

Daniel 9: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Daniel chapter 9. In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, by descent Amid, who was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans, in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, perceived in the books the number of years that, according to the word of the Lord to Jeremiah the prophet, must pass before the end of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely seventy years.

Then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy, with fasting and sackcloth and ashes. I prayed to the Lord my God and made confession, saying, O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments.

We have sinned and done wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and rules. We have not listened to your servants, the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes and our fathers, and to all the people of the land.

To you, O Lord, belongs righteousness, but to us open shame, as at this day, to the men of Judah, to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to all Israel, those who are near and those who are far away, in all the lands to which you have driven them, because of the treachery that they have committed against you.

To us, O Lord, belongs open shame, to our kings, to our princes and to our fathers, because we have sinned against you. To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against him, and have not obeyed the voice of the Lord our God, by walking in his laws, which he set before us by his servants, the prophets.

[1 : 35] All Israel has transgressed your law and turned aside, refusing to obey your voice, and the curse and oath that are written in the law of Moses, the servant of God, have been poured out upon us, because we have sinned against him.

He has confirmed his words, which he spoke against us, and against our rulers who ruled us, by bringing upon us a great calamity. For under the whole heaven there has not been done anything like what has been done against Jerusalem.

As it is written in the law of Moses, all this calamity has come upon us, yet we have not entreated the favour of the Lord our God, turning from our iniquities and gaining insight by your truth.

Therefore the Lord has kept ready the calamity, and has brought it upon us. For the Lord our God is righteous in all the works that he has done, and we have not obeyed his voice.

And now, O Lord our God, who brought your people out of the land of Egypt, with a mighty hand, and have made a name for yourself, as at this day, we have sinned, we have done wickedly.

[2 : 35] O Lord, according to all your righteous acts, let your anger and your wrath turn away from your city Jerusalem, your holy hill, because for our sins and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and your people have become a byword among all who are around us.

Now therefore, O our God, listen to the prayer of your servant, and to his pleas for mercy. And for your own sake, O Lord, make your face to shine upon your sanctuary, which is desolate.

O my God, incline your ear and hear. Open your eyes and see our desolations, and the city that is called by your name. For we do not present our pleas before you because of our righteousness, but because of your great mercy.

O Lord, hear. O Lord, forgive. O Lord, pay attention and act. Delay not for your own sake, O my God, because your city and your people are called by your name.

While I was speaking and praying, confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel, and presenting my plea before the Lord my God, for the holy hill of my God. While I was speaking in prayer, the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision at the first, came to me in swift flight at the time of the evening sacrifice.

[3 : 48] He made me understand, speaking with me and saying, O Daniel, I have now come out to give you insight and understanding. At the beginning of your pleas for mercy a word went out, and I have come to tell it to you, for you are greatly loved.

Therefore consider the word and understand the vision. Seventy weeks are decreed about your people and your holy city to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place. Know therefore and understand that from the going out of the word to restore and build Jerusalem, to the coming of an anointed one, a prince, there shall be seven weeks. Then for sixty-two weeks it shall be built again, with squares and moat, but in a troubled time.

And after the sixty-two weeks an anointed one shall be cut off, and shall have nothing. And the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. Its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war.

Desolations are decreed, and he shall make a strong covenant with many for one week. And for half of the week he shall put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall come one who makes desolate, until the decreed end is poured out on the desolator.

[5 : 07] Daniel chapter 9 opens with Daniel's recognition that the seventy years spoken of in the prophecy of Jeremiah chapter 25, verses 8 to 12, in which Jeremiah foretells the number of years that must pass before Jerusalem's desolations would end, were shortly to be completed.

This occurs in the first year of the reign of Darius, here further described as the son of Ahazuerus. Jeremiah's prophecy reads, Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts, Because you have not obeyed my words, behold I will send for all the tribes of the north, declares the Lord, and for Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon my servant, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all these surrounding nations.

I will devote them to destruction, and make them a horror, a hissing, and an everlasting desolation. Moreover, I will banish from them the voice of mirth, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride, the grinding of the millstones, and the light of the lamp.

This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, declares the Lord, making the land an everlasting waste.

Jeremiah also prophesies on the matter in chapter 29 verse 10, For thus says the Lord, When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise, and bring you back to this place.

[6 : 37] The seventy years of exile are also mentioned in 2 Chronicles chapter 36 verses 20 to 21. He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia.

To fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept sabbath, to fulfill seventy years.

The land being rendered desolate and enjoying its sabbaths, the years of sabbath rest it was denied, is mentioned in the covenant blessings and curses in Leviticus chapter 26 verse 43. But the land shall be abandoned by them, and enjoy its sabbaths while it lies desolate without them. And they shall make amends for their iniquity, because they spurned my rules, and their soul abhorred my statutes.

The calendar of Israel had the principle of sabbath weaving through it on all levels. The seventh day was the weekly sabbath. There were two great seven-day feasts, unleavened bread and tabernacles.

[7 : 39] There was the feast of weeks, connected with seven times seven weeks. There was the cluster of feasts in the seventh month. Then there was the sabbath year and the year of jubilee, once again based on the principle of seven times seven.

The fiftieth year was the new year following the passing of seven years times seven. The great events in Israel's history were often also connected with the sabbath principle.

For instance, the completion of Solomon's temple complex occurred in the five hundredth year after the exodus, a jubilee cycle raised to the next order of magnitude. The book of Ezekiel makes great use of sabbath and jubilee themes, with the numbers 49, 50 and 25, a half jubilee, appearing throughout the great visionary temple at the end of the book.

With the overthrow of Jerusalem and Judah by the Babylonians, the land enjoyed a sort of sabbath rest. An oppressive rich class was removed from the land, and the poor took possession of it. The situation under the governorship of Gedaliah was short-lived, however, a false dawn. But the purging of the land of a sinful people allowed the land itself to enjoy a period of rest.

[8 : 45] Understanding the seventy years of Jeremiah is challenging, even if not as challenging as understanding the seventy weeks of years that are mentioned at the end of this chapter. Differing positions exist.

Some regard the seventy years as symbolic, rather than a literal reference to a period of time. As a symbolic designation for a time period, it would evoke sabbath and other connections for the hearers.

For other commentators, it is regarded as an exact period of time, and for yet others, an approximate one. The sabbath and jubilee patterns gave a structure for hope. If the seventy years are an exact or an approximate period of time, we need to work out their boundaries.

Do they begin with the events of 605 BC, when the prophecy of Jeremiah was first given, when Nebuchadnezzar defeated the Egyptians at Carchemish, became the king of Babylon, established Babylonian dominance in the region, besieged Jerusalem, took some of the royal family hostage, and placed the kingdom of Judah under his yoke?

Perhaps earlier, with the destruction of Nineveh in 612 BC, and the devastation of the Neo-Assyrian Empire at that time. In his lengthy treatment of the subject, Ross Winkle argues for 609 BC as the key date, with the final defeat of Assyria.

[9 : 57] Or do the years begin with the final overthrow of Jerusalem in 586 BC? What is the end point? Is it the time of the rebuilding of the temple in 516 BC?

The time of Babylon's overthrow in 539 BC? The return under Cyrus shortly after that, in 538 BC? Or to some other date? The period of time seems to relate quite particularly to the time of Babylon's dominance over the countries of the region, not merely to Judah's exile.

There are several candidates for a good starting point in the late 7th century BC, which is where I believe we ought to focus. The most natural end point would be 539 BC or 538 BC, with the overthrow of Babylon and the decree of Cyrus.

This, I believe, is why Daniel is reflecting upon this prophecy of Jeremiah in the first year of the reign of Darius. If we take the subdivisions of the later 70 weeks of years in this chapter as something that might help us to understand how the 70 years of Jeremiah function in the understanding of Daniel, we might find a clue in the fact that Darius comes to the throne at 62 years of age, mapping the 70 years onto the schema of the 70 weeks of years.

The final year is the year after Babylon's overthrow. Having recognised that the time spoken of by Jeremiah's prophecy had been completed, Daniel recognises also that the people should be returning home, but they're not doing so yet.

[11 : 20] So Daniel turns to the Lord in prayer. He fasts and dresses in sackcloth and ashes, confessing the rebellion, the sins, and the unfaithfulness of the people that had led them into exile in the first place.

Daniel is approaching the Lord on the basis of and in terms of covenant promises such as those found in Leviticus chapter 26, verses 40-42 and 44-45, sandwiching the judgment of that chapter concerning the land being granted its Sabbaths.

But if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers in their treachery that they committed against me, and also in walking contrary to me, so that I walk contrary to them and brought them into the land of their enemies, if then their uncircumcised heart is humbled and they make amends for their iniquity, then I will remember my covenant with Jacob, and I will remember my covenant with Isaac, and my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land.

And then continuing in verse 44, Daniel prays as a prophetic intercessor for his people.

It may also be helpful to see Daniel's prayer in the light of the sacrificial system, covering as needed for Israel's sins, a purification, and Daniel's prayer seeks this.

[12 : 51] Daniel's prayer is a long prayer of confession, in which Daniel confesses the sins of the nation to the Lord. Daniel's prayer is driven by a profound sense of the Lord's holiness and justice, but also by his unswerving faithfulness to his covenant, and by the confidence that, since Judah and Jerusalem are named by the Lord's name, he will not cast them off completely.

The prayer alternates between the two parties of the covenant, speaking of the riches of the Lord's justice, faithfulness, righteousness, and truth, while juxtaposing each of these with the injustice, unfaithfulness, unrighteousness, and falsehood of Israel.

The Lord's unchanging character and commitment to his covenant is the bedrock of Daniel's appeal. Each trait of the Lord exposes something new about the sin of his people. The Lord's faithfulness to the covenant exposes just how unfaithful his people have been.

His righteousness exposes the wickedness and the shame of his people. His mercy, forgiveness, and long-suffering expose the depth of the people's rebellion. His deliverance exposes the extent of the people's ingratitude.

His hallowing of his name through his redemption of his people in the midst of the nations exposes the perversity of the way that redeemed people, graciously called by his name, made themselves a byword among the nations on account of their wickedness and the destruction that resulted from it.

[14:10] Yet here lies the one hope for Israel. Daniel has exposed their complete and utter bankruptcy, but he can still appeal to the Lord, because the Lord has placed his name upon them as his own people.

The angel Gabriel comes to Daniel at the time of the evening sacrifice. The evening tribute or offering came at the beginning of a new day and was a memorial, calling upon God to see his people and to act on their behalf.

This is essentially what Daniel's prayer had been. Even though there was no earthly tribute being given at that time, Daniel still presents the response to his prayer in terms of that offering.

This might offer a powerful insight into the way that prayer can be considered in terms of ritual.

Such a principle is illustrated in Psalm 141 verses 1 to 2.

Prayer and song can be thought of as akin to sacrifices, but the connection can work in the other way too and help us better to understand the nature of the sacrificial system. Sacrifices are like dramatised or ritualised prayers.

[15:23] As the prophets often stress, the sacrifices don't operate as a sort of mindless ritual, irrespective of the posture of heart of those performing them. The temple was not primarily a house of sacrifice, but a house of prayer.

Gabriel assures Daniel that his pleas for mercy had been heard and tells him that he has a word and vision in answer to Daniel's prayer, as Daniel is greatly loved. Like Moses in Exodus chapter 32 to 34, the prophet loved by the Lord intercedes for a wicked people.

The vision that he has given concerns 70 weeks. While Jeremiah's prophecy was about 70 years, Daniel is told of 70 weeks or sevens, not literal weeks but periods of time generally identified as years.

We should recognise the jubilee themes here. In Leviticus chapter 25 verses 8 to 13, the law of the jubilee is given. It starts on the 10th day of the 7th month, in connection with the Day of Atonement. Liberty is proclaimed to the land and all of its inhabitants, who can return to their ancestral properties. Leviticus speaks of seven weeks of years, in reference to the jubilee, the time of replanting in the land, extending themes of Pentecost, which is seven weeks of days.

[16:36] The event declared to Daniel is a greater awaited jubilee, a jubilee multiplied by ten, a jubilee raised by an order of magnitude. This awaited event would put an end to Israel's transgressions, confirm the sin or purification offerings, cover Israel's liability to punishment, establish the reign of righteousness, confirm and fulfil that which was foretold by visions and faithful prophets, and anoint a most holy place, establishing a place of God's dwelling.

From the very earliest period of the church, Christians have seen in this prophecy, a foretelling of the advent and the ministry of Christ. The 70 weeks of years are subdivided into 7 weeks of years, 62 weeks of years, and a single final week.

Once again, determining dating is difficult. What and when is the decree referred to in verse 25? Is it the decree of Cyrus around 538 BC, following shortly after the fulfilment of the 70 years of the prophecy of Jeremiah?

Or is it some later event? Here we encounter significant differences on chronology, particularly around the dating of the return and the rebuilding of the city and temple. Are Ezra and Nehemiah to be dated immediately after the decree of Cyrus, or do they relate to a time over a century later?

James Jordan, for instance, argues for a short chronology, with Ezra and Nehemiah dating from the time of Cyrus' decree in 538 BC onwards. Much depends on the identification of the Arctic Xerxes of Ezra and Nehemiah and his connection with Darius the Mede of Daniel, who is also identified by

Jordan as Cyrus the Persian.

[18:11] Jordan has also previously raised the possibility that wholesale and radical revisionist work on the entire BC dating system might be required. Such a revision, of which he is not the only advocate, would remove about 80 years in the process, cutting the length of the Persian Empire from 205 to 120 years.

Modern Christian commentators, by contrast, have tended to date the events of Ezra and Nehemiah later, with Arctic Xerxes commissioned to Ezra, which is commonly identified with the decree, coming in 458 BC.

Calculating from this date, taking the weeks as a reference to 490 literal solar years, The start of the 70th week comes in 26 AD, the beginning of Christ's ministry according to this reckoning, with his cutting off occurring halfway through the final week.

James Bajan, for instance, interprets the decree as a mandate from Arctic Xerxes to re-establish Judah's religious governance in 458 BC. In 409 BC, in Bajan's account, Nehemiah, the anointed prince, is in Jerusalem and completes the reforms initiated by Ezra.

Paul Tanner argues for a different date, 444 BC, the word of Arctic Xerxes to Nehemiah authorising him to return to Jerusalem to rebuild a city and its walls.

[19:29] He argues that the years, rather than being taken as regular solar years, should be interpreted as prophetic years of 360 days. This would yield a time of 475 regular years instead of 490.

This yields the beginning of the 70th week in 33 AD, the more generally recognised date for Christ's death and resurrection. We should observe the way that the 70 weeks of years begins with a period of 7 weeks of years, an initial regular jubilee cycle, as part of the great jubilee cycle, the jubilee cycle times 10.

Numerous other positions exist. Some relate this to events surrounding Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Symbolic readings of these time periods can dispense with many of the attempts to match these clearly to specific dates.

Some argue that some of the years are symbolic, while others are literal, others that there is a gap or delay, or that a period of time intervenes between some of these weeks. Some clues to the meaning of periods of time within it might also be found elsewhere in the book of Daniel and in books like Revelation.

In Daniel chapter 7 verse 25, the little horn is described as follows, He shall speak words against the Most High, and shall wear out the saints of the Most High, and shall think to change the times and the law, and they shall be given into his hand for a time, times, and half a time.

[20:50] A time, times, and half a time makes three and a half, which is half a week. Elsewhere, in the book of Revelation, this is connected with 1,260 days and 42 months.

42 months is three and a half years in months, and 1,260 days is three and a half years in days.

This measuring of three and a half years in days would seem to give some support to Tanner's proposal that the years are prophetic years of 360 days, rather than standard solar years.

The Anointed One, or literally the Messiah that is cut off, seems to be a reference to Christ. We had a foreshadowing of the coming of this figure in Daniel in the Lion's Den. The Lion's Den symbolized the period of exile.

It also anticipated the events of the resurrection. The Messianic Prince acts in the 70th week. He is expelled from his people in that week, dispossessed and condemned to death, but then the city will be destroyed, overwhelmed in a flood of judgment.

This refers, I believe, to the judgment of Jerusalem in 1870. While this does not occur within the 70 weeks of years, its sentence is established at that time. Through Christ's death and resurrection, he brings the covenant into full force.

[22:01] He ends the tribute and peace offering, and the city is going to be rendered desolate. He puts an end to the sacrificial system and establishes a new covenant in its place. The year of Jubilee began on the Day of Atonement, and the greater Jubilee that is foretold to Daniel also involves a great act of atonement or covering as its climax, as Christ is the last great sin offering for his people.

Sacrifice is put to an end because all previous sacrifices could only anticipate his sacrifice, and they depended upon it for their efficacy. A question to consider, where else in Scripture do we encounter 70 times 7?

How could we read these references in the light of Daniel's 70 weeks of years?