

THE SEVENTY WEEKS OF DANIEL

By Randall Price

No portion of the Old Testament scripture is as essential to unlocking the mysteries of the prophetic plan for God's future program for Israel and the nations than the book of Daniel and, of all Daniel's prophecies, the prophecy of the Seventy Weeks provides the indispensable chronological key to New Testament prophecy. It is this prophecy which concerns both the beginning and ending of "the desolation of Jerusalem" (from the Babylonian Conquest to the Second Advent of Christ) and defines that period as "the times of the Gentiles" (Luke 21:24), after which Israel's time of restoration will begin (cf. Isaiah 2:2-4; Zechariah 8:1-15; 14:3-21). The prophecy of the Seventy Weeks (Daniel 9:24-27) therefore belongs to the larger corpus of prophetic restoration texts given to national Israel as a comfort in her captivity and as a continued promise of the fulfillment of the program of messianic redemption centered in the Davidic dynasty in Jerusalem (Isaiah 40:1-66:24; Jeremiah 30:1-33:26; Ezekiel 33:1-48:35). In this regard Daniel (5:25-31) joined the pre-exilic prophet Isaiah (41:25-26; 44:26-45:3) in predicting the overthrow of Israel's captors, the Babylonian Empire, by the Medo-Persian Empire (539 B.C.) and recording their role in the restoration of the Jewish People to the city of Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple.

Within the Book of Daniel, the Seventy Weeks prophecy is part of the division of the book that records visions of future earthly kingdoms, both human and divine (chapters 7-12), thereby serving in the progress of divine revelation as the prophetic template for later eschatological revelations such as Jesus' Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24; Mark 13; Luke 21, Paul's "Day of the Lord" discourse, (2 Thessalonians 2:1-17), and the wrath section of the Apocalypse (Revelation 6-19). This usage of the Seventy Weeks prophecy by New Testament writers in predicting future events argues for its futurist interpretation (if these New Testament texts are interpreted as unfulfilled, as literal interpretation demands).

In the context of the Seventy Week prophecy itself, Daniel (9:2) anticipated the time of this fulfillment and the end of exile based on Jeremiah's explicit prediction that the exile would last for 70 years (Jeremiah 25:11; 29:10). Recognizing that the ultimate fulfillment of restoration depended on national repentance (Jeremiah 29:10-14), Daniel sought to personally intercede for Israel through a prayer of penitent petition with its focal point of the restoration program – Jerusalem and the Temple (9:3-19). From Daniel's prayer it appears that he expected the immediate and complete fulfillment of Israel's restoration with the conclusion of the seventy-year captivity. However, the answer given to him by the archangel Gabriel in response to his petition (the Seventy Weeks prophecy) revealed that Israel's restoration would be progressive in nature and ultimately fulfilled only at the time of the end (cf. Daniel 12). In this light Gabriel explained that Seventy Weeks were "decreed" as the time necessary for both Daniel's people (the Jewish People) and the Holy City (Jerusalem)" (verse 24) to complete God's prophetic program for Israel spanning the messianic program of redemption (which includes both advents of Christ). In particular, this prophetic program would encompass six restoration goals that would be accomplished during the Seventy Weeks: (1) "to finish the transgression, (2) "to make an end of sins", (3) "to make atonement for iniquity," (4) "to bring in everlasting

righteousness,” (5) “to seal up vision and prophecy,” (6) “to anoint the most holy [place].” These events would unfold in Israel's subsequent history within specific divisions of time: “seven weeks and sixty-two weeks = 69 weeks)” (9:25-26), and “one week (the seventieth week)” (9:27), during which prophetic activity would occur as preparation for the final fulfillment.

This extensive period of fulfillment is understood by the interpretation of the seventy “weeks” as seventy weeks of *years*, based on the prior usage of Jeremiah’s “seventy years” prophecy. The resulting period of 490 years (70 x7) is divided according as *seven* weeks (49 years), *sixty-two* weeks (434 years), and *one* week (7 years). Therefore, rather than the restoration coming with the return of a remnant of the exiles after the 70 years, it would be 490 years before all that was promised for Israel’s future would be performed. Conservative Christian scholarship has understood this prophecy as *messianic*, predicting the coming and death of the Messiah (9:25-26a), and “the destruction of the city (Jerusalem) and the sanctuary (Temple)” (9:26b), as taking place after the sixty-two weeks (i.e., after the 7 weeks + the 62 weeks = 483 years). This timing pinpoints the career of Jesus and the Roman conquest of Jerusalem at the end of the Second Temple period. Futurists (dispensationalists) have classically interpreted the final “week” (the seventieth week) of verse 27 as occurring after (but not immediately after) the sixty-ninth week. In harmony with Daniel 12 and the New Testament prophetic texts that are based on Daniel’s Seventy Weeks prophecy, the events are said to describe the revelation of the Antichrist in the desecration (“abomination of desolation”) of the rebuilt Jewish Temple and his resultant divine (“decreed”) destruction during the Tribulation period. Since these events of the “seventieth week” involve Israel’s restoration program and correspond to the end time (Daniel 12:4, 9; cf. 8:17), they follow (and are distinct from) the events that define the age of the Church (which is consummated by the Rapture).

All interpretive views see the six restoration goals of the Seventy Weeks (9:24) as establishing the time of the prophecy’s fulfillment: Non-futurists argue that although these goals were future in Daniel’s day they were all fulfilled historically in the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. They therefore view the entire prophecy as being fulfilled consecutively without interruption within the seventieth week, which is understood to have immediately followed the sixty-ninth week in first century. While some futurists agree that some of the redemptive goals may have been fulfilled in Christ’s first advent, they argue that the fulfillment of other goals cannot be accomplished apart from events that attend the second advent of Christ. For example, a past historical interpretation fails with respect to Daniel’s central concern - a specific answer to the time of the end of captivity of the Jewish People and Jerusalem (9:2a, 23), the motivation behind his prayer (9:19) that resulted in the revelation of the Seventy Weeks prophecy. The non-futurist view must find an end to the exile in temporary Jewish revolts, but all of these were unsuccessful and ultimately led to the destruction of the city, the Temple and further exile. This, of course, offers no solution to Daniel’s specific petition for his people’s restoration which required a return to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Temple (9:16-19). As a result, non-futurists generally depart from literal historical fulfillment (which they require for messianic interpretation) and resort to symbolic fulfillment with “spiritual restoration” coming through Christ’s atonement. More critical to the fulfillment of this specific event, however, is the conclusion of Gabriel’s promise to Daniel that the one who would desolate the Temple would be “completely destroyed” (9:27c). Such an event did not occur historically in the past with the Roman conquerors of Jerusalem. Rather, the Roman general Titus who destroyed the Second

Temple together with his emperor father Vespasian enjoyed the triumph of parading the Temple vessels through the streets of Rome. As with the messianic interpretation of verses 25-26, the prophetic destruction of the Temple desolator in verse 27 must occur literally, since the destruction of the Temple in verse 26 is understood to have occurred literally. The fact that this destruction is “decreed” further demands that its fulfillment must be one that can be identified historically as the result of divine judgment. Only the futurist interpretation that sees the Temple desolator as the Antichrist (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4; Revelation 11:1-2) with his destruction at the Second Advent of Christ (2 Thessalonians 2:8-9; Revelation 19:11-20) is in harmony with this requirement of divine demonstration.

A number of other factors also argue for a progressive future fulfillment of these goals in both the first and second advents of Messiah. First, it is crucial to observe those for whom this prophecy is to find fulfillment, namely “your people and your holy city” (9:24). The fulfillment of the Seventy Weeks prophecy must occur with respect to national Israel and Israel’s capital city of Jerusalem. In other words, it is not a universal “salvation history” that is being addressed here but the future history of the Jewish People in their historic Land. Because a Jewish remnant did historically return to Judah as a Nation to resettle the Land and to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple, in direct answer to Daniel’s prayer, and because a Jewish Messiah did come to the Land of Israel to historically “make atonement for iniquity” (9:26), the six prophetic goals of the Seventy Weeks cannot be interpreted other than in terms of literal fulfillment for the same people and place that Daniel knew. Therefore, in context, this excludes finding final fulfillment for these six goals within the Church in this age rather than with the Jewish Nation in the age to come. This can be substantiated by looking at the messianic mission to Israel described in these goals.

The first three goals relate to the sins of national Israel while the final three goals respect her salvation. Thus the period for the fulfillment of all the goals must be seen in conjunction with Messiah’s mission to Israel, which historically encompasses both advents. That Messiah is clearly on center stage in this prophecy can be observed by the unambiguous mention of him in verses 25-26. In verse 24 the terms connected with the first set of goals: “finish” (transgression) and “end” (sin), both look at the culmination of a condition. Although in the year that the “Seventy Weeks prophecy” was given, Cyrus freed the Jews, ending their foreign captivity and their unavoidable contact with idolatry and desecration, the remnant that returned to Judah found that idolatry and transgression continued (cf. Ezra 9:1-2; Nehemiah 9:2). This fact revealed that the prophetic plan was unfulfilled by Israel’s return at the end of the seventy years but required the coming of Israel’s Messiah to fulfill it in the future. Jewish commentators also held that the final fulfillment of these goals had not been accomplished with the return and restoration under Zerubbabel in 538 B.C. According to the Jewish commentator Abarbanel, the nature of Israel’s sin required not 70 years, but 490 years to complete the sins committed *in addition* to the violation of the sabbatical law (2 Chronicles 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.”

What Daniel’s prophecy clearly reveals is that the Messiah came and accomplished the first part of His mission at the time predicted in verses 25-26, that is, 483 years into the 490 years. In the context of verse 26 Messiah’s “cutting off” must refer to a death in the same time

period as the destruction of “the city [of Jerusalem] and the sanctuary [Temple],” that is, in the late Second Temple period. This was precisely the time expected for the arrival of the Messiah in the rabbinic sources (see the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Sanhedrin 97a-b). Based on these sources the revered Vilna Gaon accepted the messianic era as beginning at this appointed time, but without the Messiah! In explanation he proposed that an initial transitional age (of apostasy) would precede the final fulfillment.¹ Therefore, Messiah’s death was to “make an end [“atone for”] sin” and “make atonement for iniquity” as predicted in verse 24. This act serves as the basis for Israel’s future salvation at the second advent (Zech. 12:10; Matt. 24:30-31; Lk. 21:27-28; Rom. 11:26-27). The words “and have nothing” added after the words “cut off” may mean “without inheriting the messianic kingdom” (verse 26a). This fulfillment, as declared by Jesus (Acts 1:6-7) awaits the future, or the end of the final week when the prerequisite for the establishment of the messianic kingdom, the overthrow of the Temple desolator (the Antichrist), is completed (verse 27).

The fulfillment of the last set of goals also waits the time of the end. The phrase “to bring in everlasting *righteousness*” looks at the predicted millennial restoration or “age of righteousness” (see Isaiah 1:26; 11:2-5; 32:17; Jeremiah 23:5-6; 33:15-18) that reverses the theological scandal (note Dan. 9:15-16) of the Israel’s national rejection of her Messiah (see Ezekiel 36:17-38; 37:21-28). This eschatological restoration may also be intended in the goal “to seal up the prophetic vision,” which has the fulfillment (or “confirmation”) of Jeremiah’s prophecy in view. The final goal “to anoint the most holy” must also look to the future, and specifically a future dedication of the Temple’s Holy of Holies. Rabbinic interpretation referred this to the Third Temple, since according to *Tosefta Sotah* 13:2 the Second Temple had not been anointed since it lacked both the Ark of the Covenant and the *Shekinah* (the Divine Presence). Rather, according to *Yoma* 21b, the Ark would be revealed by the Messianic king, who would also build the Third Temple (cf. Zech. 6:12). When Messiah returns in glory, He will build the millennial Temple (see Ezek. 40-48), it will be filled with the Divine Presence (Ezek. 43:1-7), and will be consecrated for use throughout the messianic age (Ezek. 43:11, 18-27; 44:11-28; 45:13-46:15; Isa. 56:6-7; 60:7; Jer. 33:18; Zech. 14:16-21). Therefore, Daniel describes Messiah’s mission to Israel beginning with His crucifixion as Israel’s Savior and culminating with His reign as Israel’s king. Thus, Daniel’s prayer for an end to exile can only be fulfilled when all of the elements of his petition will be realized, and this can only be accomplished in the coming age of Messiah’s reign.

The signal event that leads to the completion of the messianic program for Israel in the concluding half of the seventieth week is the further revelation in verse 27b of the desecration Temple through the “abomination that makes desolate.” A leader (called a “prince” like the messiah in verse 25) related to the people (the Romans) who destroyed the Second Temple would make a covenant with the leaders (“the many”) of Israel. While the specific nature of this “covenant” is unclear, it is clear that it relates to the rebuilding of the Temple in some way. Several reasons may be given to support this conclusion: (1) The Second Temple was rebuilt by the permission and power of a Gentile ruler (Cyrus), setting the precedence for the rebuilding of the Third Temple. (2) If a political power or leader could guarantee the rebuilding of the Temple, any covenant made with Israel would be expected to include this, (3) When the covenant moves

¹See further, Michael L. Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus. Volume 1: General and Historical Objections* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, forthcoming), pp. 71-75, 78-79.

from policy to persecution in the middle of the seventieth week, the Antichrist takes the prerogative to cause the sacrifices to cease (Daniel 9:27; 12:11) and to occupy it himself (Matthew 24:15; Mark 13:14; 2 Thessalonians 2:4). This could imply that he had been involved in some prior relationship with it, (4) A pivotal event marked both the beginning and end of the first sixty-nine weeks and the interval between the end of the sixty-ninth and the beginning of the seventieth (Daniel 9:25-26). Such an event might be expected at the beginning of the seventieth week as well, especially when it would appear to mark a revival of God's direct dealing with the Nation, (5) Since the purpose of the Tribulation is to prepare Israel for the fulfillment of its promises in the Millennium where the Temple is prominent, and the Temple suffers with the Nation during the Tribulation, its rebuilding should be connected with the beginning of the Tribulation (the signing of the covenant, Daniel 9:27a).

Daniel's focus on the Temple's future desecration as a signal event in the seventieth week, "the time of distress" (Daniel 12:1), was announced by Jesus as the unavoidable sign to Israel of the time of Great Tribulation (Matthew 24:15; Mark 13:14). The apostle Paul also used it as evidence for the unmistakable rise of the "man of sin" (the Antichrist) and of the judgment of God to come in the Tribulation, especially upon the Antichrist whose act of "abomination" will be accompanied with deceptive "signs and false wonders" (2 Thessalonians 2:9; Revelation 13:11-15). With the destruction of the Antichrist and his armies by Christ (Revelation 19:20), and the national repentance of Israel (Romans 11:26-27), the final restoration of Israel and the exaltation of Jerusalem and God's Sanctuary for which Daniel prayed will be accomplished (cf. Isaiah 2:2-3; 4:2-6; Jeremiah 3:17; Ezekiel 37:24-28; 48:35; Zechariah 8:3-8; 13:1-2; 14:8-20).

Daniel had searched the prophets and prayed for an answer to the mystery that surrounded the desolation of the Temple in his day. The answer he received by divine revelation was that the times of the Gentiles, imposed from the captivity of his day, would not end until it was brought together in an international empire headed by a coming wicked ruler. Daniel was told that this would occur in the end time, and that with the final act of Temple desolation would come the final judgment of God against the Gentile powers and Israel's realization of the promises of God (Daniel 2:44-45; 7:17-27; 11:36-45; 12:1, 7). In the Seventy Weeks prophecy Daniel left to us the key to the prophetic puzzle of the end time so that we who live closer than he to the times of fulfillment might know what to expect and have confidence in our own day of the outworking of God's program for Israel and for our own lives.

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