

Brief Note

A Context for Daniel's Seventy Weeks

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Introduction

The end of the seventy weeks prophecy of Dan 9 is sometimes considered a weak link in our interpretation. And of course those who say so want very much for this to be the case, because of what our interpretation says about literal Israel in God's overall plan. For Seventh-day Adventists, literal Israel plays a vanishingly small role in prophecy. This does not mean the Jewish people are unimportant, but only that they don't figure prominently in the Adventist end-time scenario. For other Protestants literal Israel is the main feature in their interpretive agenda. So how to justify what we say?

Dan 9:25-27 discusses events that would occur at the end of the seventy weeks. The last part of Dan 9:24 lists six things that would be accomplished in association with that period of time.¹ The first part of Dan 9:24, gives the briefest overview. It says: "'Seventy "weeks" are decreed for your people and your holy city . . .'" (Dan 9:24, NIV; margin). It is this first clause of vs. 24 that will occupy us here.

What the Passage Does Not Mean

One could think of the various gap theories as a way of getting around the implications of vs. 24a. If seventy weeks are decreed (lit. "cut off"), or set apart, for "your people," what happens after that? Answer: Not the same things that happened before. If we take the seventy weeks to be the first part of the 2300 days, what would happen during the rest of that time? Who would the last part of the prophecy be set apart for? Not for literal Jews.² God did not reject His people, but the basis for their acceptance has changed.

¹ In both cases the events mentioned go beyond the end of the seventy weeks as such. In vss. 25-27 there is a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem. And in vs. 24b events #3 and #6 both have to do with Christ's high priestly ministry in heaven, which begins within the time period but extends beyond it.

² Seventh-day Adventists have nothing but warm feelings toward Jewish people. There is no prejudice here. It's just that genetics is not what the passage is about.

People whose entire system of prophetic interpretation seeks to emphasize the role of literal Jews, and especially in an eschatological context, must have some way of prolonging the seventy weeks, i.e., some way of not allowing them to end too soon. Gap theories do this. They keep the period open until the end time, so that literal Jews can be associated with prophetic fulfillment eschatologically.

But this flies in the face of the obvious sense of the passage. What the angel is saying to Daniel is that the Jewish nation would come to an end. And we know from history that it did. Rome is not going to destroy Jerusalem in our lifetime. It did that almost 2000 years ago in A.D. 70.

Having said this, it is important to keep in mind that the seventy weeks do not end in A.D. 70. Another important event that does not mark the end of the period is the Messiah's death, because the Messiah was to be cut off in the middle of the seventieth week. The middle is not the same as the end. Other events – within the time period – would follow Messiah's death, as important as His death was. Summarizing, the seventy weeks do not end in modern times, in A.D. 70, or in A.D. 31.

What the Passage Does Mean

The time in history when the seventy weeks do end is not hard to calculate. The prophecy says that Christ would be cut off in the middle of the seventieth week. Starting from 457 B.C. that occurred in A.D. 31. So three and a half prophetic days (or literal years) after A.D. 31 the period as a whole would come to an end.

The immediate context

Three and a half years after the spring of A.D. 31 brings us, not to 2005 or whatever, but to A.D. 34. By all accounts this is the timeframe in which Stephen was martyred. So does this mean that Stephen's death is more important prophetically than that of Jesus? Not for a moment. It might mean, though, that we have more to learn about what the seventy weeks are about. I would say that the death of Stephen is the correct ending point for the period, but not because Stephen died then. Much more is involved here than the death of an individual, even one so important as Stephen.

There were many Jews living in Jerusalem at the time of Christ's death, who may have been swept up in the excitement of the moment when He died, but were nevertheless impressed by His teachings. Some of these might accept the apostles' teaching about Jesus after giving the matter more thought. God loved these people on behalf of the patriarchs and they had crucified Jesus in ignorance (Luke 23:34; Acts 3:17). So for three and a half years they were given time to reflect on what they had done. This period of added grace says volumes about the kind of God we worship.

Three and a half years later, however, no one could generously say that Stephen had been stoned in ignorance. By this time the Jewish people – and the leadership in particular – had a full and accurate knowledge of what they were doing. And please notice what that was. By murdering Stephen they were not rejecting Stephen, they were firmly and finally rejecting Jesus.

Three and a half years of apostolic preaching and miracles under the power of the Holy Spirit had done their intended work. Thousands accepted Christ, and the rest intelligently and deliberately rejected Him. This is serious business. When God calls us to decision He respects our choices.

There are theologies in which it makes no sense to speak of people accepting or rejecting Christ. We do not accept or reject Him; instead He accepts or rejects us. In such a theology, any interpretation in which an entire nation is called to decision would seem misguided, but in fact it is firmly biblical. Otherwise, what was Elijah trying to accomplish on Mt. Carmel?

The broader context

After A.D. 34 literal Jews were not excluded from grace. At least Paul was not excluded from grace. But the special status enjoyed by the Jewish nation up to that time was removed. This was accomplished not by rejecting people on the basis of their Jewishness, but by accepting both Jew and Gentile on the basis of faith. In Christ the covenant promises are extended to anyone who will accept them. For three and a half years the gospel was taken exclusively to the Jews. When a majority of them rejected it, He took it to the ends of the earth. We now pose a question with far reaching implications. If A.D. 34 was an ending point (the angel speaking to Daniel said it was), what was the corresponding beginning point? Was it 457 B.C.? In one sense, but there is more.

Since the promises were given originally to Abraham, we should see what ended with the seventy weeks as beginning with Abraham. We cannot know with complete accuracy when Abraham lived, but if we were to say 2000 years before Christ, that would get us close.

Before going on, consider the relationship between the seventy weeks and the 2300 days as Seventh-day Adventists have always taught it. We have always understood that the seventy weeks are the first part of the 2300 days. See fig. 1.

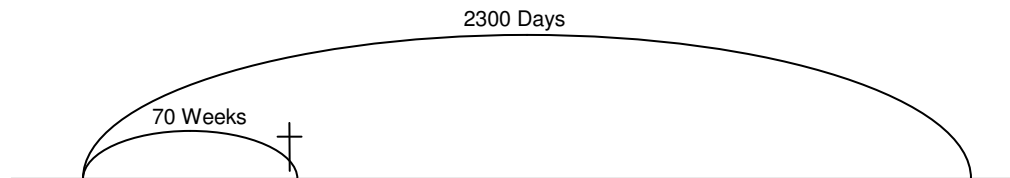


Fig. 1. Seventh-day Adventist concept of the relationship between the seventy weeks of Dan 9 and the 2300 days of Dan 8.

Consider now how the seventy weeks might map onto the period from Abraham to Christ. In saying this I emphasize that the Jews who stoned Stephen were not rejecting Stephen, they were rejecting the One who sent him. They were rejecting

Christ. So defining the period in fig. 2 (below) as extending from Abraham to Christ is exactly correct, despite the fact that the year in question is A.D. 34 instead of A.D. 31.³

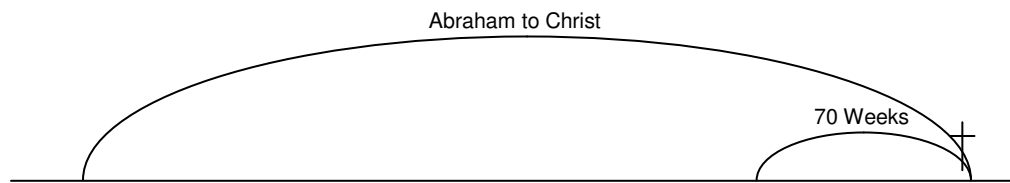


Fig. 2. The period from the giving of the covenant promises to Abraham, to their rejection after Christ's death, as that period relates to the seventy weeks of Dan 9.

When the angel says "Seventy "weeks" are determined for your people and your holy city . . ." (Dan 9:24), the obvious sense of what he is saying is that something would come to an end. The Jewish nation would no longer be a nation and it would no longer enjoy God's special favor. And yet God meant to bless someone. The promises had been given and they would be kept. If He could not fulfill them to literal Israel because of unbelief, He would fulfill them to spiritual Israel – the Israel of faith.

Some will disagree, but I submit that this is not a disruption of God's plan. Abraham was the father of many nations, but only one of them enjoyed any special relationship to God. Even Esau, who was descended from Isaac, the child of promise, did not have a special relationship to God. There was always a spiritual component. Physical descent from Abraham was never the only consideration defining Israel. If it were, how can we explain such apparent contradictions as God's differing relationships with Jacob and Esau?

Abraham was more than the father of many nations (Jews, Edomites, Ishmaelites and through them Arabs); he was the father of the faithful. So when God fulfills His promises to those who have the faith of Abraham, He is not being untrue to any part of what He said. Let us now combine the two diagrams.

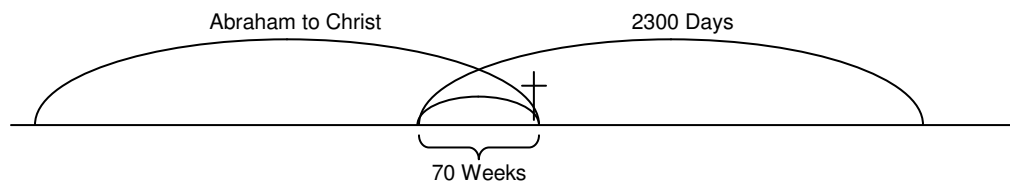


Fig. 3. Combined diagram showing the time during which literal Israel were the primary object of the covenant promises to Abraham, the 2300 days of Dan 8, and the intersection of the two, which defines the seventy weeks of Dan 9.

³ The number of years from Abraham to the end of the seventy weeks is something less than 2000, so the two periods are not identical. But they are comparable. That is my point here.

Conclusion

The seventy weeks lie at the intersection of two longer periods. The beginning of the seventy weeks is the beginning of the 2300 days. But the end of the seventy weeks is more than the period from 457 B.C. to A.D. 34. It is that, but it is more. It is the end of the period from the time when the promises to Abraham, and with them a litany of special spiritual privileges, up to the time when the Jews finally lost the last of these privileges by rejecting Christ.

At this point the gospel goes to the Gentiles as well as Jews and there is no longer any distinction. In A.D. 34 it was like Mary breaking her alabaster box and the fragrance filling the room. By removing the last of the Jews' special privileges the promises could not be spread from one end of the earth to the other. Previously the descendants of Abraham had enjoyed the special status of being God's chosen people. They were recipients and custodians of the promises God gave to Abraham. Losing them is not at all the same thing God rejecting them. "God did not reject his people whom he foreknew" (Rom 11:2).

Jews are not destined to be lost because of physical descent, any more than they are destined to be saved because of physical descent. Instead salvation is by faith. A Jew who believes in Jesus can be saved. (Paul is an example.) A Gentile who believes in Jesus can also be saved. After the end of the seventy weeks all of the branches in the olive tree in Paul's illustration are grafted in (see Rom 11:24). We can imagine exceptions, but Paul does not mention them. All branches in Paul's illustration are now grafted and the basis for their relationship with the nourishing sap of the olive tree is, precisely and exclusively, faith. God's chosen people today are those who accept God's chosen Person.

^{NIV} Acts 4:12 Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."