THE HEBREW SINGULAR FOR “WEEK” IN THE EXPRESSION “ONE WEEK” IN DANIEL 9:27

FRANK W. HARDY
Westminster, MD 21157

Introduction

In a recent paper, 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 šābuʿīm in vv. 24-26 properly means “weeks” rather than “sevens”—a point on which there is much difference of opinion.


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 $šb̄w$ (šab'w) with waw
or $šb$ (šab'w) 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.”

The footnote NIV offers at v. 27 (text: “seven”; note: “Or ‘week’”) is indefensible. Having once rendered $šb̄w$'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

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).

1 KB defines $šb̄w$ 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 $šb̄w$ 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 $šb̄w$ 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, 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’īm means many “sevens,” šābu’ā must mean one “seven.” This does not work. On the other hand, since šbu’ 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’īm šib’īm, “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’īm as “weeks.”

The Alternatives

The fact that there is another šb’ym in v. 24 (šib’īm, “seventy”) raises an interesting point. If the first šb’ym (vocalized šābu’īm) 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.” If šš (3) + ym = 30; šrb (4) + ym = 40; šms (5) + ym = 50; and šs (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.

*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’ (šebac) 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.

5Consider Dan 8:14, where the words ‘ereb bōger (“evening morning”), both singular, are followed by the number 2300 (‘alpeīm āšlōs me’ōt). 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—šēbā 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 šaḇūʿîm is a participle meaning “besevened.”6 In this case šaḇūʿaʿ would be the pāʿāl form of a hypothetical root *šb’.7 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 šaḇūʿîm in Dan 9:24-26, but all examples of the singular šaḇūʿaʿ in the Old Testament and all examples of the feminine plural šaḇūʿît 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 šaḇūʿîm (“weeks”).8 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

6 A Commentary on Daniel (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 105.

7 Pāʿāl 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 qattāl are better regarded as remnants of the passive participle Qal (see § 52s), so that pāʿāl must be considered as an original verbal noun . . . ” (Gesenius-Kautzsch, Grammar, 136, §50a).

8 We must be even more careful to avoid using “heptads” as a substitute for šaḇūʿîm. 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 šaḇūʿîm 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 *siebentägige Woche*—a “seven-day week.”9 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.”10 While the Heb šābu’ā’ 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 šābu’ā’, 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.11 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.12 Behind the Heb šābu’īm he sees the Aramaic šābu’īn,13 which also means “weeks.” But his point has to do with the masculine gender of šābu’īm, which, he says, can be explained on the assumption that the translator took an Aramaic word (with the ending -īm) into the Hebrew without giving the matter any great amount of thought (hence the unusual ending -īm). 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 šābu’īm 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.

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


11Another way would be to use some form of the word *sabbaton*, “Sabbath.” In the New Testament this is the only form used.

12For 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.

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’ā, "seven," in v. 25; šib’îm, "seventy" (the plural of "seven") in v. 24; šābu’ā, "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. 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. 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’ā can only mean "week."

"I would like to thank William H. Shea for calling my attention to this symmetry of usage.

"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."