

Daniel 9:24-27 - The Prophecy of Daniel's 70 Weeks

—**Sam A. Smith**

Overview

The prophecy of the 70 weeks of Israel was given in answer to Daniel's prayer recorded in Daniel 9:3-19. In this prophecy Gabriel revealed God's program for Israel's future. Jesus referred to the prophecy in Matthew 24:15 and indicated that understanding this prophecy is essential to understanding his Olivet Discourse. Since the 70 weeks prophecy reveals the key chronological features of Israel's history from the decree to restore Jerusalem, up to the establishment of the millennial kingdom, it is the key to understanding events leading up to the second coming of Christ, most particularly the events of the tribulation period. Thus the 70 weeks prophecy provides the chronological structure for understanding both Jesus' Olivet Discourse and much of the book of Revelation. The prophecy reads as follows:

24 "Seventy weeks have been decreed for your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to make an end of sin, to make atonement for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy place.

25 "So you are to know and discern that from the issuing of a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince there will be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks; it will be built again, with plaza and moat, even in times of distress.

26 "Then after the sixty-two weeks the Messiah will be cut off and have nothing, and the people of the prince who is to come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. And its end will come with a flood; even to the end there will be war; desolations are determined.

27 "And he will make a firm covenant with the many for one week, but in the middle of the week he will put a stop to sacrifice and grain offering; and on the wing of abominations will come one who makes desolate, even until a complete destruction, one that is decreed, is poured out on the one who makes desolate." (Dan. 9:24-27, NASB)

The particulars of the prophecy

We should note that the Hebrew term *shabua'* (translated "week") simply means "seven." We could refer to this as the prophecy of the 70 "sevens," but the term "week" is so widely used that it seems best to retain the familiar terminology. Of course, the prophecy could not refer to normal weeks of days, since the events of the prophecy could not fit into such a short span of time. While premillennialists and amillennialists disagree on the interpretation of

the prophecy, there is general agreement that the first 69 weeks refer to weeks of years, at least approximately.¹

It is helpful to identify the particulars before trying to decipher the chronology of the prophecy. Both Daniel's prayer and the prophetic answer brought by Gabriel are dated in first year of the reign of Darius, the son of Ahasuerus (538 B.C.), approximately three years before the end of the 70 years of Israel's captivity (Dan.9:1).² The phrase, "your people" refers to Israel, and "your holy city" refers to Jerusalem. The statement, "to make an end of sin, to make atonement for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy place," refers to a historical progression of events leading up to the establishment of the visible, earthly kingdom that had been promised. Messiah being "cut off" is a reference to Messiah's death. The destruction of the city and the sanctuary refers to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (fulfilled in A.D. 70), after Christ's death (fulfilled in A.D. 33). The "prince who is to come" is a reference to the Antichrist who will come to power during the tribulation period (cf. Matt. 24:15-22; 2 Thess. 2:3-4; Rev. 13:1-9).³ He is the same individual referred to by Paul in 2 Thessalonians as "the Man of lawlessness," and by John in Revelation as the first "beast." The "covenant" (v.27) is a treaty made between Israel (the many) and the Roman Prince (the Antichrist). The last, or seventieth week (v.27) represents the tribulation period. "Desolations" refers to the horrible and destructive events to take place during the period of the prophecy. The phrase, "on the wing of abominations" is a reference to the Roman Prince seating himself in the temple and claiming to be God (2 Thess 2:3-4; Rev. 13:1-9), and likely to the setting up of an image to the Antichrist in the temple (Rev. 13:14-15). The "complete destruction, one that is decreed, is poured out on the one who makes desolate" is a reference to the destruction of the Roman Prince at Christ's return, when Christ will crush the Antichrist's kingdom and establish God's kingdom on earth (cf. Dan. 2:44-45; 7:1-27; Rev. 19:19-20).

Structure and chronology

Premillennialists interpret the prophecy of the 70 weeks as a literal chronology leading up to the second coming, at which time Christ will establish the visible aspect of the kingdom of

¹ Amillennialists generally view the last week of the prophecy as encompassing the time from the end of the 69th week to the second coming, including the entire Church age.

² The identity of the Darius mentioned in Daniel 9:1 is not known; this may be a reference to Cyrus the Great under another name. It was not uncommon for kings of this period to be known by multiple names.

³ Some amillennial interpreters identify the covenant maker in Daniel 9:27 as the Messiah, and therefore they view the covenant referenced there as the new covenant. However, such an interpretation seems highly unlikely. Given the structure of the passage, it is apparent that the antecedent to "he" in verse 27 is the Prince who will come from the people who destroy the city and the sanctuary (v.26), *i.e.*, the Roman Prince (the Antichrist). If the reference in verse 27 were to the new covenant, why is it stated that it will be made for only one week? The new covenant is an eternal covenant (Jer. 31:31-37 cf. Ezek. 37:21-28, esp. v.26; Heb. 9:12). The New Testament draws a clear connection between Christ's eternal priesthood and the new covenant (Heb. 7:17-8:13), demonstrating the eternity of the new covenant.

God on earth, the first phase of which is the millennium. They also regard the 70th week as the future time of tribulation described by Christ in the first half of the Olivet Discourse, and by John in Revelation (chaps. 6:1-20:3). Dispensational premillennialists view the prophecy as pertaining to Israel, not the Church, in accordance with the opening statement of the prophecy (cf. v.24, “Seventy weeks have been decreed for *your* people and *your* holy city”). Accordingly, they view the present Church age as falling parenthetically between the 69th and 70th weeks—a mystery hidden in ages past (Eph. 3:1-10)⁴

Amillennialists generally view the 70 weeks as a symbolic chronology in which the chronology can be viewed somewhat elastically. Accordingly, they view the first 69 weeks as the time from the starting decree (typically identified with the decree of Cyrus in 539-538 B.C.) to Messiah, and the 70th week as encompassing the death of Messiah, the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and the entire Church age (and millennium) up to the time of the second coming.⁵

While it seems likely that the structure of the 70 weeks has some symbolic significance, it cannot be denied that it is also a chronology. Israel’s 70 years of captivity also likely had symbolic meaning; nevertheless, the chronology was still literal. It simply does not follow that because a particular number, or numeric structure was chosen for its symbolism that the number is merely allegorical. In the case of the prophecy of the 70 weeks, it is clear that the structure was intended to serve as a chronology (cf. 9:25, note the “from” / “to” expression). There are several observations that lead to the conclusion that the prophecy must be understood as a chronology. First is the enumerative structure: the prophecy is clearly built on the structure of 70 x 7, and even if that structure is symbolic, the symbolism is dependant upon understanding the structure itself. To illustrate this, suppose the prophecy had been the prophecy of the 40 “sixes,” would the interpretations given still be the same? Probably not. Thus, whether there is symbolism or not, it ought to be clear that a literal understanding of the structure is prerequisite to understanding the prophecy. Second, the enumerative structure is sequential, *i.e.*, linear. In this prophecy the first group of 7 weeks precedes the second group of 62 weeks, which precedes the 70th week. Thus, the prophecy is not simply about 70 weeks—it is about 70 sequential weeks. Third, specific historical events, *e.g.*, the death of the Messiah, the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, the making of a covenant, the cessation of daily sacrifices at the temple, the abomination that will make the temple desolate, and the final destruction of the one who makes the temple desolate, are all linked to the sequence of the 70 weeks. This evidences an underlying chronological structure. Fourth, there are good reasons to believe that the weeks are units of time. In comparing Daniel 9:27 with Matthew 24:15-22 and

⁴ Most dispensationalists view the Church age as ending prior to the beginning of the 70th week (pretribulationism), however, some view the Church age as ending sometime during the 70th week, thus not all dispensationalists are pretribulationist.

⁵ Such a view is typical of partial preterism. Full preterists view the 70th week as having been completely fulfilled in A.D. 70.

Revelation 12:6,14, it appears that the 70th week is 2520 days long.⁶ Of course, if the length of the 70th week is 2520 days, then no amillennial interpretation thus offered could be correct, for they all require the 70th week to be much longer. Fifth, a purely symbolic interpretation of the 70 weeks lacks explanatory power. If the 70 weeks structure is not a chronology, then what is the symbolic significance of the fact that Messiah is said to be “cut off” and the city and the sanctuary destroyed after the 69th week, or that certain events, such as the making of a covenant and the cessation of the daily sacrifices in the temple are said to occur at specific points during the 70th week? Sixth, when the prophecy is understood as chronological, the portions of the prophecy that have already been fulfilled coincide with history.

The chronology is the most challenging aspect of the prophecy. Assuming that the prophecy is chronological, the first task is to determine the starting and ending points of the first 69 weeks.⁷ The prophecy specifies the starting point as “the issuing of a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem” (Dan. 9:24), and the end point is “until Messiah the Prince.” This leaves us with two challenges: determining which of the various decrees to use as the starting point, and what point in the life of the Messiah is the correct end point of the 69th week. Of the decrees that have been suggested as the starting point, only one matches the criteria of the prophecy: the 444 B.C. decree of Artaxerxes issued at the behest of Nehemiah, since it alone allowed for the rebuilding of the fortifications (walls, gates, and fortress) necessary to the eventual restoration of the city as implied in Daniel 9:25, “with plaza and moat.”⁸ Also, the conditions under which the restoration began, described in Nehemiah 4:1-23 and 6:1-14, match the

⁶ Revelation 12:6 states that the time during which the woman (Israel) will be protected in the wilderness is 1260 days, which is also said to be 42 months (Rev. 12:14, cf. Dan. 7:25). Since the persecution of Israel begins at the time the abomination of desolation is set up (Matthew 24:15ff, cf. Dan. 9:27) and it extends to the second coming, the length of the second half of the tribulation is likely 1260 days, making the entire week 2520 days. Why the 70 weeks prophecy employs a 360-day year is not known.

⁷ The first 69 weeks are given as two groups: 7 weeks, and 62 weeks. Therefore, the last week of the 62 weeks is the 69th week (7weeks + 62 weeks = 69 weeks). The prophecy does not specify any event for the conclusion of the first 7 weeks, though it may be more than coincidence that the last material included in the Old Testament (Ezra/Nehemiah) was likely recorded shortly after 400 B.C. (approximately 48 years {or 7 x 7 weeks} after the start of the 70 weeks).

⁸ Jerusalem was minimally occupied prior to this decree, but because the defensive fortifications destroyed at the time of the Babylonian invasion had not been repaired, only an unprotected village existed amidst the ruins of the once great fortress city. That village was subject to constant plundering and intimidation. Obviously any decree that did not provide for the rebuilding of the defensive structures could not have been the decree prophesied in Daniel 9:25. Although the wording of the actual decree is nowhere given, the extent of the restoration begun pursuant to the decree is evident from the book of Nehemiah (esp. 2:5-8). While previous decrees allowed Jews to return to the land and to rebuild the temple, Artaxerxes’ decree in the twentieth year of his reign is the only decree that allowed for the rebuilding of the defensive fortifications that would pave the way for the eventual restoration of Jerusalem.

conditions stated in the prophecy (Dan. 9:25).⁹ The other decrees to which interpreters have pointed are concerned mainly with the return of the Jews and the minimal reoccupation of Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the temple, not the restoration of the city. Due to the importance of this prophecy, one would expect that the implementation of such a decree would be well documented. And in fact, the book of Nehemiah, recorded a little over a hundred and thirty years after the prophecy, does just that, documenting the beginning of the restoration of Jerusalem pursuant to Artaxerxes' 444 B.C. decree, and the circumstances surrounding the initial work of restoration (Neh. 4:1-23; 6:1-14, cf. Dan. 9:25). Therefore a strong case can be made for viewing Artaxerxes' 444 B.C. decree as the starting point for the prophecy. As to what event in the life of Messiah serves as the end point of the 69 weeks, the prophecy does not specify.¹⁰

Early in the twentieth century, Sir Robert Anderson attempted to calculate the time from Artaxerxes' decree to the triumphal entry of Christ using the start date of Nisan 1, 445 B.C. and the year of Christ's crucifixion as A.D. 32.¹¹ Anderson used a 360-day year in his calculations and made adjustments for converting from the Hebrew calendar to the Julian calendar. However, there were numerous problems with Anderson's calculation, including both the year of Artaxerxes' decree (445 B.C.) and the year of Christ's crucifixion (A.D. 32). Both of these dates are now known to be untenable.¹² More recently, Harold Hoehner provided calculations from

⁹ The prophecy states that the city would be rebuilt, "even in times of distress" (Dan. 9:25). The book of Nehemiah records that pursuant to Nehemiah's request of Artaxerxes, the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt amidst ridicule, opposition and even severe threats of force from Sanballat, the governor of Samaria, and Tobiah, the governor of Ammon, as well as others (Neh. 2:9; 4:1-7; 6:1-2). As the rebuilding of the wall progressed, the threat of attack grew so intense that half the workers stood watch with swords, spears and bows in hand, while the other half worked with their weapons at their side (Neh. 4:7-23). There was also an assassination plot against Nehemiah (Neh. 6:1-4), and when that did not succeed, the opposition attempted to discredit him (Neh. 6:5-14); however, all of these plots failed. These difficulties certainly qualify the rebuilding of Jerusalem under Nehemiah as occurring in a time of distress as prophesied in Daniel 9:25.

¹⁰ Except for the passion week, it is not possible to give a precise date for the events in Jesus' life. We know that Jesus was crucified on Friday, Nisan 14th, likely in A.D. 33, and from that a timeline of the passion week can be derived. (For arguments supporting A.D. 33 as the year of the crucifixion see, Harold Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*, pp.65-114.)

¹¹ Nehemiah 2:1, which refers to the decree of Artaxerxes, states that the decree was made in the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes' reign, but it does not specify the exact day. For the purpose of these calculations Anderson used Nisan 1 [which he stated was March 5], 445 B.C. Aside from the fact that the year is incorrect (see the note below), the date conversion is also incorrect (Nisan 1, 445 B.C. would have been March 13th, not March 5th in the Julian calendar).

¹² The decree of Artaxerxes made in the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of his reign (Neh. 2:1) should be dated in the year 444 B.C., since according to the accession-year system of reckoning, the reign of Artaxerxes should be dated from the first full calendar year of his reign (444 B.C.). Also Harold Hoehner has argued that the A.D. 32 year of the crucifixion is not tenable due mainly to the fact that

the decree of Artaxerxes to the triumphal entry using Nisan 1, 444 B.C. as the start date and A.D. 33 as the year for the crucifixion.¹³ The calculations involve the conversion of dates from the Hebrew lunisolar calendar, and there are unresolved questions as to how the calculation should be done. However, if one uses a date prior to the 5th day (*i.e.*, days 1-4) of Nisan, 444 B.C. as the start date, the 69th week terminates anywhere from March 29th (Sunday) A.D. 33, to April 2, A.D. 33.¹⁴ Assuming a crucifixion year of A.D. 33, Jesus was crucified April 3 (Friday), A.D. 33.

One possible calculation of the 70 weeks prophecy is as follows: (The intermediate result must be rounded to a integer since the least significant figure in the prophecy is an integer.) The last half of the 70th week is 1260 days; the 70th week is 2520 days; thus there are 476 solar years in the first 69 weeks (calculated as the integer result of $69 \times 2520 / 365.24219$). 476 solar years is 173,855 days. When 173,855 days are added to the start date (Nisan 1, 444 B.C.), the result is March 29 (Sunday), A.D. 33, which would have been the date of the triumphal entry of Christ into Jerusalem four days before his crucifixion. Jesus was likely crucified on Friday, Nisan 14, A.D. 33 (April 3, A.D. 33 by the Julian calendar).¹⁵

The importance of Daniel 9:24-27 in the study of future prophecy

Jesus in Matthew 24, and Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2, associated the abomination in Daniel's 70th week with the future time of tribulation just prior to the establishment of the millennial aspect of the kingdom of God. It has been established from a comparison of Daniel 9:27 with Revelation 12:6,14 that the length of the 70th week is 2520 days. It is apparent from Daniel 9:27 that the 70th week begins with the making of a covenant between the Roman Prince whose people destroyed the city and the sanctuary, and that this last week is divided into two equal parts, with the abomination in the temple occurring at the midpoint and the destruction of the Roman Prince (the Antichrist) occurring at the conclusion of the 70th week. This serves as the basic chronology of the tribulation period and is therefore essential in understanding both Jesus' teaching in the first half of the Olivet Discourse and the book of Revelation from 6:1 to

Christ was crucified in a year when Nisan 14th (Passover) fell on a Friday, which was not the case in A.D. 32. Hoehner presents the case that A.D. 33 is the most likely year of the crucifixion (Hoehner, pp.65-114).

¹³ See Hoehner, pp.115-139. The March 4/5 date Hoehner gives for Nisan 1, 444 B.C. is incorrect. Nisan 1, 444 B.C. fell on April 2 in the Julian calendar. Also, Hoehner gives March 30th A.D. 33 (Julian calendar) as the date of Christ's triumphal entry, when the date was likely March 29th.

¹⁴ The dates given here are Julian.

¹⁵ For the purpose of checking this calculation note that the Julian day number for Nisan 1, 444 B.C. is 1,559,344; that day number plus 173,855 days (the number of days in 476 solar years) results in Julian day 1,733,199, which converts to March 29 (Sunday), A.D. 33 in the Julian calendar. Since the beginning of Hebrew months was based on visual observation of the moon, and conditions for observing the moon can at times be unfavorable, the start of a month could vary by a day, but would be compensated in subsequent months. Thus over the span of this prophecy the date should not be off more than one day, if at all.

20:3. While Revelation presents a sequence of events that will occur during the tribulation, it nowhere presents a chronology anchored to a timeline as found in the prophecy of the 70 weeks. Thus, understanding of the prophecy of the 70 weeks is essential to understanding the chronology of the tribulation events discussed in Matthew 24-25 and Revelation 6:1-20:3.

One of the key contributions of this prophecy is that it allows us to determine the length of the tribulation period and the event that makes the midpoint. It is only by a comparison of Revelation with Daniel 9:24-27 and Matthew 24 that the length of the tribulation can be deduced. We learn from Daniel 9:27 that the abomination in the temple marks the midpoint of Daniel's 70th week (the tribulation period). In Matthew 24:15 Jesus linked Israel's flight into the wilderness as occurring at the time of the abomination referred to in Daniel 9:27; and in Revelation 12:6 (cf. vv.13-17) John recorded that the "woman who gave birth to the *male* child" (Israel) will be nourished (provided for) in the wilderness for 1260 days (3 ½ years, cf. Rev. 12:14 and Dan. 7:25). From this information it is possible to infer that the second half of the tribulation (from the abomination to the end) is 1260 days and that the total length of the period is approximately 7 years (2520 days). Thus, without the information from the seventy weeks prophecy it would not be possible to determine the length of the tribulation period. Also the fact that the abomination marks the precise midpoint of the period (which is nowhere else revealed in scripture) makes an approximate chronology of the tribulation period possible. A comparison of Daniel 9:27 with Matthew 24 and Revelation 6:1-20:3 reveals that the first four seals of Revelation occur in the first half of the period, and that the last three seals fall into the last half of the period.¹⁶ We should also add that the 70 weeks prophecy is the only biblical passage to mention the covenant that begins the tribulation period (Dan. 9:27).

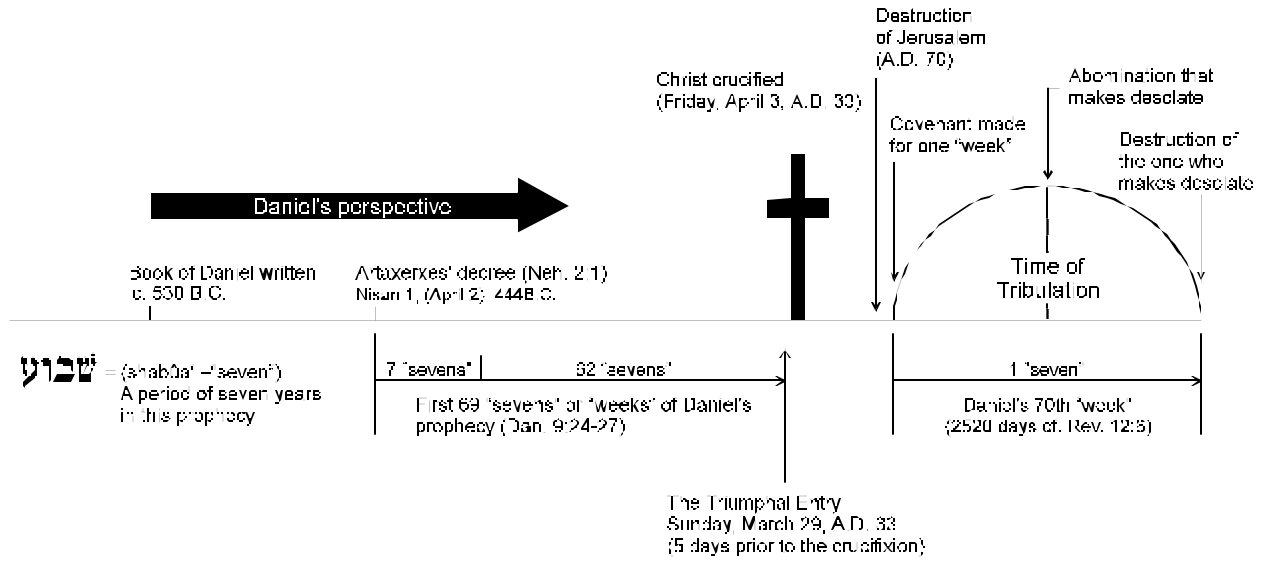
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¹⁶ The fact that the abomination marks the midpoint of the tribulation is the key to deciphering the chronology. In his Olivet Discourse Jesus revealed that the abomination referred to by Daniel would result in a severe persecution and martyrdom of Jewish believers during the tribulation period (Mt. 24:9-14 and vv.15-22); in Revelation this event occurs during the time of the fifth seal (Rev. 6:9-11). Since the fifth seal occurs in connection with the abomination in the temple, it is apparent that the first four seals fall into the first half of the period. This information, along with the fact that Revelation provides a sequence for many tribulation events allows us to construct a gross chronology of the period.

The 70 Weeks of Daniel



Calculation of the first 69 sevens:

1. The length of one seven is 2520 days (2 x 1260 days), cf. Rev. 12:6.
2. There are 476 solar years in the first 69 sevens.
(Calculated as the integer of $69 \times 2520 \text{ days} / 365.24219 \text{ days/year}$)
3. 476 solar years from Nisan 1 (April 2), 444 B.C. is Nisan 9 (March 29) A.D. 33.
($476 \times 365.24219 \text{ days}$, is 173,955 days, which from Nisan 1, 444 B.C. comes to Nisan 9 (March 29), A.D. 33.)