

Eschatology: Daniel's Seventy Weeks

Daniel 9:24-27 has long been one of the most controversial passages in all of the Bible. While the "seventy weeks" that Gabriel describes to Daniel are a bit complicated, the passage is not inscrutable.

Seventy Years of Captivity

Backing up a bit, chapter nine starts out with Daniel figuring out that the seventy years of Israel's captivity had ended. Why were there exactly seventy years of captivity? Where does this number come from? It has to do with the Sabbath. We normally think of days when we think of the Sabbath. The Sabbath day is the seventh day. Israel was supposed to work for six days and rest on the seventh day. Hence, Saturday was called the Sabbath day.

The word Sabbath simply means "rest." For Israel, there were Sabbath days and also Sabbath years. Every seven years, the land of Israel was to have a Sabbath, a rest. They were to supposed to plant crops in the land for six years and allow the land to rest during the seventh year. Additionally, there was the year of Jubilee. Every forty-nine years, there was to be an additional Sabbath year (the Jubilee) in which all debts were forgiven and the land was allowed another year of rest.

1,2,3,4,5,6, 7 (Sabbath)	29,30,31,32,33,34, 35 (Sabbath)
8,9,10,11,12,13, 14 (Sabbath)	36,37,38,39,40,41, 42 (Sabbath)
15,16,17,18,19,20, 21 (Sabbath)	43,44,45,46,47,48, 49 (Sabbath)
22,23,24,25,26,27, 28 (Sabbath)	50 (Jubilee)

Thus, for each unit of fifty years, the land was supposed to have eight years of rest (seven Sabbaths and one Jubilee). Perhaps in the early days, Israel faithfully celebrated the Sabbath years. However, by the time of the exile, Israel had not kept the Sabbath years for over four hundred years. They had missed a total of seventy Sabbath years (62 Sabbaths + 8 Jubilees = 70 years of rest). God had patiently waited for Israel to keep the Sabbath years, but they would never keep the Sabbath on their own.

2 Chronicles 36:20-21

Since Israel would not keep the Sabbath years on their own, God was going to force the land to keep the Sabbath years by removing Israel from the land. Thus, the seventy years of captivity are not an arbitrary number. This was to make up for the seventy years worth of rest that the land had missed. Jeremiah had prophesied of these seventy years of exile.

Jeremiah 25:11; 29:10-11

Daniel had read Jeremiah and understood that the seventy years of exile were coming to an end.

Daniel 9:1-2

Based upon this knowledge, Daniel was moved to confess the sins of Israel and plead for the captivity to come to an end. We read this confession in Daniel 9:4-19.

The Seventy Weeks

While Daniel was praying, Yahweh sent the angel Gabriel to give Daniel a special message, which has come to be known as "Daniel's seventy weeks."

Daniel 9:24

"Your people" is obviously a reference to the Hebrew people. "Your holy city" is obviously a reference to Jerusalem. Gabriel tells Daniel about a future block of time, seventy "weeks." If taken literally, this would only add up to one year and four months. However, it is unlikely that Gabriel was speaking of such a short time. The Hebrew word for "week" simply means "seven." Seventy "weeks" are actually seventy "sevens." Most scholars understand this to be years (70 x 7 = 490 years).

Verse 24

Israel had been in captivity for seventy years. God was going to give them seventy groups of seven years (490 years) to accomplish six purposes.

Daniel 9:24

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1) to finish the transgression – God was going to give Israel 490 years worth of his patience. Once the 490 years was reached, their transgressions will be finished, and God will pour his wrath upon them.

2) to make an end of sins – This is similar to the first purpose. Israel's sins will be filled up after 490 years.

3) to make reconciliation for iniquity – While Israel fills up the measure of their sins, God will send a Savior who will reconcile them, even while they are in their sins.

4) to bring in everlasting righteousness – The forgiveness of sins also brings eternal righteousness.

5) to seal up vision and prophecy – This 490 year period will fulfill the visions and prophecies that Daniel has seen.

6) to anoint the Most Holy – This refers to the anointing of Jesus, as we will see shortly.

Verse 25

Verse 24 is a summary of the entire 490 year period. Gabriel goes on to describe some more specifics within this time in verse 25.

Daniel 9:25

Gabriel gives two events and the length of time between them. The first event is "the going forth of the command to restore and rebuild Jerusalem." Scholars have debated which command Gabriel is referring to. Calvin and many others have applied this verse to the decree of Artaxerxes in 457 BC, which is recorded in Ezra 7. The second event is "until Messiah the Prince." The word Messiah means "anointed," which leads us to understand that this is speaking of the anointing of the Prince, Jesus. The time period is "seven weeks and sixty-two weeks." This is a total of sixty-nine "weeks" or 483 years. 483 years after 457 BC takes us to AD 27, which is the year that Jesus was anointed and began his public ministry.

Why does Gabriel say "seven weeks and sixty-two weeks" instead of simply saying "sixty-nine weeks"? There are many possible answers, but the most likely answer is that Jerusalem was restored and rebuilt in 408 BC, which is forty-nine years (seven "weeks") after the original decree of 457 BC. From 408 BC to AD 27 is 434 years (sixty-two "weeks").

Verse 26

Gabriel next explains what will happen after the Messiah is anointed.

Daniel 9:26

Two events are highlighted along with the time frame. The time frame is "after the sixty-two weeks." This means that the two events described in this verse take place sometime after AD 27. The first event is "Messiah shall be cut off, but not for himself." This is obviously a reference to crucifixion of Jesus. He is killed, but not for himself. He is killed for his people, as a substitute. This takes place in AD 30, which is "after the sixty-two weeks" (AD 27). The second event is the destruction of Jerusalem. The "Prince who is to come" is the Messiah as verse 25 refers to "Messiah the Prince." The "people of the Prince" in this case refers to the Roman armies, which "destroy the city and the sanctuary." God sent the Roman armies to carry out his vengeance upon the Jews by destroying the temple and the city of Jerusalem. This came to pass in AD 70, which is also "after the sixty-two weeks" (AD 27).

Some are tempted to think that the destruction of Jerusalem must take place during the seventieth week, which would be from AD 27-34. However, Gabriel simply says "after the sixty-two weeks," meaning after AD 27. Additionally, Jesus himself gives us insight into this timing. In Mark 13, Jesus is describing the destruction of the temple, when he gives us this time indicator.

Mark 13:30

Jesus guaranteed that the temple would be destroyed within a generation. He said this in AD 30, and forty years later, in AD 70, the temple was indeed destroyed. Within a generation means approximately forty years.

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Verse 27

Finally, Gabriel explains what will happen in the seventieth week (AD 27-34).

Daniel 9:27

Here, Gabriel gives two events and the timing of each event. The first event is "he shall confirm a covenant with many." Most understand this to refer to the baptism of Jesus, when he was anointed for his public ministry. The timing of the first event is "for one week," which is referring to the seventieth "week." The baptism of Jesus starts the seventieth week.

The second event is "he shall bring an end to sacrifice and offering." This is another reference to the crucifixion of Jesus. His Substitutionary atonement for sin is the once-for-all sacrifice, the final sacrifice. Every sacrifice after this is an "abomination." The Jews would continue to sacrifice for another forty years, accumulating abominations, which would bring about their desolation. The timing of the second event is "in the middle of the week," which is referring to the seventieth "week." Half of seven is 3½. This means that in the middle of the seventieth "week" is 3½ years after the baptism of Jesus, which is AD 30, when Jesus was crucified.

What marks the end of the seventieth week (AD 34)? When Cornelius was converted, Peter met with the apostles in Jerusalem to explain that Gentiles could now be saved. Paul was raised up to preach to the Gentiles. God could have destroyed Jerusalem at this moment, but he once again poured out his grace upon the Jews. According to Jesus' words in the Olivet Discourse, God granted the Jews one "generation" to repent and return to him.

Dispensationalism and the Seventy Weeks

Many eschatological positions hold to the above explanation of Daniel's seventy weeks. However, in the early nineteenth century, a new approach was forged that has since become the dominant view in America: Dispensationalism. This has been made especially popular by the Left Behind series. Dispensationalism is a peculiar form of Futurism. Remember that Futurists believe that most Biblical prophecy will be fulfilled in the future, at the end of the world.

Dispensationalists believe that near the end of the world, God will remove the church from the world and return to Judaism. Israel will repossess the promised land, the temple will be rebuilt, and animal sacrifices will resume. Dispensationalists believe that Daniel 9:24-27 explains how God is going to deal with Israel for seventy weeks (490 years). However, the peculiarity is that Dispensationalists believe that there is a large time gap between the sixty-ninth week and the seventieth week. The first sixty-nine weeks (483 years) takes us up to AD 30, but the prophetic clock stops. God stops dealing with Israel once they reject Jesus as their Messiah. The seventieth week is entirely future. There are multiple problems with such a view:

- 1) There is absolutely no textual warrant for inserting a gap between the sixty-ninth and the seventieth weeks. Gabriel divides up the seventy weeks into distinct periods of time (6+62+1=70), but divisions do not entail gaps.
- 2) Just as the first block of time was consecutive (70 years without gaps), so the second block of time should be considered consecutive (seventy "weeks" of years without gaps). As of today, we now have an almost two thousand year gap between year 483 and 484. This destroys the unity of "seventy weeks."
- 3) Dispensationalists introduce some peculiarities regarding verse 27. Instead of Jesus confirming a covenant at the beginning of the seventieth week, Dispensationalists believe that the antichrist will make a covenant with Israel. Instead of Jesus bringing an end to sacrifice and offering, Dispensationalists look for the antichrist to stop the temple sacrifices. Where Dispensationalists look for a future antichrist, we see this verse as describing the ministry of Jesus.

Conclusion

A straight-forward reading of the text points us toward a first century fulfillment. This is consistent with everything else we have studied in the book of Daniel. We will also see a mostly first century fulfillment when we study the Olivet Discourse, the book of Revelation, and other prophetic texts.

The center of prophecy is Jesus Christ, not Israel.