

CHRONOMESSIANISM

THE TIMING OF MESSIANIC MOVEMENTS
AND THE CALENDAR OF SABBATICAL CYCLES*

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THIS paper presents an outline of the evidence in the biblical, Qumran, New Testament, and rabbinic literature for a hitherto unnoticed but apparently at one time widespread belief, that the inevitable coming of the messiah would take place during the season when Israel celebrated the sabbatical year. Sabbatical messianism, or chronomessianism, are appropriate terms for a phenomenon that inspired a search in the scriptural prophecies for the exact date of the redeemer's coming. Although most powerful in the apocalyptic tradition, chronomessianism appears as well in the mainstream of Judaism. The locus classicus of chronomessianic doctrine is found in Daniel 9, particularly in the mysterious verses 24-27. This study will trace the impact of Daniel 9 on the literature of ensuing centuries. A fascinating question arising from this investigation is whether chronomessianic doctrine was a factor in the timing of the launching of certain movements, such as John the Baptist's ministry or Bar Kochba's rebellion against the Romans.¹

I

The pre-history of chronomessianism may be traced in several biblical passages. Isa. 23:15-18 predicts that Tyre will be forgotten for seventy

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1 For more extensive bibliographical citations, see "The Calendar of Sabbatical Cycles During the Second Temple and Early Rabbinic Period," *HUCA*, 44 (1973), 153-196. The following items should be added: Zuckermann's "Ueber Sabbatjahrzyclus, etc." (*ibid.* p. 156 note 12) is now available in an English translation by A. Lowy, "A Treatise on the Sabbatical Cycle and the Jubilee (New York: Hermon Press, 1974); Nachum Sarna, "Zedekiah's Emancipation of Slaves and the Sabbatical Year," in *Orient and Occident. Essays Presented to Cyrus H. Gordon* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Butzon & Bercker Kepelaer, 1973), 143-149. To note 97 p. 180, add: A. A. Akavia, *Sinai* 30 (1951), 118-137.

years, at the end of which time the Lord will again remember the famous city.² Jeremiah employs the 70-year period for the length of Judah's coming exile in Babylonia (Jer. 25: 11–12; 29: 10).³ The use of the number 70 might reflect the Jewish affinity for the numeral seven and its multiples, evidenced in weekly and yearly sabbaths (shemittah) and the jubilee; alternately, it might have been a common Near Eastern convention for the maximum life expectancy or the normal span of two or three generations.⁴ Whatever that number's function in Jeremiah, Zech. 1:12 regards the number 70 as the precise length of Judah's exile. By fusing Jeremiah's "70-year prophecy" with the assertion in Lev. 26:34–35, 43, that during the exile the land would atone for the sabbaths that Israel had violated, 2 Chron. 36:21–23 suggests not only that Jeremiah's words came true, but explicitly interprets Cyrus' edict as having reference to them.

Whatever the precise meaning of these passages, the credit for inventing sabbatical messianism belongs to the author of Daniel 9.⁵ Zech. 1:2 and 2 Chron. 36:21–23 merely repeated Jeremiah's prophecy to account for the length of the exile; the interpretation in Daniel was future-directed. The author of Daniel openly acknowledges that he uses Jeremiah, specifically, and other "books" where the reference may include Zechariah, without question the Chronicler, from whose views he dissents.⁶ Stressing the novelty of the discovery in a lengthy introduction (1–23), the author of Daniel goes on in 9:24–27 to present his own chronological exegesis of Jeremiah's 70-year prophecy. Before proceeding with a review of chronomessianic doctrine and movements, it will be necessary to analyze this passage in some detail, particularly to determine how it was generally understood in antiquity.

The ancient Jewish exegesis of Dan. 9:24–27 differs from modern scholarship in two significant ways. With a few exceptions,⁷ all medieval and recent commentators translate the key-word *shavu'a* (supposedly

2 For a view that this passage is a postexilic addition, see O. Procksch, *Jesaja I* (KAT, Leipzig, 1930), 305.

3 See W. Rudolph, *Jeremia* (HAT, Tübingen, 1968), 161, 184 f.

4 Cf. Ps. 90:10; Jer. 27:7. For a review of ancient lore in reference to 70 years, see P. Grelot, "Soixante-dix semaines d'années," *Biblica* 50 (1969), 169–186, esp. 173–175.

5 Cf. R. H. Charles, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Oxford, 1929), pp. xxvii f.; D. S. Russel, *The Method and the Message of the Apocalyptic* (London, SGM Press, 1964), 16 f.

6 Dan. 9:2 cites "books." The use of 2 Chron. 36:21 is apparent a) in the word "To fulfill" (לְמַלְאוֹת), which varies from כְּמַלְאוֹת in Jer. 25:12 and 29:10. Dan. 9:10–14 also suggests an awareness of the Chronicler's use of Lev. 26 in citing Jeremiah.

7 Grelot, note 4; M. Delcor, *Le livre de Daniel* (SB, Paris, 1971), 194–204.

following the LXX) as heptomad or a "week," seven years.⁸ The ancient exegetes, it will be shown, understood *shavu'a* to refer to the seven-year cycle, the last year of which was "the year of the Lord" (Lev. 25:2), the equivalent of the year of shemittah or release (Deut. 15:1-2), when debts were canceled and land lay fallow.⁹ The difference between the two interpretations is that, according to the former, any septennial number will do; according to the latter, however, each seven-year period had its fixed place in a series, precise in beginning and end. A second difference stems from the first. Modern exegetes interpret the passage without reference to Jewish chronology current at that time.¹⁰ The ancients, however, took it for granted that the numbers in 9:24-27 had to harmonize with their calendar of sabbatical cycles.¹¹ No student would undertake to determine the day of the week without reference to the Jewish or Christian calendar; yet none of the nineteenth or twentieth century commentators, I have concluded, tries to harmonize Daniel with the sabbatical cycles as they were uninterruptedly observed during inter-testamental and early rabbinic times. This study attempts to show that such a harmonization is plausible, perhaps even compelling.

That *shavu'a* meant the sabbatical cycle is attested in Qumran, rabbinic and epigraphic documents. In its description of the beginning of rule of Light, the Manual of Discipline mentions the monthly and annual seasons: the period of years "for their weeks" (לשבועיהם); and at the beginning "of their weeks" a period of "freedom (דורו i.e., jubilee)."¹² The so-called Zadokite Document alludes to the Book of Jubilees in these words: "And the exact statement of the epochs of Israel's blindness to all these, behold it can be learnt in the Book of the Divisions of Times into their Jubilees and Weeks" (ספר מחלקות העתים לייבוליהם) (ובשבועותיהם).¹³ These and similar passages allude to the sabbatical cycles known to have been observed in Palestine from the post-exilic period to the fifth or sixth Christian century.¹⁴ A recently excavated

8. Cf. Schürer, III, 266 f.; J. A. Montgomery, *Daniel* (ICC, New York, 1927), 373, who notes the possibility of *shavu'a* meaning sabbatical cycle, but ignores it in 390-401; A. Bentzen, *Daniel*³ (HAT, Tübingen, 1952), 73-77; Russel, *Method* (note 5), 195-202.

9. Seder Olam, 28; 30; Yer. Ta'anit IV, 5, 68d; Nahmanides' *Commentary* on Exod. 12:2 and 20:8.

10. Cf. references cited in notes 5, 7-8.

11. Seder Olam, 28 (p. 65, Ratner ed.); Yalkut Shim'oni on Amos 7:17, no. 547; Dan. 9:24, No. 1066; B. Yoma 54a. Although Saadia, Rashi, and Ibn Ezra diverge widely in the hermeneutics of Dan. 9:24-27, they agree that these verses referred to the traditional calendar of sabbatical cycles.

12. IQS 10:8-9. See also below notes 26-29.

13. CD 16:3-4.

14. Cf. B. Zuckermann (note 1), 5-45; Wacholder, *HUCA*, 44 (1973), 156-

synagogue at Khirbet Susiya contains fragments of a mosaic dated in the "second year of the Week (שְׁלִשְׁבוֹעַ) . . . four thousand years . . . after the world was created."¹⁵ This inscription comes from a synagogue probably built not before the fifth Christian century, yet the basic meaning of *shavu'a* had hardly changed through the centuries.¹⁶

In contrast to the Chronicler, who had understood Jeremiah's 70-year prophecy literally, Dan. 9:24 interpreted it as 70 sabbatical cycles (שְׁבַעִים שָׁבָעִים) equal to ten jubilees or 490 years; each of Jeremiah's years being equal to a shemittah cycle, seven of which made up a jubilee, at the end of which the Hebrews in bondage gained their freedom. But Jerusalem's sins have been so grave, in the author's opinion, that ten jubilees "are decreed concerning your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place" (v. 24). Daniel never uses the term jubilee directly, but his numbers can be only understood in light of Lev. 25:1-23, which gives seven sabbaticals as the maximum time of sanctioned bondage. Lev. 25:10, to be sure, may be plausibly interpreted to mean that a jubilee cycle consisted of 50 years, not of 49. But a 49-year jubilee is taken for granted by the author of the Book of Jubilees. Even the rabbinic tradition which generally supposes a 50-year jubilee for the period of the First Temple argues a 49-year jubilee for the Second. Moreover, as has been stated above, the observance of shemittah cycles is attested, while the assumption of an extra year for the jubilee year is totally unwarranted by the evidence. This is not to say, however, that during the intertestamental period the Mosaic injunction regarding the jubilee was entirely ignored. The author of Daniel 9 not only assumed the reality of a jubilee period, but without mentioning it directly made it the most significant unit of the divine divisions of time. What appears to have happened is that the seventh shemittah (i.e., the 49th year) was legally considered both a sabbatical and jubilee year.¹⁷

The Book of Daniel reflects an interest in chronography that is unique in the biblical tradition. This interest, however, reflects not an antiquarian's passion for accurate dating of events, but a purpose to strengthen the author's prophetic vision. The names of the Babylonian

196, Cf. J. Jeremias, "Sabbathjahr und neutestamentliche Chronologie." *ZNW*, 27 (1928), 103.

15 S. Gutman et al., "Excavations in the Synagogue at Khirbet Susiya," *Qadmoniot*, 5 No. 2 (1972), 47-52, esp. 51a.

16 M. Nedarim, 8:1, rules that a vow "this *shavu'a*," limits its validity to the remainder of the current cycle, inclusive of the shemittah year.

17 In accordance with the opinion of Judah, who argued, however, that the 50th year counted also as the first year of the next shemittah cycle; the sages differ (Arakhin, 12b; cf. Seder Olam, 15, and passim).

and Persian kings and the fictional dates which are interspersed throughout the Book of Daniel were inserted there to give an appearance of historicity to the prophetic material.¹⁸ In some passages, indeed, the author weaves chronological lore into the very essence of the prophecy. This is the case in chapters 7–8, which relate the sequence of the four kingdoms that was to conclude at “the end of days;” it is particularly evident in 9:24–27, which uses Jeremiah’s 70-year prophecy to structure a “chronology” of the future. An analysis of these verses suggests that the author proposed a threefold division of history:

A. The rebuilding of the temple

B. The prophetic epoch, described in our passage;

C. The postprophetic epoch, presumably identical with the messianic age. Thus Daniel’s interpretation of Jeremiah’s 70-year prophecy transcended the antiquarian interest in chronology and chronography, claiming as it did, to reveal the schedule of the future. Unfortunately, the author tells nothing of A and C; but we should be grateful that he chose to detail Epoch B which is likewise divided into three periods:

1. The rebuilding of the temple

2. Persecution

3. The bridge between the prophetic and postprophetic epochs.

1. “Know then and understand: from the time that the word went forth that Jerusalem should be restored and rebuilt, seven weeks shall pass till the appearance of one anointed, a prince; then for sixty-two weeks it shall remain restored, rebuilt with streets and conduits” (25: NEB). Daniel defines the first stage of the prophetic epoch (when “the word went forth”) as an unmistakable reference to Leviticus’ admonition and to Jeremiah’s oracle, cited in Dan. 9:2. Our passage points out that from the time of the prophecy, presumably uttered just prior to the exile, until the restoration of Jerusalem and the appearance of the “anointed prince” (evidently a reference to Zerubbabel), there elapsed seven sabbatical cycles (one jubilee or 49 years). But Daniel seems to insist that the time of the exile was to be counted as part of the sixty-two cycles, the period of Jerusalem’s rebuilding. A possible justification for regarding the two as segments of a single time-unit is that since the exile was integral to the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy of redemption it became a part of the period of restoration. Therefore, the subtraction of seven sabbatical cycles (one Jubilee) reduces the period of the 62 sabbatical cycles (8 and 6/7 jubilees) to 55 sabbatical cycles or 7 and 6/7 jubilees = 385 years.

18 The fictional nature of Daniel’s chronological lore has not prevented scholars of many generations from transforming it into historical chronology. Cf. H. H. Rowley, *Darius the Mede and the Four World Kingdoms in the Book of Daniel* (Cardiff, University of the Wales Press Board, 1959).

2. "At the critical time, after the sixty-two weeks, one who is anointed shall be removed with no one to take his part; and the horde of an invading prince shall work havoc on city and sanctuary. The end of it shall be a deluge, inevitable war with all its horrors. He shall make a firm league with the mighty for one week; and, the week half spent, he shall put a stop to sacrifice and offering... then, in the end, what has been decreed concerning the desolation will be poured out" (26-27: NEB). The period of crisis, according to our passage, would occur during the final sabbatical cycle of the ninth jubilee, which verse 27 splits into two equal segments, the second more horrible than the first.

3. Daniel makes no explicit mention of the third period of the post-prophetic epoch, but its existence is apparent, as verse 24 listed 70 sabbatical cycles, while verses 25-27 accounted for only 63, leaving 7 cycles as a remainder. It may thus be assumed that the third period of this epoch lasting seven sabbatical cycles = one jubilee, was intended to serve as a bridge between the prophetic epoch and the coming of the messianic kingdom.

Table 1 sums up the chronology implicit in the three periods:

TABLE ONE
DANIEL'S PROPHETIC EPOCH

Dan. 9	Period	No. of Jubilees	No. of Sabbatical Cycles	No. of Years	Remarks
24	1-3	10	49	490	entire epoch
25	1	8 6/7	62	434	exile plus restoration
25a	1a	1	7	49	exile
25b	1b	7 6/7	55	385	restoration minus exile
27	2	1/7	1	7	persecution
27a	2a	1/14	1/2	3 1/2	stage I of persecution
27b	2b	1/14	1/2	3 1/2	stage II of persecution
24-27	3	1	7	49	bridge to messianic age

We are now faced with the question which has confronted every student of Dan. 9:24-27. How are we to identify the chronology underlying this passage? We must further address an additional question: In what respect does our study presume to offer a more satisfactory answer to Daniel's messianic numerology than do the numerous scholarly proposals made hitherto?¹⁹

19 Consult the bibliographies assembled in the works cited in notes 5, 7-8. As to the dates of the sabbatical cycles, see the tables in *HUCA* 44 (1973), 185-196, cited in note 1. Zuckermann's tables of sabbatical cycles (note 1), presently the consensus, assume a chronology described in note 21.

To address the second question first, the explanations proposed hitherto fail to take account of the obvious link between Daniel's chronology and the then current calendar of sabbatical cycles. As has been stated above, *shavu'a* in the sense of seven years always referred, in ancient texts, to the computing of the shemittah cycle. The chronology proposed here is the first attempt, to our knowledge, to interpret Dan. 9:24–27 in light of the then current sabbatical calendar.

As is now almost universally accepted, any approach that attempts to solve the numerology of Dan. 9:25–27 must presume that our passage refers to the onslaught on Judaism by Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Since verse 27 predicts that this persecution will last a sabbatical cycle, split into two stages, the problem is how to synchronize this sabbatical cycle with the then current calendar. Now since Antiochus IV ascended the throne of Syria (according to cuneiform tablets) between Ululu 11 and the end of the month of 137 (September 4 and 22 of 175) and was murdered in Kislimu 148 S.E. (November 20–December 18 of 164 B.C.E.), the single sabbatical cycle of the Jewish calendar alluded to in verse 27 could only be either 176/75–170/69 B.C.E. or 169/68–163/62 B.C.E.²⁰

Which of these two sabbatical cycles does the evidence better fit? Arguments in favor of the first: a) Antiochus IV in fact became king at the end of the first year of the cycle; b) Hellenization of Judaea commenced soon thereafter; and c) Dan. 9:26, "the anointed shall be removed" (וכרת משיח) apparently refers to Antiochus' replacement of the rightful high priest, an event which seems to have taken place in 172 or 171 B.C.E.

Daniel's words, however, become unquestionably more pointed in light of the second alternative: a) "the horde of the invading prince shall work havoc with the city and sanctuary," is a perfect fit for Antiochus' pillage of the Temple in the autumn of 169 B.C.E., at the beginning of the sabbatical cycle; b) the division of the sabbatical into two segments, during the second of which "sacrifice and offering will cease" would not fit into the first but does accord with the second alternative; and c) the same may be said of "the desolations" (שְׁקוּצִים מְשׁוּמִים). As to the reference to the removal of Onias, the date of this event is obscure and cannot be cited to refute the evidence which so strongly supports the cycle of 169/68–163/62 B.C.E. Now if the sabbatical cycle recorded in verses 26–27 alludes to the Julian years 169/68–163/62 B.C.E., which corresponded to the 63rd sabbatical cycle, as well as to the last cycle of the 9th jubilee, Daniel's underlying sabbatical chronology can be reconstructed

20 A. J. Sachs, and D. J. Wiseman, "A Babylonian King List of the Hellenistic Period," *Iraq*, 16 (1954), 202–212, esp. 209. R. A. Parker and W. H. Dubberstein, *Babylonian Chronology 626 B.C.–A.D. 75* (Providence, R. I., Brown University Press, 1956), 23; Wacholder, *HUCA* 44 (1973), 160–163.

as shown in Table 2. (Suppose, however, that the first alternative, or some other exegesis of Dan. 9:24–27, is to be preferred, then deduct from Table 2, seven Julian years, or adjust dates otherwise as needed.)²¹

TABLE TWO
DANIEL'S SABBATICAL CHRONOLOGY

Dan. 9	Epoch	Period	No. of Jub.	No. of Sabb.	No. of Years	B.C.E.	Remarks
24	I					Until 604/03	preprophetic epoch
24	II	1–3	10	49	490	603/02–114/13	prophetic epoch
25		1	8 6/7	62	434	603/02–170/69	restoration, including exile
25a		1a	1	7	49	603/02–555/54	exile
25b		1b	7 6/7	55	385	554/53–170/69	restoration minus exile
27		2	1/7	1	7	169/68–163/62	persecution
27a		2a	1/14	1/2	3 1/2	169/68–166/65	stage I
27b		2b	1/14	1/2	3 1/2	165/64–163/62	stage II
24–27		3	1	7	49	162/61–114/13	end of prophetic epoch
24	III					After 113/12	messianic age

A recurring discrepancy between the proposed reconstruction of Daniel's dates and the chronology based on reliable sources presents a problem. Daniel apparently dated the exile in 604/03 B.C.E. but it occurred either in Nisan of 597 B.C.E., if the writer referred to the first Babylonian exile, or in Av of 587, if the second was meant. Cyrus issued his edict in 538/37; not in 554/53, as is suggested in our interpretation of the passage. The answer to these objections is that Daniel's dates, as they related to the remote past, were often approximate or artificial, made to fit into a more or less arbitrary chronomessianic structure, exemplified by the book's chapter headings which date by a fictive Darius the Mede.

More problematical, however, is the inconsistency of the date of the placement of the "abomination" in the Temple. According to I Macc. 1:54, it occurred in Kislev of 145 S.E. = December of 167 B.C.E.; Table 2 seems to date the event in the spring of 165. Although the difference between the two datings is only about fifteen or sixteen months, it does represent a serious objection to the calculation, as it is too large an

²¹ See note 19. By deducting 1 Julian year from the dates, Table 2 would conform to the sabbatical chronology of the consensus. See Maimonides, *Shemittah* X, 1–8.

error for contemporaneous chronology. In fact, however, the difference may be reduced by six months, as in Jewish tradition, half a week is not $3\frac{1}{2}$ days or years, but 3, since the sabbath day or year is not normally part of the computation. If so, Daniel may have dated the second stage of Antiochus' persecution in the fall of 166 B.C.E.; I Macc. 1:54, some ten months earlier. This method of computation would reduce Daniel's departure from the historical date to ten months, perhaps a permissible deviation in a chronomessianic book.

Daniel appears nearest to the historical date in his evident timing of the end of the persecution, presumably in Tishri of 163. For most purposes, however, in the ancient Jewish calendar, the year commenced in Nisan. And if Daniel intended to time, using the customary post-dating, the cleansing of the Temple on Nisan 1 149 S.E. = April 163 B.C.E., this timing departs from that of I Macc. 1:54 by only three or four months.

Because Dan. 9:24-27 offers the classical locus of sabbatical chronomessianism, a relatively large section of this study dealt with this passage, permitting now a more abbreviated treatment of the evidence for this belief in subsequent Jewish writings. No matter how divergent their opinions might have been among men such as the author of the First Book of Maccabees, the members of Essene groups, Josephus, or the talmudic sages, they regarded Daniel's numbers as a guide to the date of the redemption. Even Christian chronography, which ultimately developed into a science, had had its foundation in Daniel.²² To be sure, the ancient Jewish exegetes frequently misapplied or abused our passage; but their understanding, in contrast to that of modern scholarship, that Daniel referred to sabbatical messianism is right. Only with the gradual disappearance of the agricultural laws of shemittah from Jewish life did the link between the calendar and the expectations of redemption finally disappear.

II

Qumran Writings

If Daniel 9 pointed out the messianic implication of the sabbatical cycles, the author of Jubilees elaborated the same divisions of time for the creation of the world and Israel's history until the entry into Canaan. By its very formal title, "The Book of the Divisions of Times into their Jubilees and Sabbatical Cycles," the author shows his indebtedness to Daniel 9, as both *'ittim* and *shavu'ot(im)* were probably inspired by

22 H. Gelzer, *Sextus Julius Africanus* (Leipzig, 1880), I, 24-26.

Dan. 9:25.²³ Although the Book of Daniel never mentions the term directly, the jubilee forms the essence of Dan. 9:24-27. Daniel, we are told, became aware of the meaning of the sabbatical division by studying Jeremiah and Chronicles, with the aid of Gabriel (Dan. 9:2, 21-27). Jubilees' introductory sentence attributes the division of time into sabbaticals and jubilees to the Lord, as he had spoken to Moses on Mount Sinai. The angel of the Presence, according to Jub. 1:29, informed Israel that these periods would prevail from the creation "until the sanctuary of the Lord shall be made in Jerusalem in Mount Zion," i.e., probably to messianic rather than Solomonic times.

During the sabbatical year, according to the War between the Children of the Light and the Children of the Darkness, special sacrifices were ordained. Warfare was prohibited.²⁴ The nature of these sacrifices is obscure; the prohibition of warfare may have reflected a strictly sectarian view. But it seems clear that there existed, confirmed in writings so diverse as Josephus and Tacitus,²⁵ a tendency to equate the laws of the yearly sabbaths with those of the weekly sabbaths.

The recently published fragments from a partially preserved *peshar* offer a fascinating presentation of sabbatical chronomessianism.²⁶ Although written in the familiar Qumran style, the *peshar* applied Daniel's insight into what evidently was an anthology of biblical passages related to the sabbatical and jubilee themes, but which also included allusions to the reigns of the Righteous (Melchizedek) and Wicked (Melchiresha^c). After commenting on Lev. 25:13 in regard to the Israelites' return to their patrimony in the year of דרור (jubilee), the remission of debts in Deut. 15:2, and freedom (דרור) to the captives, proclaimed in Isa. 61:1, 11QMelch 3 II continues: "Its interpretation is: that He will proclaim them to be among the children of Heaven and of the inheritance of Melchizedek . . . For He will restore (their patrimonies?) to them and proclaim freedom to them and make them abandon all of their sins. This shall take place during the sabbatical cycle (*shabu'a*) of the first jubilee following the ni[ne] jubilees, and on the D[ay of Atone]ment f[alling]

23 The term '*eth*' is used 13 times in the Book of Daniel. CD 16:3-4.

24 IQM 2:6-10.

25 A.J. XIII, 234; Tacitus, *Hist.*, V, 4, 3.

26 A. S. van der Woude, "Melchisedek als himmlische Erlösungsgestalt in den neugefundenen eschatologischen Midraschim aus Qumran Höhle XI," *OTS* 14 (1965), 354-373; M. de Jonge and A. S. van der Woude, "11Qmelchizedeq and the New Testament," *NTS* 12 (1965-1966), 301-326; J. T. Milik, "Milki-sedeq at Milki-reša^c dans les anciens écrits juifs et chrétiens," *JJS* 23 (1972), 95-144; "4Q visions de 'Amram et une citation d'Origène," *RB*, 79 (1972), 77-97. The citations below follow Milik's transcription of what is labeled as 11QMelch in *JJS*.

at the en[d of the ju]bilee, the tenth;²⁷ To forgive on it (the day of atonement) for all of (the sins) of all the children of [God and] the men of the lot of Melchizedek.”²⁸ Although its main thought is quite clear, the precise chronology of the *peshet* remains obscure. There is no doubt, however, that the tenth jubilee alludes to the chronology of Dan. 9:24’s 70 sabbatical cycles, which equals 10 jubilees, when Melchizedek will overcome Me(a)lchiresha^c. Any lingering doubt that this is so disappears when one reads in line 18 of our fragment: “And the herald of good tidings (Isa. 52:7a) refers to the messiah, the Spirit concerning whom it was said by Dan[iel (9:25): ‘Until the coming of the messiah, the prince, 7 sabbatical cycles . . .’”²⁹ Despite the fact that the *peshet* utilizes a long list of biblical passages, Dan. 9:24–27 remained the key to the author’s chronology of sabbatical messianism.

Rabbinic Traditions

The Seder Olam, attributed to Rabbi Jose ben Ḥalafta (second century C.E.), but clearly a chronographic anthology of material stemming from several generations of scholars preceding and following Rabbi Jose, represents the rabbinic chronomessianic school. In chronicling the biblical events this treatise often adds the alleged current sabbatical and jubilee dates. The author does this particularly when he deals with momentous occasions, such as the building of Solomon’s Temple or the disaster to Sennacherib’s army.³⁰ Chapters 29–30 of Seder Olam, which may be regarded as a kind of midrash on Dan. 9:24–27, tailor the chronology of the burnings of the First and the Second Temples to make them conform to the author’s view of Daniel’s sabbatical numbers: 10 Jubilees = 70 Sabbatical cycles = 490 years elapsed from Nebuchadnezzar’s to Titus’ conquests of Jerusalem. To be sure, the Seder Olam, like the Book of Jubilees, formally merely furnished a chronicle of the past, but its deterministic chronology clearly points to a didactic lesson in the divine design of time.

We have place here for only a few of the numerous talmudic allusions to chronomessianic expectations. Of the paragraphs that make up the Eighteen Blessings, a fourth century Palestinian amora, Rabbi Aḥai,

27 This reading differs from that of Milik’s rendition of 11QMelch 3 II lines 6–7 (*JJS* 23 [1972], 99): “Et cet événement [aura li]eu dans la première semaine (d’années) du jubilé suivant des neuf [f] jubilés. Et le [jour des Expi]ations’ (*Lev.* 25:9) est a f[in du] dixième [jub]ilé. . . .”

28 11QMelch 3 II, 4–8.

29 11QMelch 3 II, 18.

30 Seder Olam Rabbah (ed. Ratner), 11, 15, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27. Sennacherib’s disaster, for example, is said on the basis of Isa. 37:30 to have occurred in a shemittah year (ch. 23, p. 53a–b).

noted that the seventh blessing (גאולת ישראל) dealt with the redemption of Israel, which he took to show that "Israel would not be redeemed except during the year of the sabbath."³¹ An identical motif was ascribed to Ps. 126, relating the return of Zion, to its being the *seventh* of the fourteen psalms of Ascent.³² A frequently cited Baraita describes the apocalyptic events of the seven years prior to the messiah's coming (all of which would be disastrous, except the years of shemittah) with the redeemer making his appearance during the postsabbatical year.³³ Mishnah Avot (5:8) expresses the link between redemption and the sabbatical year thus: "Exile came to the world because of idolatry, incest, the shedding of blood, and the (non-observance of) shemittah." For just as the observance of shemittah hastens redemption so its violation causes exile.³⁴

Furthermore, talmudic computations of the messiah's expected appearance figure dates that coincided with Sabbatical chronology. "Just as the seventh offers a release to the Jew, so the world will be released during the seventh millennium," the epoch of the universal sabbath.³⁵ Sanhedrin 97b promises that the messiah would appear "after the year 4291 of the creation of the world"; its being in the Jewish calendar a shemittah year evidently played a role in the choosing of this specific date.³⁶

Not only did the chronomessianic school claim to date the year when the redemption would come, but it presumed also to predetermine the season of the year. Rabbinic chronographers, including the authors of Seder Olam, dated events such as the angelic announcement of Sarah's impending pregnancy, Isaac's birth and God's covenant with Abraham as having occurred on the night of the 15th of Nisan.³⁷ The early *payyetan*, Yannai, who apparently flourished in the seventh century, using one line for each biblical incident, filled a twenty-four-line alphabetic acrostic poem, with incidents all of which allegedly occurred on the night of the 15th of Nisan; Abraham's victory over the four kings, Jacob's wrestling with the angel, Gideon's dream, the angel's striking the Assyrian army,

31 Yer. Berakhot, II, 4, 4d-5a; cf. B. Megillah 17b.

32 Yer. *ibid.*

33 B. Megillah 17b; Sanhedrin, 97a; Pesiqta d'Rab Kahana, *Bahodesh* I, 97 f. (Mandelbaum ed.), Songs Rabbah on 2:11.

34 Cf. B. Shabbat, Targumim and Rashi, Lev. 26:34-35, 44. Rabbi Elijah of Vilna's biblical calendar, appended to the Seder Olam (Waxman ed.; New York, 1952), identifies the ten shemittah years neglected by Israel during the preexilic period.

35 B. Sanhedrin 97a; cf. Av. Zarah 9a. See also Gelzer (note 22); Seder Eliyyahu Rabbah 2.

36 Av. Zarah 9b, which gives year 4231 A.M. is apparently a corruption.

37 Seder Olam, 5; B. Rosh Hashanah, 11a.

Daniel in the lions' den, concluding with the expected coming of the redeemer.³⁸ These Midrashic datings were of course based on nothing except the parallel with the timing of the Exodus. Their purpose was not so much to time the miraculous incidents as to emphasize the point that, in the words of the Mekilta and Tanḥuma, בניסן נגאֵלוּ וּבְנִיסָן עָתִידִין לִהְיוֹת, "During the month of Nisan they (Israel) were redeemed; they will be redeemed again in Nisan."³⁹

III

So far I have outlined the chronomessianic lore from Jeremiah to the late talmudic tradition. In this section I propose to show that the sabbatical calendar was probably a factor in the timing of the following messianic movements:

1. the commencement of John the Baptist's ministry; 2. the ascribed date of Jesus' birth; 3. Agabus; 4. the prophet of Egypt; and 5. Bar Kochba's uprising against Rome.

1. *John the Baptist's Sabbatical Date*

What is the evidence for the likelihood that John the Baptist commenced his ministry during or near the period when the Jews celebrated the year of release? Luke 3:1-2 offers a sixfold synchronism for John's date:

"In the 15th year of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilatus was procurator of Jerusalem, when Herod was prince of Galilee, his brother prince of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias prince of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas." It should be noted that this passage makes no mention of a sabbatical date, which might lead to a negative conclusion, that the sabbatical cycle played no or only a minor role in John's timing. Such a deduction is unwarranted because: a) even Graeco-Jewish historians, such as Josephus, customarily did not mention the year of the sabbatical cycle, perhaps since the Jews of the Diaspora did not observe shemittah; b) Luke addressed himself primarily to Gentile Christians; and c) conversely, Luke perhaps had no need to mention the chronomessianic link as it was taken for granted. The question whether John the Baptist's preaching coincided with the period of shemittah can be decided only on the basis of the contemporary calendar.

At first sight it should be a simple matter to convert Luke's "15th year of Emperor Tiberius" into a Julian date since Roman chronology

38 M. Zulay (ed.) *Piyyute Yannai* (Berlin, Schocken, 1938), 92 f.

39 B. Rosh Hashanah, 12b; Mekhilta, *Pisha*, 14, p. 52 (Harowitz and Rabbin); Tanḥuma, *Wayyera*, 17.

during this period is well attested. But the matter is complicated because it is not known which of the divergent calendars or regnal calculations Luke had in mind. Finegan and Hoehner have summarized the extensive scholarship on this point:⁴⁰ a) assuming that the reference is to Tiberius' dynastic reign, which commenced on August 19 of 14 C.E., Luke meant the year running from August 19 of 28 to August 18 of 29; b) if Luke's dating was the one customary in Antioch, presumably Luke's home town, the 15th year ran from Tishri 1 of year 27 to the end of Elul of year 28; c) by Babylonian and Jewish convention, the beginning of the regnal year fell in the spring, the 15th year of Tiberius ran from Nisan 1 of the Julian year 28 to the end of Adar of year 29 and d) if Luke followed the usage of Roman historians, such as Livy and Tacitus, Tiberius' 15th year commenced on January 1 and ended on December 31 of the year 28. Whichever of these methods of dating was intended by Luke, the whole or a part of Tiberius' 15th year coincided with the current sabbatical year that ran from Tishri 1 of year 27 to Elul 29 of year 28.⁴¹

If this synchronism of John's ministry is, or at least was assumed by Luke to have been historical, and if the synchronism was not a sheer accident, only under possibility b) could John have commenced his mission anytime during the year and still coincide with the sabbatical year. Under possibilities a), c), or d), however, his first public appearance could have taken place only during a fraction of the year. The largest fraction would have occurred under possibility d), from January 1 of 28 C.E. to Elul 29 by Jewish reckoning; from Nisan 1 to Elul 29 of 28 C.E., assuming possibility c); but only about a month, i.e. Elul of 28 C.E. under a). Whatever the fraction, if Luke's report of John's ministry in the 15th of Tiberius is historical, it coincided with the "sabbath of the land" in the Jewish calendar. But even if Luke or his sources invented the date, a problem which I do not here attempt to evaluate, the sabbatical calendar probably was a factor in John's timing. The fact that John began his ministry in 27/28, a year that happened to have been a shemitah, does not prove that he had deliberately planned the synchronism. For all we know, since John had to begin preaching sometime, if he was going to do it at all, the coincidence might reflect an accident. But the tradition of chronomessianism since Daniel suggests strongly that John planned the timing of his appearance in a season when preachers customarily called on the people to repent, for the "day of the Lord" was approaching.

If this timing was both deliberate and consistent with popular Jewish

40 J. Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (Princeton, N. J., Princeton University Press, 1964), 259-280; H. W. Hoehner, *Herod Antipas* (Cambridge, University Press, 1972), 307-312.

41 Wacholder, *HUCA*, 44 (1973), 190.

chronomessianism, John will have begun his ministry before or during the Passover season. "On Passover they were redeemed and on Passover they will be redeemed again." (It is of course more than a coincidence that Christ rose in the Passover season.) A major festival date for John, assuming Luke's dating was intended to be precise, rather than approximate, would exclude possibility a) from the above mentioned listings. Thus Passover of 28 C.E. during the period of shemittah appears to be the most reasonable date, from a chronomessianic point of view, for the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry.

2. *The Sabbatical Date of Jesus' Birth*

Chronomessianic beliefs may also help explain why early Christian writers assigned the birth of Jesus to certain dates. We need not stop here to review the diverse traditions of the ancients and the immense scholarship of the moderns on this point. What ought to be remembered, however, is that the determination of the exact dates of birth, except in royal families or in circles among whom horoscopes were popular, was in antiquity rarely possible even for contemporaries. The date of Jesus' birth became a problem only after he had been proclaimed Christ by his followers. In other words, the question of Jesus' birth became enmeshed in chronographic and historical factors. Hence, it may be assumed that, presented with the problem of assigning the year of birth to Jesus, the early Christian writers, having absorbed the doctrine of sabbatical messianism, would tend to pick a timing in consonance with this belief.

Three sabbatical dates were available to Christian historians while remaining faithful to the Gospels: Tishri of year 9 to Elul of 8 B.C.E., 2/1 B.C.E., or 6/7 C.E. Luke (2:1-2) evidently chose the shemittah of 6/7, since he mentions Quirinius' census. That Sulpicius Quirinius became the procurator of Syria in C.E. 6 is attested by Josephus and possibly by an inscription.⁴² A number of scholars posit, however, mainly on the basis of Luke, that Quirinius served in some kind of official post in the Near East also in 4-2 B.C.E.⁴³ If so, it might still fit with the chronomessianic tradition which would have expected the messiah during the shemittah of Tishri of year 2 to Elul of 1 B.C.E. In fact the earliest Christian chronographers from Clement to Eusebius offer the equivalent of 3/2 or 2 B.C.E.,⁴⁴ which tends to support the view that the ancient writers tended to favor a date that fell on the very eve of or during a shemittah.

42 Schürer, I, 516 f.

43 A. J. XVIII, 1-2. Cf. the literature cited by H. L. Feldman, in the LCL edition of Josephus, ad locum; cf. S. Sandmel, "Quirinius," in *IDB*, III, 975-977.

44 Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 215-249.

3. *Agabus*

A certain Agabus, who together with other prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch, according to Acts 11:27–30; 12:25, predicted a worldwide famine which in fact occurred during Claudius' reign. Joachim Jeremias took it for granted that whenever a famine is mentioned in Palestinian sources, it necessarily referred to deprivations caused by sabbatical years,⁴⁵ as if famines in Palestine other than during shemittah years or outside Palestine were, in antiquity, rare occurrences. Josephus (*A. J.* XX, 101) reports a famine in Judaea about that time, but divergent readings in the text, epitome and the Latin translation make it doubtful whether the famine occurred under Fadus (C.E. 44–45?) or under both Fadus and Tiberius Alexander (C.E. 45), or only during Tiberius Alexander's sole procuratorship (46–48). Contextually, the last date is the only plausible one under the circumstances.

4. *The Egyptian Prophet*

Little is known of the Jew of Egypt, labeled the prophet, except that Josephus brands him as one of the impostors who had promised to show to his followers "unmistakable marvels and signs . . . in harmony with God's design."⁴⁶ In Jerusalem and elsewhere he collected, according to Acts (21:38) 4,000 men, according to Josephus 30,000; but he was finally defeated by Felix, the Roman procurator, who with a large army slew some 400 of the prophet's followers and captured 200. The prophet himself, however, escaped unhurt, and his scattered believers continued to plague the land for a while.

The timing of this prophet is likewise poorly attested. We know that the procuratorship of Felix lasted from 52 to 60 C.E. Since Josephus records the story of this movement after having mentioned first Nero's accession, which took place in September of 54, and Felix's murder of the high priest, Jonathan, which apparently had occurred in early 55, the timing of this messianic movement coincided with the sabbatical year of 55/56.⁴⁷ In light of what has been said so far Nisan of 56 appears to be the likely date of the Egyptian prophet, a date that may have been regarded as "in harmony with God's design."

45 Jeremias (note 14) conveniently cites the ancient evidence on contemporary famines.

46 *A. J.* XX, 167 f.; cf. *B. J.* II, 61–63; Acts 32:38.

47 *A. J.* XX, 158 f. dates Nero's gift to Agrippa in the first year of Nero's reign, i.e. 54/55; 20:160–168 relates the rise of the Sicarii and the murder of Jonathan. Cf. *B. J.* II, 250–270.

5. *Bar Kochba*

Bar Kochba is the popular name (the rabbis called him Bar Koziba; he himself used Shimeon bar or ben Kosebah) of the leader of the second revolt against the Romans in 132–135. His official title was *nasi'*, denoting chief, prince, or king.⁴⁸ That his followers regarded Bar Kochba as the messiah of the Jews is almost certain. The very choice of the popular name of Kochba, denoting star (cf. Num. 24:17), instead of Bar Koziba (liar) suggests a claim of messianism. His coins and documents are dated according to a new era, that of "the Redemption of Israel" or "Freedom of Israel." Rabbi Akiba called him king, messiah. Ancient Jewish, Christian, pagan, now reinforced by numismatic and papyrological documents, combine to round out for us a picture of a messiah in action.⁴⁹

As with regard to John the Baptist's ministry and the date of Jesus' birth, the timing of the beginning of Bar Kochba's revolt appears to synchronize with the season of shemittah.⁵⁰ Eusebius dated the revolt in 132–135 C.E. and the rabbinic tradition maintains that it lasted three and a half years. A number of scholars have dated the beginning of the revolt during Tishri of 132, but recently found numismatic and papyrological evidence has shown that spring of 132 is the correct date.⁵¹ The nearest shemittah season lasted from Tishri 132 to Elul of 133. In other words, the timing of the uprising evidently coincided with the Passover season, on the eve of the Sabbatical year, in accordance with chronomessianic divine design.

Another point needs to be noted. The Julian date of 132/33, when the Bar Kochba rebellion commenced, happened to have been both a sabbatical and a jubilee year; which may have been an additional factor in the rise of the pitch of messianic fervor. As has been noted above (Dan. 9:24–27), the Qumran, and rabbinic writings, strongly suggest that the celebration of the jubilee year continued to be observed during inter-testamental times, as every 7th shemittah, or 49th year, was proclaimed a jubilee.⁵² Unfortunately, unlike the dates of shemittah, none of those of the jubilee has survived. According to the reconstruction proposed

48 J. T. Milik, in *Discoveries in the Judean Desert II* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1961), 118–171.

49 Yer. Ta'anit, IV, 7 p. 68d; Aristo of Pella in *FGrH*, 201; Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* IV, 6.

50 For the scrupulous observance of the customs of shemittah during Bar Kochba's rule, see *Discoveries in the Judean Desert II*, 125 ff., suggesting perhaps that Hillel's *prozbol* (M. Shevi'it, 10:3–8) had not been operative at the time.

51 B. Kanael, "Notes on the Dates Used During the Bar Kokhba Revolt," *EJ* 21 (1971), 39–46; Wacholder, *HUCA*, 44 (1973), 155, and *passim*, 153–184.

52 S. Safrai, "Yovel," in *Encyc. Hebraica* (in Hebrew), says that there is no shred of evidence for the existence of jubilee since the postexilic period. That

above, however, 603/02–555/54 B.C.E. constituted a jubilee cycle in Daniel's calendar, which Table 3 extends to the Bar Kochba period, showing that 132/33 C.E. was a jubilee year.

TABLE THREE
JUBILEE CYCLES

No. of Jub.	B.C.E.	No. of Jub.	B.C.E.	No. of Jub.	B.C.E., C.E.
1	603/02–555/54	6	358/57–310/09	11	113/12–65/64
2	554/53–506/05	7	309/08–261/60	12	64/63–16/15
3	505/04–457/56	8	260/59–212/11	13	15/14–32/35 C.E.
4	456/55–408/07	9	211/10–163/62	14	35/36–83/84
5	407/06–359/58	10	162/61–114/13	15	84/85–132/33

It is evident that the observance of the sabbatical years and jubilees during the intertestamental times played a far larger role in the consciousness of Israel than has been hitherto recognized. Immense as were the effects of the calendar of sabbatical cycles on the agricultural and social life of the people, its influence was no less on the formulation of Jewish religious beliefs. Concepts such as creation, history, apocalypse, and eschatology all became enmeshed with the calendar of sabbatical cycles. In the 7th year debts were cancelled, hard labor in the fields stopped; the voice of freedom was heard throughout the land as the steps of the messiah were believed to have become more and more audible.

a specific Pentateuchal commandment was altogether ignored, however, seems unlikely, especially in view of the observance of shemittah. Aside from Dan. 9:24–27 and the literature cited in notes 26–29, see also Yer. Sanhedrin V, 1, 22c; B. Sanhedrin, 40b. In fact, supposedly, the Book of Jubilees is rather inconceivable without the assumed existence of some aspects of the institution of the jubilee.