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The Seventy “Weeks” Prophecy of Daniel 9: A Comparison of Major Views

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Daniel 9:20-27 is widely regarded as one of the most difficult passages in the Bible. Over the centuries scholars have proposed dozens of competing interpretations of these challenging verses, especially Daniel’s prophecy of the 70 “weeks.” Although there are many differences in detail among these interpretations, virtually all of them can be grouped under three main approaches, each of which is defined by its understanding of when the last “week” takes place. What we may call the “critical view” holds that Daniel’s 70th “week” refers to a 7-year span (a “week” of years) which took place 171-164 BC. Those who favor the “Dispensational view” hold that the 70th “week” has not yet taken place since it refers to a 7-year period, called the “Great Tribulation, which will happen at the end of the Church Age. Those who favor the “traditional view” hold that the 70th “week” includes the cross of Christ.

Although these notes favor the “Traditional” interpretation of Daniel 9 as most faithful to the biblical text, as well as to the facts of history, it is recognized that there are sincere well-informed Christians who hold each of the other views. Given the challenges of these difficult verses in Daniel 9, honest disagreement over their interpretation should never be a cause for division in the Church of Jesus Christ.

I. “The Critical View” (for example, André Lacocque):

This approach is called the “critical view” because it tends to be held by scholars who take a critical stance toward Daniel 9’s claim to have been written by the famous 6th century BC prophet Daniel. Instead, these scholars believe that the book of Daniel was written by an anonymous author about 164 BC, for which reason, according to them, many of Daniel’s prophecies focus on the events of that period. It is important to be aware of the “critical view” because it is accepted by the majority of modern scholarly commentaries on Daniel. In recent years some fine Evangelical scholars have also defended a similar interpretation of Daniel’s 70 weeks (see, for example, Cornelis Vanderwaal, John E. Goldingay, and Ernest C. Lucas). These Evangelical scholars often suggest that this interpretation need not undermine the divine authority of the book of Daniel since, they claim, ancient readers would have recognized Daniel’s “apocalyptic genre,” which typically allows an author to describe the theological significance of past events by using fictional prophecy as a literary device. The evidence for this claim, however, or its application to Daniel is not strong.

There are many significant variations among those who follow this general approach, but all agree that the last of Daniel’s 70 weeks refers to the momentous seven year period between 171 BC and 164 BC. This period concerns the events surrounding the murder of the anointed legitimate high priest Onias III in 171 BC, the desecration of the temple by the Greek tyrant, Antiochus Epiphanes, in 167 BC, and finally the rededication of the temple by Judas Maccabaeus in 164 BC, which event is celebrated in the Jewish feast of Hanukkah.

One" in verse 26a and "the Ruler" in 26b (and probably also "he" in verse 27). The fact that "the critical view" takes these all to be different individuals appears arbitrary and unconvincing.

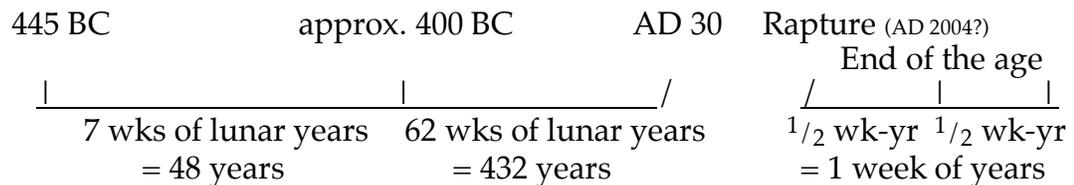
4) "The city and the sanctuary" were not in fact "destroyed" by Antiochus, as verse 26 would demand on this approach.

II. "The Dispensational View" (for example, H. A. Ironside):

This approach was first set forth about 150 years ago. It is perhaps the most popular view among Evangelicals, since it was promoted by the footnotes of the influential *Scofield Reference Bible*, and most recently by popular Christian writers, such as Hal Lindsey (*The Late Great Planet Earth*) and Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, coauthors of the "Left Behind" series.

While there are differences in detail among those who follow this approach, all are agreed that the last week of Daniel's 70 weeks is still waiting to begin, that it will come at the end of human history just before the millennium. Also agreed by all who follow this approach is that the Cross, the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, and the entire Church age (AD 70 to the present) are events occurring after Daniel's 69th week, though still before Daniel's 70th week, and so form a "great parenthesis" between those two weeks.

The following is the particular view of *The New Scofield Reference Bible*, with some details supplied by H.A. Ironside, but it is typical of this approach.



445 BC = Artaxerxes gave Nehemiah permission to rebuild Jerusalem, especially its walls (Nehemiah 2)

400 BC = approximate date when the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple was completed

AD 30 = approximate date of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday prior to His death on the cross and resurrection. When Daniel 9:25 refers to Christ as "Ruler," it is felt that the triumphal entry is especially in view.

On this view calculations of years are based on the assumption that Daniel was referring to years made up of 360 days (rather than 365 days)

According to dispensationalists the last week of the 70 begins with a revived Roman Empire (often felt to be the result of the European Common Market) headed up by the "he" mentioned in Daniel 9:27 who is the "Little Horn" of Daniel 7:8, and thought by many to be the Antichrist. This view holds that this Roman Ruler will begin the week of years supportive of renewed sacrifices and temple worship in Israel (the "covenant" mentioned in verse 27), but in the middle of the week (after 3 1/2 years) will show his true colors by introducing "abominations" into the temple and by launching a program of intense persecution against the Jews. This period is called "the great tribulation." Most dispensationalists teach that the church will be raptured, taken up to meet Christ in the air, just prior to this last week, and that following it will be the millennium.

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Advantages of this view

1) Understanding the “sevens” or “weeks” of Daniel 9 as “weeks of years,” and making the further observation that often years in the Bible are counted as comprising only 360 days (used as, a round number approximation, as in Revelation 11:2; 12:6, where 3½ years has only 1260 days), then on this view there is a remarkable precision in the various predicted figures.

2) This approach better understands the ultimate nature of the blessings promised in verse 24 – to be accomplished in fullness only at the Return of Christ.

3) In keeping with various New Testament passages, Daniel 9:26 is understood to refer to the death of Christ on the Cross which is followed by the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in AD 70 (see Matthew 24:15; Mark 13:14; Luke 21:20).

4) Perhaps the most significant advantage of this view is that it takes the Bible seriously and encourages a lively expectancy for the return of Christ.

Disadvantages of this view

1) Daniel’s clock operates in a very strange fashion! At the end of the 69th week, it suddenly stops ticking (for what has now been almost 2000 years) and then starts up again for the 70th week. There is not the slightest hint in Daniel 9 of such a gap or “parenthesis.” At times this view has been defended with the analogy of seeing mountain ranges from afar – the prophet like the viewer cannot see the valley that might be separating two mountain ranges by many miles. This is unconvincing in Daniel 9 since Daniel does see at least two major events in the “valley,” namely the Cross and the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70! Surely the most natural interpretation of Daniel 9:26, “After the 62 sevens” is to take this to mean within the last “seven,” the events predicted would be taking place.

2) Following the dispensational approach, we cannot imagine why Gabriel rushed so in order to quickly inform Daniel that his prayer had been answered – when in fact it would be 93 more years for the decree to be issued for the rebuilding of Jerusalem.

3) A straightforward reading of the text would imply that the individual who is called “the Anointed One; the Ruler” in verse 25 is the same individual as “the Anointed One” in verse 26a and the “Ruler” in 26b (and the “he” of 27). Dispensationalists, however, take “The Anointed One” in each case to be a reference to Jesus, but typically they identify the “Ruler” in verse 26b and the “he” of verse 27 as references to the Antichrist. This switch in the reference of these terms seems arbitrary and unconvincing.

4) It is very disturbing that dispensationalists insist that the crucifixion of our Lord (“The Anointed One will be cut off”) is not itself included in the events of the 70 weeks, in that it occurs in the “parenthesis” after the 69th week, when surely the Cross is the foundation for all the blessings promised as the outcome of the 70 weeks in verse 24!

5) A further problem having to do with those blessings listed in verse 24 is that on the dispensationalist approach the 70 weeks do not in fact bring in the consummation of blessing implied perhaps especially in the last two items mentioned in verse 24. The reason that this is the case is that dispensationalists teach that following the 70 weeks is the millennium which

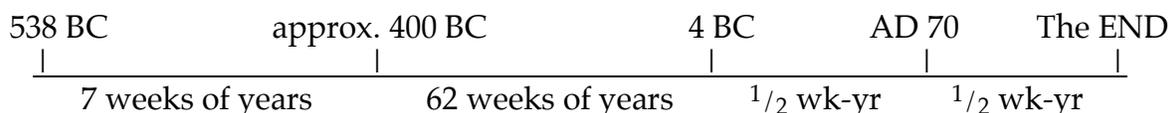
will end in a period of rebellion and wickedness called “Gog and Magog” in Revelation 20:7-9. [Note that in Ezekiel 38 “Gog” and “Magog” refer to a period of rebellion that is prior to the final temple. Dispensationalists usually identify this earlier period of rebellion as Armageddon, as mentioned in Revelation 16:16.] Only after this will “vision and prophecy be sealed,” etc.

6) There are a number of special problems having to do with the dispensational interpretation of verse 27. First is the seeming inconsistency of saying that the coming Ruler will on the one hand “make firm” a covenant for one week which later in the same verse is implicitly broken in the middle of that very same week when he puts a sudden end to sacrifice and offering. A second problem involves the dispensational assumption of a reestablished Israel with a temple and a sacrificial system at the end of the age all in the face of the testimony of Hebrews that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and the new order begun in Him has made the Old Testament order of sacrifice and temple worship entirely obsolete. Finally, as will be stated in connection with the “traditional approach,” there is a failure on the part of dispensationalists to appreciate the clear parallelism between verses 26 and 27 demonstrating that they refer to the same events and time framework.

II. “The Traditional View” (for example, M.G. Kline):

Once again, there are various differences in detail among those who hold to this approach — but in main outline, because of the vast number of Christians holding this view through the centuries, it may properly be termed the “traditional view.” Those taking this approach would all agree that Daniel’s 70 weeks begin with the famous decree of Cyrus (who is also called Darius) permitting Israel to return home out of her 70 year captivity and authorizing her to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. (See Ezra 1; 2 Chronicles 36:23; Isaiah 44:28; 45.) This decree was issued in the sovereignty of God only moments after Daniel begun his prayer in Daniel 9 and constitutes the starting point of Gabriel’s urgent good news to Daniel. The “word which has gone forth” in Daniel 9:23 is the very same “word” of which Gabriel speaks in Daniel 9:25 when he says “From the going forth of the word to restore and rebuild Jerusalem” — each refers to the decree of Cyrus. Also all are agreed that Daniel’s “clock” at no point stops or is reset. Rather there is a willingness to see Daniel’s 70 weeks as not literal “weeks of years” (the text nowhere says “weeks of *years*”), but as symbolic and of uncertain length, where the symbolism is based on the very literal 70 years predicted by Jeremiah after which Israel was set free from her captivity. After all, as 2 Chronicles 36:21 indicates, each of those years of Babylonian captivity represented a week of years, earlier back in the Promised Land when faithless Israel had neglected to celebrate the sabbatical years of rest for the land. In other words, in effect Daniel is teaching that God’s future deliverance will be very much like that earlier deliverance from captivity after 70 years, only this time the release will be one where His people are set free not just from some political bondage, but from their sins!

The following is the particular view of Meredith G. Kline, slightly modified by Gordon P. Hugenberger, but is in essence similar to the views of many others sharing this approach (Oswald T. Allis, Edward J. Young, E.W. Hengstenberg, and E.B. Pusey – disagreement tends to be focused on the length of the 70th week).



538 BC = the decree of Cyrus and, earlier the same day, Daniel's prayer in Daniel 9
400 BC = the approximate date when the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple was completed
4 BC = approximate date of Jesus' birth
AD 70 = destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem by the Roman armies as unknowing agents of Jesus Christ according to Matthew 21:33-22:14 and Acts 6:14.
End = The Return of Our Lord Jesus (hopefully, AD 2004)

Advantages of this view

1) As mentioned earlier, the 70 weeks begin with the decree of Cyrus issued moments after Daniel's prayer in Daniel 9 (in 538 BC) and so this approach makes sense of Gabriel's urgency in that the 70 weeks prophecy includes an immediate answer to Daniel's prayer. Also, on this approach, the word going forth in verse 23 is seen as the same word which goes forth in verse 25 – both are references to the word or "decree" of Cyrus.

2) Also this view follows a simpler and more natural interpretation of the individuals in view in verses 25-27 than is the case in the other approaches mentioned above. Keeping in mind that "Anointed One" is simply a translation of the Hebrew expression "Messiah" or the Greek, "Christ," on this approach Jesus Christ is being referred to in verse 25 as "the Anointed One, the Ruler," in verse 26 first as "the Anointed One" and later as "the Ruler," and finally in verse 27 as "He." Also, following a different translation than the NIV for the end of verse 27, Jesus again is referred to, this time as "the one who makes desolate," or "the desolator."

3) On this approach the blessings mentioned in verse 24 as the foal of the 70 weeks are in fact accomplished by the 70 weeks, as also are the curses – where Israel is finally and decisively judged for her persistent covenant infidelity (in the end of the Old Testament order accomplished finally in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in AD 70).

4) This view properly exposes and interprets the obvious parallelism between verse 26 and verse 27 – so that both of these verses are seen to refer to the same events with verse 27 filling out and clarifying what is predicted in verse 26. (See "commentary" on these verses below.)

5) In keeping with various New Testament passages, Daniel 9:26 is properly understood as referring to the death of Jesus on the cross followed by the "abomination which causes desolation." This is Israel's own temple-defiling sin that called for Christ's righteous judgment of desolation through the agency of the Roman armies when they destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70 (see Matthew 24:15; Mark 13:14; Luke 21:20; Matthew 21:33-22:14; Acts 6:14).

6) Understanding the Church age as lasting this symbolic ½ week-year, or in other words a symbolic 3½ years, makes Daniel 9 consistent and, in fact, the source for similar symbolism found elsewhere in the Bible; always as a symbol for the Church age:

Daniel 7:25 "time, times, and half a time" = 3 ½ times. This is a symbol for the church age during which the "little horn" (the kingdom of this world set over against the kingdom of God) persecutes the saints.

Revelation 11:2 "42 months"

Revelation 11:3 "1,260 days"

Revelation 12:6 "1,260 days"
Revelation 12:14 "a time, times, and half a time"
Revelation 13:5 "42 months"

Disadvantages of this view

1) While Daniel's "clock" on this approach never stops or needs to be reset, it does seem to "distort" time in a strange way. Especially odd is the way the last ½ week-year already has taken nearly 2000 actual years.

In response to this objection, in addition to what has already been said, especially in 6) above, two further comments may help. First is the fact that the symbolism of the 70 weeks only requires that events come in the predicted sequence: first the decree, then the rebuilding, then the death of Christ, and finally the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. There is no necessary reason for the various intervals to be somehow or other proportionate. To appreciate the force of this argument it may help to reflect on John's statement in 1 John 2:18 where we read, "Dear children, this is the last hour..." Obviously "hour" is being used symbolically. We now know that this "last hour" has lasted nearly 2000 years, yet no one would argue that each of the preceding "hours" would somehow need to have been just as long!

That Daniel intends us to understand these 70 weeks as symbolic is suggested first by the fact that the term "years" in fact is nowhere used in the text. Furthermore, the 70 weeks are so clearly patterned on the previous very literal 70 years, which were just then ending as God was preparing to sovereignly set His people free from their captivity. As mentioned earlier, those 70 years were determined to precisely correspond to the 70 sabbatical years, which Israel had rebelliously ignored while still in her homeland (see 2 Chronicles 36:15-23). And so, in this sense, they themselves represented a kind of 70 week-years.

Secondly, at many points in the Scripture the Church age is depicted as the last moments of world history. The passage 1 John 2:18 just mentioned, is only one example. To this can be added Romans 13:12, "The night is nearly over; the day is almost here." See also, Acts 2:17; 1 Timothy 4:1; 2 Timothy 3:1; James 5:3; 1 Peter 1:5; Jude 18 to list only a few such passages. The effect of all of these passages is, of course, to heighten our eagerness and expectancy for the return of Our Lord who said, "'Yes, I am coming soon.' Amen. Come? Lord Jesus" (Revelation 22:20).

Translation and a Brief Commentary on Daniel 9:20-27

Daniel 9:20-27 (based on the NIV)

<p>20 While I was speaking and praying, confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel and making my request to the LORD my God for his holy hill –</p> <p>21 while I was still in prayer, Gabriel, the man I had seen in the earlier vision, came to me in swift flight about the time of the evening sacrifice.</p>
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22 He instructed me and said to me, “Daniel, I have now come to give you insight and understanding.

23 As soon as you began to pray, a word went forth, which I have come to tell you, for you are highly esteemed. Therefore, consider the message and understand the vision:

This “word” is the decree of Cyrus permitting Israel to return out of their captivity in Babylon, and authorizing them to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. This is discussed more fully earlier in these notes. This occurred in 538 BC.

24 Seventy “sevens” are decreed for your people and your holy city

The “sevens” can also be rendered “weeks” implying not weeks made up of 7 days, but of 7 years as in Leviticus 25:26. These week-years are taken as a symbolic time frame patterned after the 70 years of Babylonian captivity followed by God’s deliverance of His people.

The rest of this verse can be divided up into three couplets summarizing 6 goals for the 70 weeks.

to finish transgression, to put an end to sin

The first pair are negative goals, but it is appropriate that they are first because they address the main subject matter of Daniel’s prayer of confession. More specifically, these goals refer to God’s decisive judgment against the transgression and sin especially of Israel (remember the stress on “for your people and for your holy city”), although they may include far more. This judgment is spelled out in greater detail in the second half of verse 26 and the second half of verse 27, and it was finally fulfilled in history in AD 70 with the destruction of the Old Testament order by means of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and its sin-defiled Temple (first symbolically “cleansed” by Jesus in His wrath).

to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness

Then follows a second pair, now of positive goals of blessing which establish the eternal New Covenant order. Here we are to think first of the work of Jesus’ death and Resurrection. Compare the similar thought of Hebrews 10:12-14.

to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the Holy of Holies.

This final couplet surely points us to the consummation of redemptive history when all the promises of God find their fulfillment and validation and the ultimate temple and Holy of Holies, described in the New Testament as the “body of Christ,” which is still in the process of being built up on its chief cornerstone, Jesus Christ, at last receives its eternal anointing with the immediate and visible presence of God. See Ephesians 2:19-22; Revelation 21:22

The temple that was built after the exile never was anointed with the literal presence of God's Spirit. The concern here, however, is not just with the literal temple, but with what that temple symbolized.

25 Know and understand this: From the going forth of the word to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Messiah, the Ruler, comes, there will be seven "sevens" and sixty-two "sevens."

This breaking up of the total of 69 "sevens" at first seems odd. The advantage in doing so, however, is that the result of the first seven 'sevens' or "Jubilee" according to Leviticus 25, which is the completion of the literal Temple, provides us with a ready model for the goal of the 10th Jubilee (the 70 weeks) which is the fashioning of God's eternal temple – his perfected people.

It will be rebuilt with streets and a trench, but in times of trouble.

Ezra and Nehemiah give ample testimony to this period of persecution, and hardship. "Square and moat" seems to be like our expression, "inside and out," as a way of expressing totality. It is also possible that the city is being described in a way which deliberately compares it to a temple (much like the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21, 22).

26a After the sixty-two "sevens," the Messiah will be cut off without what was rightfully His.

– namely obedience and honor as is suggested by this allusion to Genesis 49:10. In that passage Shiloh was promised to come. See also Ezekiel 21:27. Christ's death is being described here as a "cutting off." This expression is used often enough elsewhere to refer to death, however there is a special richness and aptness in the present passage. This will be appreciated when it is seen that verse 26a is paralleled by 27a. To "cut" or "cut off" (the same word in Hebrew) is the standard word in the Old Testament for making (literally "cutting") a covenant. The idea here, then, is that the death of Christ is itself not a failure of God's program, though Christ was denied what was rightfully His as "the King of the Jews." Rather His death was the very cutting ceremony which ratifies a New Covenant "for many."

26b [And] The army of the Ruler who will come will destroy the city and the sanctuary.

For their rejection and stubborn rebellion, the Ruler, who in the previous verse already was identified as Christ, will send His unwitting armies, the Romans, in righteous judgment to destroy Jerusalem and its defiled Temple. This interpretation has already been defended in detail earlier in these notes. Once again, it will be seen that this segment of verse 26 parallels the middle segment of verse 27. See also Matthew 21:33-41.

26c Its end will come like a flood: War will continue until that end; desolations have been decreed.

With further detail the events of AD 70 are described here. "Desolations" refers to the appalling destruction of Jerusalem which like its earlier destruction in 586 BC by the Babylonians, is God's temporal judgment against His faithless people for their sin. This segment too is paralleled by the last part of verse 27.

27a He will make a covenant prevail for the many for one "seven."

"He" is Christ, whose death ratifies the New Covenant in His blood for His elect, "the many." This Christ will do before the destruction of the old covenant order in AD 70. (For the definitive study of this verse in its context, see Meredith G. Kline, "The Covenant of The Seventieth Week," in John. H. Skilton, Editor, *The Law and The Prophets*, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co. 1974.)

27b But in the middle of that "seven" He will put an end to sacrifice and offering.

This Jesus did not merely accomplish by the final sacrifice of Himself, but also in His judicial destruction of the Temple in AD 70 never again to "be rebuilt. The Old Testament forbids sacrifice outside the Temple.

27c And because of the extremity of abominations there will be One who will make desolate, even unto complete destruction. And what has been decreed will be poured out on what is desolate.

Parallel to 26c, this last segment of verse 27 focuses on the events and significance of AD 70. This is precisely how Jesus understood these verses in Matthew 24:15 and Mark 13:14. Jesus is "the One who will make desolate." "What is desolate" refers to the appalling dereliction and destruction of Jerusalem (cf. Daniel 9:17). It is interesting to note that the Jewish historian Josephus who wrote in the first century AD as an eyewitness to the events of AD 70 likewise interpreted these verses as predictive of those dreadful days (*The Jewish War* IV,3,12; IV,5,2; IV,6,3; VI,2,1; *Jewish Antiquities* X,11,7). "The extremity," literally "the wing," may be a term referring to the pinnacle of the temple – with the implication, then, that the defiling abomination calling for God's judgment had now reached even the uttermost point of the temple.

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(indebted at many points to M.G. Kline)