

Daniel's Seventy Weeks and the Times of the Messiah (Daniel 9:1-27)

This is a very rich, and yet very detailed and involved passage about the times and circumstances of Messiah. It includes the suffering of the Messiah; but I include more detail here because it gives such a specific prophecy of the sweep of history. Daniel writes pertaining to Jews and Jerusalem. "Seventy weeks" makes up the oracle. As mentioned above, this period of time is set to accomplish several things: to restrain or finish transgression (Rom. 6:4), to make an end of sin or sin offerings, to make atonement for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21), to seal up vision and oracle (he fulfilled them), and to anoint the Most Holy Place. These were partially fulfilled in the first coming, but must await the second advent for completion. (These were only partially fulfilled at Christ's first advent, and so will be completely fulfilled at the second. So Daniel's vision--we now know--encompasses the period from 444 B.C. to the second advent, even though he focuses on periods of time within that stretch.)

The period of time known as "seventy weeks" begins with the commandment to rebuild Jerusalem,¹ which most probably refers to the decree of Artaxerxes to Nehemiah on Nisan 1 (March 4/5) 444 B.C. (Neh. 2:1-8).² After 69 "weeks" the Messiah would be cut off, indicating he would not receive the kingdom then. We know that Jesus died the 14th of Nisan, 33 A.D. (see below). So that time period is what Daniel is predicting with 69 weeks. The term rendered "weeks" is the Hebrew word *shēbu'ah*, a *heptad* or period of seven. Why does Daniel focus on this period of "sevens"? We know in these passages he had been studying Jeremiah to determine when the exile would end. Jeremiah had predicted that the nation would be in captivity for 70 years because they had not kept the *Sabbath* years to let the land lie in rest; the captivity was back-payment for these omissions (Jer. 25:11 and 29:10). Each of the 70 years of captivity, then, represented the seven years in the sabbath cycle. On the basis of that, Daniel sees 70 of these time periods stretching into the future, each of those 70 likewise represent seven years. Seven of these periods would be 49 years; and from the time references in the context, that works--from the decree given to rebuild Jerusalem to the completion of the building of Jerusalem with moat and plaza (for the importance of the gate and its complex, see Ezra 10:9; Est. 4:6; 2 Chron. 32:6; Neh. 8:1,3). They did not start building the city until Nehemiah returned in 444 B.C. And while they built the walls quickly, the whole city took longer to restore.

A lot of students of the Bible gloss over this section of Daniel as "mere symbolism" because it seems to them too difficult to work out; but the text of Daniel is too specific for us to set aside so easily. Daniel is concerned with exact time frames and precise events. So how does it come out? Let's test it and see what happens--and then you can decide if it is vague symbolism.

Daniel has 70 "weeks" in all for the prophetic time-table; but after 69 of these the Messiah would be cut off. If the unit "week" is actually seven years, then 70 "weeks" would be 490 years. So 69 weeks would be 483 years--if one uses solar years. Beginning with 444 B.C., the total of 483 years would come out to 38 A.D. But they did not use the solar calendar; they used a lunar calendar of 12 months of 30 days each. How do we know this? There is good evidence that the year was calculated as 360 days, or 12 equal months of 30 days. But since the harvests grew on the solar system, each year the harvest would get a few days away from the day set for the harvest festivals. So they calculated how often they had to add a 13th month to the year to bring the calendar and the harvest back into harmony. We know they used the lunar months to calculate the year: we see in the story of the Flood that the waters of the Flood began on the 17th day of the second month, and ended on the 17th day of the seventh month, which we are told is 150 days-- five months of 30 days. John in Revelation takes the Old Testament prophecies of the end-times and calculates the three and a half years ("times, time and half a time") as 42 months to be 1260 days. That is 42



¹ This is not to be confused with the earlier decrees to rebuild the Temple, or walls. This is the the dare to complete the city.

² Nisan 1 in 444 was either March 4 or March 5, March 5 being more likely since the crescent of the new moon would have been visible late in the evening of March 4, about 10:00 p.m. and could have been easily missed (Goldstine, *New and Full Moons 1001 B.C. to A.D. 1651* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1973), p. 47.

months of 30 days to get 1260 days. So we are on good ground to say that 360 days made up a year in the prophetic calendar (see the detailed discussion by Harold Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977]). Since there is a difference in calculation by years, we have to go to the lowest common denominator—how many days in the prophecy.

So then it is a matter of mathematics: 69 weeks times seven years, times 360 days of their calendar year will give us the number of days in the prophecy: 173,880 days. So Daniel is saying after the decree of March 5, 444 B.C., there are 173,880 days until Messiah is cut off.

Now, this can be verified with our calendar system. The difference between 444 B.C. and 33 A.D. is 476 solar years. But how many days is that? By multiplying 476 by 365.24219879 (or by 365 days, 5 hours, 48 minutes, 45.975 seconds), one gets 173,855 days, 6 hours, 52 minutes, 44 seconds—or 173,855 days. Now there is a difference of 25 days. But remember, the solar reckoning is from March 5, 444 to March 5, 32 A.D., calculating on exact years. If we add the difference of the 25 days to March 5, we come to March 30 (of A.D. 33). In the year 33 A.D. that was Nisan 10, the Monday of the Passion Week, the probable day of the Triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem.³ Jesus died Nisan 14, 33 A.D., or April 3, 33 A.D.⁴ So Daniel is saying that from March 5, 444 B.C., there will be 173,880 days and then after that (by 4 days) the Messiah will be cut off. No wonder there was an increase in Messianic expectation in the days of Jesus; groups like the Essenes knew and loved the Book of Daniel.

Calculating Daniel's Seventy Weeks with Lunar Years

- 69 sevens = 483 lunar years (360 days = 12 months of 30 days) = 173,880 days
- 173,880 days = 476 solar years + 25 days
- Decree of Artaxerxes (March 4/5 444 B.C.) + 476 years and 25 days = March 30, 33 A.D.
- March 30, 33 A.D. = Triumphal Entry - Messiah "Cut Off" - Presented at Temple at the beginning of Passion Week
- 70th seven - period of desolation yet to come followed by Messianic Victory over His Enemies and His Rule

The prophecy continues then to describe the people of the prince who was to come and try to destroy God's program. Daniel's oracle at this point becomes very general, saying that there would be wars until the great destruction at the end of the age. The statement that Messiah was to be cut off "after" the 69th week, but not in the 70th week, is very unusual but very precise, and can only be explained by an interval of unknown length between the 69th and 70th weeks. This is often the way Old Testament prophetic perspective works, for they look to the future and see the pinnacles of events, but not necessarily how close the events are.⁵ In Matthew 24 and 25 Jesus himself predicts the destruction of Jerusalem after his death and the great wars and abominations that come at the end of the age prior to his return. His disciples could not have discerned from the way that was laid out that there would be 2000 years at least between some of the sections. So Daniel's discussion of the great desecrations to come jumps ahead to the 70th week, to the end of the age.⁶ And we know this 70th week has not yet happened, because according to all Daniel's prophecies, it will end with the coming of the Son of Man in glory to destroy the evil world ruler and his armies and end war for all time. That did not happen when Rome was ever so tyrannical, or any time down through history, even though there have been plagues and devastations that sound a little like what is described in Revelation 14-19, but they do not measure up to those great plagues to come in their devastation, and they did not end with the second coming.

The amazing prophecy of Daniel 9 should bring comfort to all believers! It tells us that everything is working to plan in God's redemptive program. It tells us that Messiah was to die in his earlier work on earth; but his ultimate work on earth awaits his coming in glory. It also tells us that all the wars and conflicts are part of God's plan and not a failure of it. They will not hinder the fulfillment of the promises—of which we are heirs.

³ Nisan 10 is the day the Jews chose the animal in the Temple that they were going to use for Passover on Nisan 14.

⁴ Jesus was born in the winter of 5/4 B.C. just prior to the death of Herod, who died between March 29 and April 11, 4 B.C. He began His public ministry in the fall of 29, just after John began His that summer, the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberias. Jesus' ministry included at least three, most likely four trips to Jerusalem for Passover, the last being his death (the narratives mention three different Passovers, but a fourth fits in the chronology as well). So that rules out a 30 A.D. death, which would have given him a ministry of a few months. Passover fell on Friday in 30, 33, and 36. The year 36 is too late, for Pilate was only there through 35 A.D. So 33 A.D. fits all the evidence the best.

⁵ This is clear from most Messianic prophecies that do not distinguish between a first and second advent; they just tell of the coming of Messiah.

⁶ It may be that God chose to do it this way because of His intent to make a legitimate presentation of the kingdom of heaven to Israel (even though He knew they would reject). But the contingency is there—if they receive it, this is Elijah who should come (but they didn't, and this wasn't Elijah).