

# Interpreting Daniel's Seventy Weeks (Three Historic Views)

by Randall Price

We will consider below three views of the prophecy of the Seventy Weeks in Daniel 9:24-27. The first view is the traditional Orthodox Jewish or Rabbinic interpretation which today is non-messianic. The second and third views are Christian views which are messianic, but differ as to the time of fulfillment of the seventieth week. The first view is the Amillennial view which interprets the seventieth week as past and as having its fulfillment (or terminus) at the death of Christ. The second view is the classic Dispensational view which interprets the seventieth week as future and as having its fulfillment (or terminus) in the events of the Great Tribulation.

## The Rabbinic Interpretation

The seventy weeks prophecy of Daniel 9:24-27 was originally regarded by the rabbis as one of the most important predictive texts in the Bible. This significance was testified to by the first-century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus: "He [Daniel] not only predicted the future, like the other prophets, but specified *when* the events would happen" (*Antiquities* x. 268). The belief that Daniel's prophecy provided information as to the precise time of prediction was no doubt a significant factor in the timing of the war with Rome in AD 66, since the 70 years of wrath in Daniel 9:3, which figured prominently in the Qumran *War Scroll* (1QM), could have been interpreted as the period between the first outbreak of revolutionary activity in 4 BC (the time of Herod's death, and possibly also of Jesus' birth) and the final uprising in AD 66.

However, in the earliest versions of the present Hebrew Bible the Book of Daniel was placed later rabbis in the division known as the "Writings." This placement removed Daniel from the ranks of the prophets and reduced his prophecies to the status of pedagogical stories. Yet, undisputed evidence for Daniel's location within the Hebrew canon appears to be limited to later Hebrew manuscripts and to statements that may be traced no further back than the early rabbinic period. Two of the oldest available manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible which attest to the present canonical order are *Codex Leningradensis* and the *Aleppo-Codex* which are dated only to the ninth and tenth-century A.D. The two of the most explicit rabbinic statements are in the Gemara of the Babylonian Talmud: *Baba Bathra* 14b (where Daniel appears before Esther and Ezra), and *Megilla* 3a (where Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi are called prophets, but are distinguished from Daniel), are within material composed in the fifth to eighth centuries A.D.

Earlier Jewish tradition reveals a different rabbinic concept of Daniel with prophetic status. The oldest manuscript of the Hebrew Bible, *Codex Cairensis* (895 A.D..) includes Daniel in its list of the prophets and a Hebrew-Aramaic-Greek canon list dated tentatively to the second-century A.D. also list Daniel following the three major prophets. Furthermore, in all the Jewish sources of the first century A.D. - the Septuagint, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Josephus, Jesus, and the New Testament writers - Daniel is reckoned among the prophets. Why, then, did the later rabbis exclude Daniel from the prophetic corpus?

The evidence of Daniel's prophetic influence upon the religious and political events of earlier periods indicates that the Book could have dangerous effects. The Zealots considered Daniel an important prophetic voice, whose visions held the key to the interpretation of world events, especially concerning the Romans. Josephus referred to one such prediction (probably the seventy weeks prophecy) in *Jewish War* (VI) which the Zealots relied upon to instigate and support the first (and possibly second) revolt(s) against Rome. This trend was also followed by first and second-century rabbis. The fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., and the events subsequent to it, had confirmed to these rabbis (as it had to the early Jewish-Christians and Church Fathers), that the interpretation of the fourth monarchy in Daniel 2 and 7 as the Roman empire was correct. Therefore, Daniel's prophetic timetable was accurate as his book alone contained the key for the destruction of the Second Temple and of Israel's future restoration after a further exile (the seventy weeks prophecy). So influential was Daniel in this regard that *Targum Jonathan* on the Prophets (c. 50-1 B.C.), reveals that all of the prophets were interpreted along the lines set out in Daniel to calculate the end-time.

This use and influence of Daniel as predictive prophecy led the rabbis to regard Daniel as a dangerous book, since the application of an apocalyptic timetable to contemporary events had brought both disappointment and decline to the Nation. By separating it from classical prophecy and grouping it with other narratives of the Exile (e.g., Esther and Ezra), it was removed from exerting a paradigmatic influence on the prophetic corpus. Once it was incorporated among the heroes of the Exile, the accent of the book from was shifted from prophecy to pedagogy. Perhaps fear of Daniel's eschatological influence also led the rabbis to allow an allegorical interpretation of the Prophets and the Writings; an allowance never permitted for the Torah. By permitting the prophecies to be allegorized, the problems of literal interpretation (and application) could be avoided.

With regards the interpretation of the seventy weeks prophecy, the rabbis interpreted the weeks as "weeks of *years*" and saw it as having prophesied the Roman destruction of Jerusalem. The seventieth week is not entirely included in that event. Because it predicts the destruction of the Romans, its final statement is retained as a future event. The Jewish chronological record of Rabbi Jose known as the *Seder Olam Rabbah* preserves the oldest rabbinic tradition for interpreting the seventy weeks. In chapter 28 of this work the first seven weeks are related to the exile and return, the next sixty-two weeks are in the Land, and the final week predicts a period partially spent in the Land and partially spent in exile. In this case, the seventieth week could include events that occurred *after* A.D. 70.

According to *Abarbanel*, the condition of Israelite punishment in exile required the 490 years of this prophecy to complete the sins committed *in addition* to the violation of the sabbatical law (cf. 2 Chron. 36:21). Other Jewish commentators such as *Rashi* and *Metzudos*, held that this referred to a period following the 490 years (which they believed ended with the destruction of the Second Temple), "the last exile whose purpose it will be to terminate [i.e., *to atone for*] transgression of the Jewish Nation. Rabbi Hersh Goldwurm summarizing their views observes: "Thus, seventy weeks have been decreed upon your people and your city [for relative well-being] after which the Jews will receive the remainder of their punishment in the last exile whose purpose will be to terminate [i.e., *atone for*] transgression. One reason for this interpretation is because these commentators believed that Jewish suffering would atone for their transgression. *Abarbanel* noted that the return to Jerusalem and even the rebuilding of the Second Temple did not bring the expected redemption nor atone for past sins, since it was itself a part of the exile and atonement. He held that the real and complete redemption was still far off in history, awaiting fulfillment according to Daniel's prophecy.

The seventieth week (vs. 27) was not included in the sixty-two of vs. 26, according to *Ibn Ezra*. He thought it was not counted because of the turmoil and unrest preceding the destruction during which an anointed was killed. He arrived at seventy weeks by adding the seven weeks of verse 25 to the sixty-two of verse 26. This may indicate his difficulty in reconciling verse 27 with verse 26. Rashi has no difficulty identifying the "the people of the Prince that shall come" as the Romans (i.e., the legions of Vespasian and Titus). Both *Rashi* and *Rambam* are examples of those who ascribe the breaking of the covenant (with the Jewish rulers ["great ones"] rather than "many") to a broken promise of the Romans. However, none of the Sages who hold this opinion provide any historical source in support. The *Jerusalem Talmud* (*Taanis* 4:5) apparently attempts to connect this with the Romans substituting a pigs for the agreed lambs for the daily sacrifice. It states that at that very hour the sacrifices were stopped and the Temple was destroyed immediately after. Some rabbis believed that the abomination that makes desolate (vs. 27) referred to Hadrian's erection of a pagan temple on the site of the Jewish Temple after the Bar-Kokbha war (*Rashi*). As regards the Temple, some rabbinic interpreters (cf. *Malbim*) referred the last of the restoration goals of Dan. 9:24: "to anoint the most Holy [Place]" to the Third Temple, since *Tosefta Sotah* 13:2 records that the Second Temple had not been anointed. The Sages also considered this anointing of the Holy Place to take place in relation to the restoration of the *Shekinah* and the Temple vessels. *Mishnah* tractate *Yoma* 21b recorded that the Ark of the Covenant with the Tablets of the Law, the altars, and the holy vessels were not in the Second Temple. These were to be revealed through the Messianic King at the time He would build and anoint the Third Temple (cf. Zech. 6:12-13).

Earlier rabbis apparently had understood the term *mashiach* in verse 25 literally as the Messiah. However, later rabbis (*Rashi*, *Yossipon*, ch. 47) interpreted the term figuratively as "one who is anointed" [with oil], "an anointed ruler." Thus, no historical figure could be precisely determined and the rabbis offered various candidates: Cyrus, Zerubbabel, Nehemiah, a High Priest (e.g. Yehoshua ben Yehotzadak) or a descendant of Herod (Agrippa II). Nevertheless, it was Rashi's opinion that the destruction of the desolator at the end of the seventieth week was expected to be the promised "King Messiah," who would wage the final wars and the war of Gog and Magog. This accords with the futurist perspective of almost all of the rabbinic commentators that the redemption depicted for the seventy weeks was yet to be realized.

## **The Amillennial Interpretation**

The historical and theological developments which produced the amillennial interpretation of Daniel's Seventy Weeks prophecy (Dan. 9:24-27) were the result of direct opposition to premillennialism which was considered Judaistic. The New Testament, early Jewish-Christian, and Patristic evidence supports premillennialism as the dominant eschatological view up until the third-century A.D. In the controversy over chiliasm, the hermeneutic of the Alexandrian school (followed by Augustine and consequently the Roman Catholic Church, the Protestant Reformed churches, and modern amillennialism), which was a non-literal, allegorical hermeneutic, was applied to the Seventy Weeks prophecy to prove the political and spiritual program for the Jewish People had ended with the first advent of Christ and had been replaced by the Church. While adopting an historicist approach, the amillennialists' spiritual hermeneutic permits only a subjective application of events which in turn invites a broad spectrum of interpretation. This is particularly problematic for their interpretation of the seventieth week where the events do not fit with any known history (see traditional versus symbolic schools, below).

For the amillennialist, the focus of the Seventy Weeks passage is wholly Christological. The six infinitives of verse 24 that form the purpose of the prophecy and establish its *terminus ad quem* (conclusion),

are viewed as completed by Christ. The traditional school of amillennialism sees this completion having taken place in the seventieth week, which followed consecutively (and historically) after the sixty-nine weeks. Christological fulfillment occurred within the ministry of Christ or, at the latest, the time of the first preaching of the Gospel to the Gentiles (i.e., Pentecost). The symbolic school, however, extends final fulfillment to an indefinite period, which includes the Second Advent and eternal state. In this case, the six statements represent the successive stages in the history of Christ's Kingdom. In like manner, the last of the six prophetic goals: "to anoint the most holy [one]," is taken either as Christ's own anointing by the Spirit (traditional school), or of the eschatological anointing of the new holy of holies (= Christ) in the New [heavenly] Jerusalem (symbolic school). While some amillennialists follow premillennialists in attempting to determine historical dates for the *terminus a quo* (commencement) and *terminus ad quem* (conclusion) of the 490 years (vs. 25), other amillennialists have concluded that the figure of 490 is only symbolic (7x7).

Amillennialists and premillennialists agree on the messianic interpretation of the "anointed prince" (vs. 25) as Jesus the Messiah, however, the reference to his being "cut off and having nothing" (vs. 26) is variously interpreted to apply to Jesus' death (traditional school) or Jesus' influence and prestige as Messiah (symbolic school). Most in the traditional school support their interpretation that Messiah was "cut off" in the middle of the seventieth week, by identifying "the prince who is to come" (vs. 26) with the one whose activity is described (the "he" of vs. 27) as occurring in "the middle of the week," with Christ. On this basis, the "firm covenant" that this "prince" makes with "the many" is interpreted as the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31-37) which Christ made with the Church. In this view the "the city" and "the sanctuary" are interpreted literally as Jerusalem and the Temple, while the destruction wrought by "the prince" is applied non-literally to Christ's "pronouncements of destruction." However, while E.J. Young agrees that the "he" of verse 27 refers to Christ, he identifies the "prince that shall come" with Titus, the commander of the Roman forces in A.D. 68-70 who destroyed Jerusalem. In a dramatic departure from the traditional school, the symbolic school approximates the view of premillennialism and identifies "the prince that shall come" with the Antichrist and the "firm covenant" as one made in imitation of Christ and imposed on the masses (H.C. Leupold), or made to deceive people to follow him as God (C.F. Keil), but in any case is a covenant of terror and violence.

The difficulty with interpreting Christ's being "cut off" in the middle of the seventieth week again is present in the problem of resolving the statement of cessation of sacrifice and oblation as having occurred at this time. Recognizing that these sacrifices did not immediately stop with the death of Christ, but continued another forty years, amillennialists apply the meaning spiritually to either the "rending of the veil" in the Temple or the beginning of the preaching of the Gospel, both of which (in their view) delegitimized the sacrificial system. Thus, according to Young, at Christ's death Jerusalem "ceased to be a holy city" and its Temple was "no longer the house of God, but an abomination," while the actual destruction of both was "but the outward manifestation of what had already been put into effect by our Lord's death" (*Daniel*, 217-218). The New Testament, however, depicts a continued reverence for Jerusalem during the apostolic period as the center for the mother church (Acts 1:8; 15; Gal. 1:18-2:2) and the Temple as a place for Christian meeting (Acts 2:46; 3:1; 5:12-13), ritual festival observance (Acts 2:1; 20:6), and even worship (Acts 18:18; 21:23-26; 22:17; 24:11, 17-18). Amillennialists generally conclude that while the *terminus ad quem* of the sixty-nine weeks is Christ, the *terminus ad quem* of the seventy weeks is unstated in the text. However, the destruction of the desolator at the conclusion of verse 27 is stated as the event that terminates the desolations of the last half of the seventieth week, apparently concluding the week itself. Again, the amillennial interpretation has difficulty reconciling this event with historical events, For this reason, Young (traditional

school) advises against an emphasis on dates, while Leupold (symbolic school) abandons any historic fulfillment to the sevenieth week.

## The Dispensational Interpretation

Daniel's prophecy of the seventy weeks (Dan. 9:24-27) is part of the division of his book (chapters 7-12) that records visions of future earthly kingdoms (both human and divine). In the context of chapter 7, the archangel Gabriel explains to Daniel that seventy *weeks* are required to fulfill the petition Daniel has made concerning the restoration of Israel (vss. 3-19). Daniel's prayer had been based on his observation (vs. 2) of the seventy *years* prophecy in Jer. 25:11-12; 29:10. Daniel is told of six restoration goals that will be accomplished during the seventy weeks (vs. 24), which the remainder of the chapter outlines in events to unfold in Israel's subsequent history. Dispensationalism joins with most Christian scholarship in holding that the seventy weeks are to be interpreted as seventy weeks of *years*. This resulting period of 490 years (70 x 7) is divided according to the text (vss. 25-27) as periods of *seven* weeks (49 years), *sixty-two* weeks (434 years), and *one* week (7 years). Dispensationalism is also in agreement with most evangelical scholarship in interpreting the context of this passage as *messianic*, with the coming of Messiah taking place after the sixty-two weeks (i.e., after the 7 weeks + the 62 weeks = 483 years). However, Dispensationalism (classical) is distinct in its interpretation of Daniel's seventieth week (vs. 27) as *future*. With Israel's rejection of the Messiah and His death taking place after the sixty-ninth week (vs. 26), the completion of the six restoration goals for Israel (vs. 24) are left for the seventieth week. If the seventieth week immediately succeeds the sixty-ninth week historically, then the expected restoration must be applied spiritually to the Church as a new Israel. Because Dispensationalism adheres to the principle of literal interpretation and recognizes the scriptural distinction between God's program for Israel and the Church, it understands the historical completion of *Israel's* restoration must take place in a future week. During this time (as described in vs. 27), there is a resumption of the messianic program for Israel with the overthrow of the Antichrist (the apocalyptic prerequisite to the establishment of the messianic kingdom).

This interpretation requires a prophetic postponement (older writers referred to this as a "gap" or "parenthesis") between the events of verses 26 and 27. The revelation of a prophetic postponement in the fulfillment of the eschatological aspect of the messianic program is in harmony with numerous passages in the Old Testament that reveal the two advents of Christ (e.g., Gen. 49:10-12; Deut. 18:16; 2 Samuel 7:13-16; Isa. 9:1-7; 11:1-2, 11; 52:13-59:17-21; 61:1-11, cf. Lk. 4:16-19; cf. 7:22; Zeph. 2:13-3:20; Zech. 9:9-10; Joel 2:28; cf. Acts 2:17; Mic. 5:2-15; Psalm 2:7-8, cf. Acts 13:33; Heb. 1:5; 5:5; Psalm 22:1-32; Psalm 34:14, 16; Mal. 3:1-3; 4:5-6; 53:10a, 11). Daniel's concern is with *his People* (vss. 20, 24; cf. 12:1) and the restoration that Jeremiah predicted would come after the seventy year exile (Jer. 25:11-12; cf. 2 Chron. 36:21). Jeremiah's prophecy of restoration (Jer. 30-33), like the prophecies of Isaiah (Isa. 40-66) and Ezekiel (Ezek. 33-48) included predictions of both immediate (post-exilic) restoration and future (eschatological) restoration. The post-exilic prophets understood this distinction, realizing that though they were enjoying a restoration under Ezra/Zerubbabel, the complete national/spiritual restoration had been delayed for the future. This is seen, for example, in one of the signal events of restoration - the rebuilding of the Temple (Hag. 2:3-9).

The six restoration goals of Daniel's seventy weeks prophecy (vs. 24) may have a near fulfillment in the experience of the Nation (Messiah's redemptive advent), but must wait for its complete fulfillment in the future (Messiah's restorative advent). The postponement understood between vss. 26 and 27 is the consequence of partial and complete fulfillment in the messianic program. The first phase of the messianic

program accomplished spiritual redemption for ethnic Israel in the first advent of Christ (Matthew 1:21; cf. Luke 2:11). National rejection of Messiah (Matt. 23:37, cf. Acts 3:13-15, 17; 4:25-27), while fulfilling the promise of Gentile inclusion (Acts 15:14-18; Rom. 11:11, 25, 30), necessitated a second phase of the messianic program to apply spiritual redemption to Israel nationally (Acts 3:18-21; Rom. 11:26-29, 31) and complete the promise of national restoration (Matt. 23:39; Acts 1:6-7; 3:22-26; 15:16) which will be fulfilled at the second advent of Christ (Zech. 12:10-13:2; 14:3-11).

The Dispensational interpretation depends upon the validity of interpreting the seventieth week eschatologically. This is justified by the presence of numerous eschatological time markers, such as *qetz* (“end”), *yash<sup>e</sup>bitim* (“cause to cease”), *kalah* (“end”), *’ad* (“until”), and *nech<sup>e</sup>ratzah tittak* (“an appointed end”). These terms indicate that this section belongs to the same eschatological period, qualified later in Daniel as “the end-time” (cf. Daniel 12:4, 9, 13). This identification is enhanced by the presence parallel concepts between the two chapters (e.g., prayer for understanding, 9:2/ 12:8; desolation of Jewish people, 9:27/12:7; three and one-half year period, 9:27/12:7, 11; the abolition of sacrifice, 9:27/12:11; and the abomination of desolation, 9:27/12:11). Thus, Daniel’s prayer for an end to exile will be fulfilled in the eschatological age when all of the elements of his petition will be realized. Further confirmation of the postponement of the seventieth week and of a parenthetical period of history involving further exile and persecution for the Jewish people, is supported by the New Testament’s use of the seventy weeks prophecy. John McLean has demonstrated that the sequence of events of the Olivet Discourse (Matthew/Mark) and the judgment section of the Book of Revelation (chs. 4-19) reveal a structural dependence upon the seventy weeks prophecy.

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