

DANIEL'S SEVENTY WEEKS

The final four verses of Daniel 9 contain a sweeping prophecy that arguably reaches to the second advent of Jesus Christ. As the only Old Testament prophecy that may pinpoint the timeframe of Messiah's coming to Israel, it is difficult to overstate the importance of the prophecy. As Donald Campbell says in his commentary: "Daniel 9 has been called by one writer 'the backbone of prophecy,' and by another, 'the high point of the Book of Daniel.' As chapters 2 and 7 outline the prophetic program of the Gentile nations, so chapter 9 reveals God's prophetic program for the Jews. In fact, this chapter answers the very timely question, 'Will Israel survive?'"¹ John Walvoord called this "one of the most important prophecies of the Old Testament."² The text under consideration reads:

Daniel 9:24 Seventy weeks are determined upon thy people and upon thy holy city, to finish the transgression, and to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up the vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most Holy. 25 Know therefore and understand, *that* from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the Messiah the Prince *shall be* seven weeks, and threescore and two weeks: the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublous times. 26 And after threescore and two weeks shall Messiah be cut off, but not for himself: and the people of the prince that shall come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary; and the end thereof *shall be* with a flood, and unto the end of the war desolations are determined. 27 And he shall confirm the covenant with many for one week: and in the midst of the week he shall cause the sacrifice and the oblation to cease, and for the overspreading of abominations he shall

¹ Donald K. Campbell, *Daniel: God's Man In A Secular Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House Publishers, 1988), 134.

² John F. Walvoord, *Daniel: The Key To Prophetic Revelation* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1989), 216.

make *it* desolate, even until the consummation, and that determined shall be poured upon the desolate.

The purpose of this paper is to exegete the foregoing verses, often referred to as Daniel's Seventy Weeks, with special attention to supporting the validity of a literal hermeneutic.

While there is much disagreement about how best to interpret Daniel 9:24-27, broadly speaking there are two fundamental views, the Christological and non-Christological, the latter of which may be further divided into the liberal critical view and the conservative amillennial view.³ It is not the purpose of this paper to address the proper dating of the book of Daniel. The conservative view—that Daniel wrote the book in the sixth century B.C.—is assumed. As Walvoord indicates, the defining feature of the amillennial view is that the first 69 weeks are taken literally but the seventieth week is taken as an indeterminate period of time.⁴ The exegesis that follows will maintain a consistent literal hermeneutic, resulting in a premillennial view, and accordingly, reject the amillennial view.

As with any Biblical text, context is the overriding consideration in arriving at the proper interpretation. The immediate context in chapter 9 is Daniel's grappling with Jeremiah's prophecy of 70 years of captivity for Judah and his concern for when the captivity would end: "In the first year of his reign I Daniel understood by books the number of the years, whereof the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah the prophet, that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem. And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with

³ John F. Walvoord, *Daniel*, 216.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 218.

fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes.” (Daniel 9:2-3). The greater context for Seventy Weeks are the visions that occupy the two preceding chapters. The visions of both chapters foretold future times of distress for Israel that Daniel might have had trouble reconciling with his understanding of Jeremiah’s prophecy. He was particularly interested in understanding the details of the fourth beast in Daniel 7, but even after the angelic interpretation, he lamented: “As for me Daniel, my cogitations much troubled me, and my countenance changed in me: but I kept the matter in my heart.” (Daniel 7:28). In Daniel 8, he was particularly concerned with understanding the “little horn,” but even after the angelic help: “And I Daniel fainted, and was sick *certain* days; afterward I rose up, and did the king’s business; and I was astonished at the vision, but none understood *it*.” (Daniel 8:27). Understood in view of the two preceding chapters and Jeremiah’s 70 years of captivity, Daniel’s Seventy Weeks is revelation from God in answer to Daniel’s prayer and designed to provide answers about Israel’s future. Renald Showers summarizes the context:

God had sent Gabriel for the purpose of making Daniel wise with understanding concerning the vision of chapter eight. Although Daniel had received that vision thirteen years earlier, he continued to be wearied by confusion concerning it. What confused Daniel was this: if the Babylonian captivity of the Jews was to last for seventy years, and if those seventy years were near their end, then why in the vision of chapter eight had God pictured a further chastening of Israel for many years into the future? It would appear that the vision had caused Daniel to fear that God might delay the end of the captivity. It was that fear that drove Daniel to be so intense in his prayer of repentance.⁵

⁵ Renald E. Showers, *The Most High God* (Bellmawr, NJ: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc., 1994), 116.

With this context in mind, a number of observations can be made about verse 24. First, as most scholars have recognized, the term translated “weeks” is more properly “sevens.” Like our term “dozen,” the word could mean seven days or seven years or perhaps seven of some other time interval. Robert Chisholm comments on the term: “The Hebrew word *shabua’*, which appears in v. 24 in the plural, means literally ‘a period of seven.’ Elsewhere it is used of a week (a period of seven days) (see Gen. 29:27-28 [cf. Judg. 14:12]; Exod. 34:22; Lev. 12:5; Num. 28:26; Deut. 16:9-10, 16; 2 Chron. 8:13; Jer. 5:24; Dan. 10:2-3). Here in Dan. 9:24-27 it is usually understood to refer to seven ‘weeks’ of years, that is to a seven-year period.”⁶ Most conservative commentators accept that these are weeks of years, not weeks of days, in the prophecy.⁷ Accordingly, most conservative scholars understand the seventy weeks to refer to a period of 490 years (70 X 7 = 490).

A second critical observation is that the prophecy relates to “thy people,” namely Daniel’s people, the Jewish people. It also relates to “thy holy city,” namely Jerusalem (cf. Daniel 9:2, 7). For the Jewish people and the city of Jerusalem, God has revealed six components of His program: (1) to finish the transgression, (2) to make an end of sins, (3) to make reconciliation for iniquity, (4) to bring in everlasting righteousness, (5) to seal up the vision and prophecy, and (6) to anoint the most Holy. The phrase “to finish the transgression” probably refers to the Jews’ rebellion against God. As Showers observes, the term “transgression” has the root

⁶ Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., *Handbook On The Prophets* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 313.

⁷ Kenneth O. Gangel, *Daniel* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2001), 263; Hobert E. Freeman, *An Introduction To The Old Testament Prophets* (Warsaw, IN: Faith Ministries & Publications, 2004), 285; John F. Walvoord, *Daniel*, 217-18.

mean “to rebel.”⁸ Walvoord writes: “The expression *to finish* is derived from the *piel* verb form of the root *kala* meaning ‘to finish’ in the sense of bringing to an end. The most obvious meaning is that Israel’s course of apostasy and sin and wandering over the face of the earth will be brought to completion within the seventy sevens. The restoration of Israel which Daniel sought in his prayer will ultimately have its fulfillment in this concept.”⁹ From the Christological viewpoint, passages like Zechariah 12:9-14 are particularly important. The ultimate rebellion against God was in their rejecting Messiah, and thus “to finish the transgression” must look forward to a time when that specific rebellion is also reversed. This prophecy necessarily reaches to the second advent.

The phrase “to make an end of sins” seems to point to the daily sins of the people. Gangel comments: “The idea here is not forgiveness but restraint (Gen. 8:2). God will one day seal up the sins of Daniel’s people.”¹⁰ The third component of God’s program for Israel is “to make reconciliation for iniquity.” Again, a Christological interpretation in view of New Testament revelation seems best. Looking forward to the second advent, Zechariah 13:1 reads: “In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness.” In Hebrews 2:17 confirms of Jesus Christ: “Wherefore in all things it behooved him to be made like unto *his* brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things *pertaining* to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people.” Walvoord comments on this phrase: “[It]...seems to be a

⁸ Showers, *The Most High God*, 118.

⁹ Walvoord, *Daniel: The Key To Prophetic Revelation*, 221.

¹⁰ Kenneth O. Gangel, *Daniel*, 264.

rather clear picture of the cross of Christ in which Christ reconciled Israel as well as the world to Himself (2 Co 5:19). As far as the Old Testament revelation of reconciliation is concerned, lexicographers and theologians have understood the Hebrew word *kipper* when used in relation to sin to mean to ‘cover,’ to ‘wipe out,’ to ‘make ... as harmless, non-existent, or inoperative, to annul (so far as God’s notice or regard is concerned, to withdraw from God’s sight, with the attached idea of reinstating in His favour, freeing from sin, and restoring to holiness.”¹¹

Whereas the first three components of God’s program for Israel relate to bringing an end to their rebellion and iniquity, the last three relate to a new beginning. The phrase “to bring in everlasting righteousness” likely looks to New Covenant fulfillment (Jeremiah 31:33-34).¹² We know that this has not been fulfilled yet. Dwight Pentecost is correct in seeing this as a characterization of the Millennial Kingdom: “Being satisfied by the death of Christ, God will bring in everlasting righteousness. The form of the verb ‘bring in’ here means ‘to cause to come in.’ The word ‘everlasting’ (here pl. in Heb.) means ages. Thus this phrase (lit., ‘to bring in righteousness of ages’) is a prophecy that God will establish an age characterized by righteousness. This is a reference to the millennial kingdom...”¹³ The fifth component, “to seal up the vision and prophecy,” likewise points to millennial fulfillment. Again, Pentecost’s comments are on point, namely that this signifies the completion of all the covenant promises of God to Israel: “All that God through the

¹¹ Walvoord, *Daniel: The Key To Prophetic Revelation*, 221-22.

¹² Kenneth O. Gangel, *Daniel*, 265.

¹³ J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor Books, 1985), 1362.

prophets said He would do in fulfilling His covenant with Israel will be fully realized in the millennial kingdom.”¹⁴

The phrase “to anoint the Most Holy” is difficult as it might speak of a person or a place. Many commentators take it to refer either to the millennial temple of Ezekiel 40-48 or to Christ himself. Liberal scholars place it historically before Christ with the events surrounding Antiochus Epiphanes.¹⁵ For reasons that will become more clear as I address the timeline of these events below, this component of God’s program must be placed at the second advent or during the millennium. Modern translations use the phrase “most holy place” (see, e.g., the HCSB and the NET). Along these lines, Renald Showers states: “A literal translation of the phrase is as follows: *to anoint a holy of holies...* In light of these factors and the context of chapter nine, it would appear that Gabriel was saying the following: when Messiah will come in His second coming at the end of the 490 years, the Temple complex area in Jerusalem will be anointed in consecration for God’s service.”¹⁶ Others disagree with the view that this refers to the millennial temple and Walvoord is correct to point out that dogmatism is not warranted, but does conclude: “The interpretation of Keil and Leupold that it refers to the holy of holies in the New Jerusalem has much to commend itself.”¹⁷

It is most difficult to divorce the summary of God’s program in verse 24 from the timeline that unfolds in the verses that follow it. The seventy weeks are divided

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1362.

¹⁵ Kenneth O. Gangel, *Daniel*, 265.

¹⁶ Showers, *The Most High God*, 119-20.

¹⁷ Walvoord, *Daniel: The Key To Prophetic Revelation*, 223.

into three parts—seven weeks, then sixty-two weeks, and then one week. The beginning of this 490-year period is with “the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem...” (Daniel 9:25). There are at least four decrees that have been argued to satisfy this verse: “(1) the decree of Cyrus to rebuild the temple (2 Ch 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-4; 6:1-5); (2) the decree of Darius confirming the decree of Cyrus (Ezra 6:6-12); (3) the decree of Artaxerxes (Ezra 7:11-26); (4) the decree of Artaxerxes given to Nehemiah authorizing the rebuilding of the city (Neh 2:1-8).”¹⁸ In determining which decree might fit the historical facts, Harold’s Hoehner’s observations are helpful that the language used indicates “that the city was raised to its former state. It is not a partial rebuilding but a complete restoration.”¹⁹ The decree of Cyrus, probably dating from about October 29, 539 B.C., related to the rebuilding of the temple, not the city.²⁰ Regarding the decree of Darius, Hoehner explains:

The next decree in the restoration of the temple in Jerusalem was due to Tattenai, governor of Judah, who questioned the Jews’ right to rebuild the temple (Ezra 5:3-17). Darius had a search made of Cyrus’ decree and then issued a decree himself about 519/18 B.C. to confirm Cyrus’ original decree (Ezra 6:1-12). This decree will not serve as the beginning date for the seventy weeks because it has specific reference to the temple and not to the city, and because it really is not a new decree but only confirms a former one.²¹

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 225.

¹⁹ Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects Of The Life Of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1977), 119.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 121.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 124.

The decree of Artaxerxes to Ezra occurred in 457 B.C., but like the others did not relate to the rebuilding of Jerusalem.²² The best solution is that it is the decree of Artaxerxes to Nehemiah that is in view. This decree occurred in 444 B.C. and was to rebuild the city. (see Nehemiah 2:1-8). Hoehner provides four supports for this view: (1) the decree specifically is related to rebuilding the city and the gates and walls (see Daniel 9:25, "...the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublous times"), (2) Artaxerxes specifically provided for materials for the walls, (3) both Nehemiah and Ezra record that the walls were completed during times of distress, and (4) there are no known later decrees to rebuild the city.²³ It is helpful to note that Hoehner also argues persuasively that the date of the decree of Artaxerxes occurred in March/April of 444 B.C.²⁴

The initial seven-week (weeks of years) period, or 49 years, may measure until the completion of the rebuilding of the city, although that is not confirmed in the Bible. The sixty-nine weeks, or 483 years, measures until "Messiah be cut off, but not for himself." (Daniel 9:26). This refers to the death of Jesus Christ for the sins of the world, for the term "cut off" is used of executing a death penalty.²⁵ The question of exactly when this happened—that is, when the 69 weeks terminated in the life of Christ—has been subject to much debate. The work of Sir Robert Anderson has been very influential, and places the date as April 6, 32 A.D., which he

²² *Ibid.*, 125.

²³ *Ibid.*, 126.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 127-28.

²⁵ Pentecost, *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 1364.

and others have taken to be the triumphal entry of Luke 19.²⁶ Hoehner's work criticizes Anderson's calculations and revises the date to Friday, April 3, 33 A.D., the actual date of Christ's crucifixion.²⁷ That the 69 weeks points with such precision to the crucifixion is yet more support for a literal hermeneutic measured from the decree of Artaxerxes to Nehemiah.

In view of the 69 weeks pointing to the time of Christ in the first century, it follows that "the people of the prince that shall come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary" must refer to the Roman destruction of Jerusalem, and in particular, the temple, that occurred in A.D. 70. The prince is not identified, but "the people" would be the Romans. It is difficult to argue against this historical fulfillment, which means that there must be a gap of time between the 69 weeks and the seventieth week. Daniel 9:26b reads: "and the end thereof *shall be* with a flood, and unto the end of the war desolations are determined." The flood here is not water, by an outpouring of judgment. The greatest authority on the Scriptures, Jesus himself, placed the fulfillment of this prophecy as future from his time (see Matthew 24:15), which is conclusive that there must be a gap between the sixty-ninth and seventieth weeks, just as there is a gap of time in Zechariah 9:9-10. The best approach is to interpret the seventieth week in view of the further evidence we have in the Revelation.

In verse 28, Daniel prophesies that the prince will make a covenant with many for one week. That this is the seventieth week is confirmed later in Daniel and in the Revelation. As Gangel notes: "This time frame (seven years) appears three

²⁶ Showers, *The Most High God*, 123-24.

²⁷ Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*, 137.

times in Daniel 12 (vv. 7, 11-12) and in a variety of ways in Revelation (11:2-3; 12:6, 14; 13:5). Three and one-half years appears as 1,260 days or 42 months and becomes a very important point of interpretation in Revelation, standing, as it does, directly on Daniel 9:27."²⁸ What we read in Daniel 9:27 is that the prince will break the covenant and make war during the middle of the 7-year period, apparently on Israel since the ceasing of operations at the temple is in view. This comports with Revelation 11:2, which confirms a three and a half year period of war on the holy city, with the temple as the focal point. This is confirmed again in Revelation 12:7 and 13:5. It is very notable that the description of the one making war in Revelation 13:5 parallels the description of the eleventh horn in Daniel 7: 25. Likewise, the three and half year period mentioned in Daniel 7:25 fits the Revelation passages as well. This destruction will continue until the decreed punishment is poured out on the prince, presumably at or near the end of the seventieth week (see Revelation 19). We are to understand that the program of God for Israel summarized in Daniel 9:25 will be brought to fruition before or at the point of the ending of the seventieth week.

The view of Daniel 9:25-27 that the seventy weeks are weeks of years, or 490 years, with a gap of time between the sixty-ninth and seventy weeks, best comports with the historical information we have about the issuance of the decree by Artaxerxes, the precise timing of the 69 weeks, and the historical fulfillment of certain events within the prophecy that cannot be reasonably questioned, like the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70. Further, it comports with Jesus'

²⁸ Gangel, *Daniel*, 269.

own words that the time of desolation was future and the progressive revelation of God that we have, especially in the Book of Revelation. The 69 weeks were fulfilled, then, through the crucifixion of Messiah, with certain elements of the prophecy occurring after that point but before the seventieth week, which awaits fulfillment as outlined in the Revelation.