

# Daniel's Prophecy of the Seventy Sevens

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The Book of Daniel, written by about 530 BC, laid out in advance the historical time-frame within which the Messiah would come. Through dreams given to Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 2) as well as to Daniel (Daniel 7 and 8), God revealed that the Babylonian Empire (2:38) would be subsequently replaced by the Medo-Persian Empire (8:20; cf. 5:28), the Greek Empire (8:21), and an unnamed fourth kingdom, which we know from history to be the Roman Empire (for a thorough defense that the fourth empire is the Roman Empire, see Young 1977: 275-94).

It is specifically revealed that the Kingdom of God would come during the fourth kingdom to replace all earthly kingdoms (2:44-45). And this would happen when “one like a Son of Man” is given “dominion ... and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations and languages should serve Him” and whose “dominion is an everlasting dominion” and whose “kingdom is one which shall not be destroyed” (7:13-14). In other words, the Messiah would come during the Roman Empire.

To further narrow down the time during the Roman Empire when the Messiah would come, God gave Daniel what is popularly known as the Prophecy of the Seventy Weeks (see 9:24-27). This marvellous prophecy has been subjected to numerous interpretations, even among scholars who believe in predictive prophecy. We will adopt here the traditional Messianic interpretation presented by E. J. Young (1977: 191-221) and modified by David Lurie (1990) as it fits best the Biblical as well as historical data.

This is how the prophecy came about. In the year following Cyrus' conquest of Babylon, Daniel was reading the prophecies of Jeremiah concerning “the number of years ... for the completion of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years” (9:2; cf. Jeremiah 25:11; 29:10). Recognizing that this means the Exile was basically over according to God's promise, Daniel prayed for the restoration of his people Israel and his city Jerusalem. In response God said, “Seventy weeks (literally, ‘sevens’) are decreed for your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy, and to anoint a Most Holy” (9:24; cf. Young 1977: 198-201).

The phrase here translated “to anoint *a Most Holy*” is usually translated “to anoint *the Most Holy Place*.” But the Hebrew phrase here reads literally “to anoint *a holy of holies*,” that is, “a Most Holy.” It is quite unlike “between the holy of holies” and “in the holy of holies” (Exodus 26:33-34), where in that context “the holy of holies” obviously refers to the most holy place in the Tabernacle. But the context here involves atoning for sin and bringing in everlasting righteousness (9:24) as well as the appearance of “an anointed one, a prince” who will be “cut off” (die) and (whose death) will make efficacious a covenant (9:25-27; see below). So it is not talking about the anointing of a place but a person.

Hence in light of Isaiah 42:1 (cf. 11:2; 61:1), which predicts the anointing of the Servant, who will become an atoning Sacrifice for sin (Isaiah 53), “a Most Holy” who will be anointed plainly refers to “the Anointed One” or in Hebrew “the Messiah” (or “the Christ” in Greek). And since Daniel 9:24-27 is about the fulfillment of vision and prophecy concerning the Messiah (particularly Isaiah 53), the phrase “to *seal up* vision and prophecy” naturally means to fulfill vision and prophecy (cf. Young 1977: 200).

To ensure that the Jews under the Roman Empire would take Daniel and this Messianic prophecy seriously, God also gave a series of detailed predictions concerning the preceding Greek Empire, from the rise and fall of Alexander the Great (Daniel 11:3-4) to the desecration of the Jerusalem Temple in 167 BC by Antiochus Epiphanes (Daniel 11:31). The fulfillment of this series of predictions was so uncanny that modernist scholars have to assume that the Book of Daniel must have been written in 165 BC, that is, after this series of events had already taken place (for a discussion demonstrating how unlikely this is, see Beckwith 2008: 355-58, 414-17).

The Messianic prophecy specifies that the period of the “seventy sevens” begins with “the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem” (9:25). This has to be the decree issued by Cyrus (Isaiah 44:28; 45:13; Young 1977: 201-203), which highlights specifically the rebuilding of the Temple (Ezra 1:1-4) “because that was the religious center of the city, that which distinguished it as the holy city of the Jews” (203), and thus rebuilding it was “the first and most important step in the rebuilding of the city” (202). The rebuilding of the city wall followed by the repopulation of Jerusalem under Nehemiah then constituted the completion of rebuilding the city (Nehemiah 7:4-5).

The prophecy also divides the period of “seventy sevens” into three sub-periods: 7 sevens, 62 sevens, and 1 seven, each with its own significance:

The termination of the first is indicated by the completion of the work of rebuilding the city; that of the second by the appearance of an Anointed One, a Prince; and that of the third by the completion of the covenant with the many, for whom the blessings of salvation pointed out in ver. 24 [cited in full above], as connected with the termination of the entire period, are ultimately destined” (Hengstenberg 1956: 85).

Young (1977: 195) has shown that the Hebrew word translated “sevens” (usually rendered as “weeks”), actually means “*besevened*, i.e. computed by sevens.... The word means *divided into sevens*.” Thus a “seven” can mean 7 or any multiple of 7 (1, 2, or even 10). Young did not apply this insight to his interpretation of the “sevens” in Daniel 9:24-27 but instead interpreted the term as symbolic. Lurie (1990: 306), building on this insight, argues that in this context the term refers to “periods divided into seven years, periods that are integer multiples of seven years.” Hence a “seven” here can mean  $1 \times 7 = 7$ , or  $2 \times 7 = 14$ , or even  $10 \times 7 = 70$  years.

Therefore from the time of the decree of Cyrus (538 BC) to the completion of the rebuilding of the wall of the city under Nehemiah would be 7 sevens =  $7 \times (2 \times 7) = 98$  years. Thus the wall would be completed in 440 BC (538 BC – 98 years); Nehemiah returned to rebuild the wall in 444 BC. The appearance of the Anointed One after another 62 sevens =  $62 \times (1 \times 7) = 434$  years. Thus He would appear in 6 BC (440 BC – 434 years). Jesus Christ has been reckoned to be born between 4-6 BC.

Since the value of “seven” in the first two sets of sevens— $2 \times 7$  years and  $1 \times 7$  years respectively—can only be known after each of the predicted events has been fulfilled, no one could have calculated in advance when they would be fulfilled. But this is not the purpose of the three sets of sevens. The purpose is to confirm Daniel as a true prophet in a spectacular way after the predictions have been fulfilled. Thus after witnessing the fulfillment of the events predicted in the first two sets of sevens, we should have the confidence that the message of this prophecy is from God even before witnessing the fulfillment of the event predicted in the last seven. And we saw that this message is about the atoning death of the Messiah. In fact this is the focus of the concluding seven.

Something of great significance is said to happen in the final seven (9:27). This event is often translated “he will make/confirm a covenant with many.” Young (1977: 208-13) has argued that it should be translated “he shall cause to prevail a covenant for the many” (208), which means “He” (the Messiah, the “Anointed One” of 9:25 and 9:26, who will be put to death) is “To Make a

Covenant Efficacious” for many (213).

And it is said that in the middle of this seven “He shall put an end to sacrifice and offering” (through His death). Taking this seven to have  $1 \times (10 \times 7) = 70$  years, the middle, 35 years from the birth of Christ, is then AD 30 (6 BC to AD 30 is 35 years because 1 BC to AD 1 is only 1 year—there is no year 0). Christ is commonly believed to have died in AD 30, making efficacious the New Covenant and thereby rendering “sacrifice and offering” obsolete (Hebrews 8). The end of this seven is then AD 65 (AD 30 + 35 years). In AD 66 the Jews rebelled against the Roman Empire resulting in the destruction (again) of Jerusalem and the Temple in AD 70.

This event is in fact included in this very prophecy (9:26) because it is crucially relevant. Partly it is because the prophecy is in response to Daniel’s petition concerning the future of his people and *city* (9:17; cf. 9:24). Partly it is because Christ is said to cause the New Covenant to prevail through His death and thus “put an end to sacrifice and offering” (in the Temple), that is, rendering them obsolete. But “sacrifice and offering” though already obsolete continued in the Temple until its destruction. So the New Covenant can be said to have truly prevailed only after the destruction of the Temple.

In fact it is reported that when Christ died, the veil separating the Holy of Holies and the Holy Place in the Temple was torn apart from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51). This signifies the end of the Temple together with the end of “sacrifice and offering.” Thus the continued worship at the Temple after that amounts to faith in the Temple rather than in God, which is idolatry—an abomination to God. The Temple was no longer “the house of the Lord, but a house of abominations” (Young 1977: 218). This gives a clue as to the meaning of the rather enigmatic second half of 9:27—“at the temple he will set up an abomination that causes desolation, until the end that is decreed is poured out on him” (NIV). It is about the desolation of the Temple in religious terms. This is confirmed when Jesus cited part of it in the context of His prediction that the Temple would be destroyed (Matthew 24:15).

Jerusalem and the Temple are prophesied to be destroyed by “the people of the prince who is to come” (9:26). Since it was a Roman army that destroyed them in AD 70, “the prince who is to come” (literally “the coming prince”) has to be the Roman prince Titus Vespasianus, who was then in command of the Roman army. But there is a tendency to interpret this prince as the future Antichrist. This interpretation does not make sense as the people and their prince have to be contemporaries.

Actually it is based on, and in fact required by, the assumption that the “prince who is to come” has to be a prince in the future from our standpoint as readers. So this prince will come in our future and hence cannot possibly be Titus in the first century. However the coming of the prince in Daniel 9:26 “is [in the] future from the standpoint of Dan[iel the writer]” (Young 1977: 212), and not from the standpoint of the readers (who spread across the millenniums). From Daniel’s standpoint, this future prince has to be Titus as he commanded the army that destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple.

Nevertheless, regardless of how we interpret the term “sevens” and the other details of the prophecy, of particular relevance here is the prediction that the Messiah would die before the destruction (again) of Jerusalem and the Temple in AD 70. Since Jesus died in about AD 30, He fulfilled this prediction as well. This is particularly significant because it pegs the time of the Messiah’s coming to a recognized historical event.

Before AD 70 Jews and Gentiles who accepted Jesus as the Messiah did so without the benefit of this additional piece of evidence from Daniel to help them identify Him as the Messiah. But for people living after AD 70 this prophecy adds further weight for identifying Jesus as the Messiah, the Servant of Isaiah 53, whose death is said to make atonement for sin. For God not only reaffirmed through Daniel the atoning death of the Messiah, He also specified that this would happen before AD 70.

And no sane scholar would ruin his reputation by saying that Isaiah 53 or Daniel 9:24-27 was written after Jesus' death on the cross. If they reject the obvious conclusion that Jesus fulfilled these prophecies, they would rather do so by avoiding a plain reading of the respective texts. Nevertheless the fact remains that the death of Jesus uncannily matches a plain reading of these texts. To dismiss this fact as just an incredible "coincidence" exposes one's prejudice.

## References

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