Hebrew without giving the matter any great amount of thought (hence the unusual ending *-îm*). A translator would be able to do this precisely because the two words are so similar. Zimmermann says nothing about meaning. Semantically, as well as morphologically, the Hebrew and Aramaic words are equivalent.

Beyond a certain point it no longer matters whether the word *šābuʿîm* is the object of translation activity (Aramaic > Hebrew) or the source of such activity (Hebrew > Greek). Sooner or later we must deal with the Hebrew text in its present form.

<sup>9</sup> *Wörterbuch der griechischen Papyrusurkunden* (Berlin: Selbstverlag der Erben, 1925), s.v. *hebdomas*.

<sup>10</sup> *Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), s.v. *hebdomas*.

<sup>11</sup> Another way would be to use some form of the word *sabbaton*, "Sabbath." In the New Testament this is the only form used.

<sup>12</sup> For a brief history of the hypothesis that Dan 1:2:4a; 8:12 were translated into Hebrew from Aramaic, see Zimmermann, "Hebrew Translation in Daniel," *JQR* 51 (1960/61): 198-199.

<sup>13</sup> Louis F. Hartman and Alexander A. Di Lella give the word as *šabbūʿîn* (*The Book of Daniel*, AB 23 [Garden City: Doubleday, 1978], 244). For a discussion of the expected form *šābuʿîn*, see Frank Zimmermann, "Some Verses in Daniel in the Light of a Translation Hypothesis," *JBL* 58 (1939): 350.

### *Conclusion*

In the passage before us we have a complete set of alternatives with both the singular and the plural of both "seven" and "week": *šib'â*, "seven," in v. 25; *šib'îm*, "seventy" (the plural of "seven") in v. 24; *šābu<sup>a</sup>*, "week," in v. 27 (twice); and *šābu'îm* "weeks" in vv. 24, 25 (twice), and 26. A comparison of the plurals ("seventy" and "weeks") shows different vocalizations; a comparison of the singulars ("seven" and "week"), shows difference both in spelling and vocalization.<sup>14</sup> There is no ambiguity here.

It is harder to avoid the face-value meaning of "weeks" in the masculine plural *šābu'îm* than to accept it. When the Hebrew text of Dan 9:24-27 is taken as it reads (*šābu'îm šib'îm* "seventy weeks" [v. 24]), we come to an interpretation that is grammatically, lexically, and exegetically straightforward.<sup>15</sup> Working from the viewpoint of a Hebrew original, Hasel has removed a major obstacle between the text and the exegete of Dan 9. But even if he had not, we would still have to say that in vv. 24-26 *šābu'îm* means "weeks," because in v. 27 *šābu<sup>a</sup>* can only mean "week."

<sup>14</sup>I would like to thank William H. Shea for calling my attention to this symmetry of usage.

<sup>15</sup>The exegetical appropriateness of the Masoretic vocalization *šābu'îm* receives added support by comparing the prophecy of chap. 9 with that of chap. 8. In the one case we have "weeks" (9:24, 25); in the other, "evening-mornings" (i.e., "days," 8:14). In both cases the emphasis is on units of time. More than this, the units are readily comparable, since weeks are made up of days, and both are applied in the same symbolic manner. The two chapters should be studied together.