

God's Future Program for Israel (Daniel 9)

by Randall Price

No book in the ancient world or the modern is as enigmatic, yet essential, to unlocking the mysteries of the prophetic plan for God's future program for Israel than the book of Daniel. The late seminary president and author Alva J. McClain once declared: "... with reference to its importance, I am convinced that in the predictions of [Daniel's] Seventy Weeks, we have the indispensable chronological key to all New Testament prophecy."¹ Daniel's great prophecy of the Seventy Weeks (Dan. 9:24-27) is part of the division of his book that records visions of future earthly kingdoms, both human and divine (chapters 7-12). It belongs to the larger program of future restoration promised to national Israel as a comfort in her captivity (Isa. 40:1-66:24; Jer. 30:1-33:26; Ezek. 33:1-48:35). When the Persian Empire overthrew the Babylonians in 539 BC as predicted (Isa. 41:25-26; 44:26-45:3; Dan. 5:25-31), Daniel realized the day of Israel's release was at hand. This was confirmed for him by Jeremiah's prophecy (Jer. 25:11; 29:10) which had prophesied the exile would last for 70 years (Dan. 9:2). Recognizing that the ultimate fulfillment of restoration depended on national repentance (Jer. 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 Mount (Dan. 9:3-19).

From Daniel's prayer it appears that he expected the immediate and full fulfillment of Israel's restoration with the conclusion of the seventy-year captivity. However, the prophetic revelation brought to him by the archangel Gabriel in response to his petition revealed that the complete fulfillment of the restoration program would be yet future and progressive in nature. Gabriel explained this in terms of divisions of time during which prophetic activity would occur as preparation for the final fulfillment.

Discerning Daniel's Divisions

Gabriel's revelation to Daniel was that the full course of time would extend for "seventy "weeks" (verse 24). These "weeks" are to be understood as weeks of years since Daniel's prayer were based on the years of Jeremiah's prophecy. 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. This resulting period of 490 years (70 x 7) is divided according to verses 25-27 into periods of seven weeks (49 years), sixty-two weeks (434 years), and one week (7 years). Dispensational scholarship has traditionally accepted the context of this passage as messianic, with the death of Messiah and the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple coming after the sixty-two weeks (i.e., after the 7 weeks + the 62 weeks = 483 years). The final "week," the "seventieth week" of verse 27 will then be fulfilled when the Temple is rebuilt and desecrated by the abomination of desolation in the Great Tribulation. This interpretation requires that the seventieth week of Daniel be understood as eschatological, that is, having its fulfillment in the end time. That this is the correct understanding can be demonstrated by considering the goals to be met in the fulfillment of the seventy weeks as outlined to Daniel in verse 24.

The Prophetic Plan for Israel

Six goals (six infinitives) serve to establish the time of the prophecy's fulfillment: (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]." Some

commentators argue that although these goals were once future they have now all been fulfilled historically in the first advent of Messiah. In this case the entire prophecy of the seventy weeks is viewed as being fulfilled consecutively without interruption within the first century. One difficulty with such a past historical interpretation is the fact that with the conclusion to the prophecy in verse 27 no specific answer to the time of the end of captivity had been given to Daniel. Yet it was this very thing that he was attempting to “understand” (verse 2a; cf. 8:17; 9:23), and the motivation behind his prayer (vs. 19). This view must find an end to the exile in temporary Jewish revolts, all of which 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 included a return to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Temple, vss. 16-19). Furthermore, the climax of Gabriel’s promise to Daniel was that the one who would one day desolate the Temple would himself be desolated completely. This did not occur historically with the Roman general Titus who destroyed the Second Temple. Rather, he and his emperor father Vespasian enjoyed the triumph of parading the Temple vessels through the streets of Rome.

On the other hand, a number of factors argue rather 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” (verse 24). In other words, the fulfillment of the seventy weeks prophecy must occur with respect to Daniel’s “people and city” - national Israel and the 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, in direct answer to this prayer, and because a Jewish Messiah did come to the Land of Israel to historically “make atonement for iniquity” (Dan. 9:26), these prophetic goals 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 fulfillment for these six goals with people other than the Jewish People, such as with the church in this age. Looking at the messianic mission to Israel described in these goals can substantiate this.

Messiah’s Mission to Israel

The first three goals relate to the sins of national Israel while the final three-goal 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.² A similar expression is found in an eschatological context in the Dead Sea document known as Pseudo-Daniel (4Q243-245).³ 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 BC. 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.”⁴

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.⁵ 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).⁶ 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 Program of the Seventieth Week

In verse 27 it was revealed to Daniel that in the seventieth week another significant event with relation to the Temple would occur. 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 Temple in some way. Dr. Harold Foos came to this conclusion in his doctoral dissertation written for Dallas seminary: ... it is the conviction of this writer that the repossession of the Temple site and the rebuilding of the Temple with its renewed worship will be in direct consequence of the covenant that the Antichrist makes with Israel for the "one week," the seven years of the Tribulation period.⁷ 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 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" (Dan. 12:1), was announced by Jesus as the unavoidable sign to Israel of the time of Great Tribulation (Matt. 24:15; Mk. 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 Thess. 2:9; Rev. 13). With the destruction of the Antichrist and his armies by Messiah (Rev. 19:20), and the national repentance of Israel (Rom. 11:26-27), the final restoration of Israel for which Daniel prayed will be at hand.

Daniel 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. He left to us this key to the prophetic puzzle 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.

¹Alva J. McClain, *Daniel's Prophecy of the Seventy Weeks* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), 6.

²The term *kala'* means to "terminate" or "complete," while *hatem* has the idea of "making whole," i.e., "completing." This is the end of a condition that is described by the objects as "the rebellion," i.e., the rejection of the Messiah (cf. Isaiah 53:1-9; Zechariah 12:10), and innate sin (*chata'*), i.e., sin which prevents ritual purity (cf. Isaiah 27:9; Ezekiel 36:25-27; 37:23; cf. Romans 11:27).

³In line 51 we read: *lmsfrs''* ("to bring Evil to an end"), cf. Robert Eisenman and Michael Wise, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered* (Massachusetts: Element, 1992), 67-68.

⁴Scherman and Zlotowitz, *Daniel*. The Artscroll Tanach Series, 260. 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, and thus not yet fulfilled according to Daniel's prophecy.

⁵See 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.

⁶This is one interpretation of the phrase *'eyn lo* ("will have nothing"); an alternate translation is "not for Himself," meaning that the Messiah's death was either not for Himself; i.e., it was substitutionary (for others), or that He was innocent (i.e., there was no guilt or criminal reason for His death). The former interpretation strengthens the eschatological argument, but the latter does not detract from it.

⁷Harold D. Foos, "Jerusalem in Prophecy," Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1965, p. 230.