



How Many Weeks until the End?

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IN JULY 1994 A COLLECTION OF MOUNTAIN-SIZED SPACE CHUNKS BOMBARDED Jupiter. What would have happened had our planet been the target of these missiles travelling at such incredible speeds? Amateur astronomers, like the one who earlier located Jupiter's assailants, increasingly search the heavens for possible colliders on a collision course with us. The earth's history is pockmarked by similar collisions, one of which, 65 million or so years ago, wiped out the dinosaurs. A new asteroid with our name on it may be headed our way. Will this be the end of human history? A few decades ago we read speculations about the end of space-ship earth for other reasons: nuclear war, ecological pollution, global warming, or even biblical prophecy. Today one hears less about these; perhaps even the likes of Hal Lindsey¹ have ceased predicting the final battle of Armageddon now that Russia's evil empire has disintegrated.

Some, like a friend of ours, are sure that we are headed instead for an incredible future with unlimited cheap energy from nuclear fusion under the benevolent oversight of extra-terrestrials. Those for whom life is good do not want what is their lot on earth to end. To them, promises of near eternal life by means of reincarnation or revivication after a period in the deep freeze are very appealing. Any meteors headed our way can be redirected into some other orbit so that our idyllic life can go on, at least until the sun runs low on fuel. Maybe even then it can

¹Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970).

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continue as we relocate into some distant solar system where life can go on for some more billions of years.

I. A CHRISTIAN VIEW OF THE FUTURE

Which future is ours then: an end to human life on earth or an ongoing, nearly eternal life? Right now, Christians do not seem to be very prominent in the discussion. Science and eastern religions have taken over. All those time charts of the dispensationalists have proved wrong, but we can confidently expect them to reappear near the end of this century, because for them we are coming to the end of the sixth millennium (or world age) since creation in 4000 B.C. Meanwhile, most of the rest of the church is focused on issues of sexuality. Eschatology (end-times belief) has been mostly absent from mainline proclamation for a generation. We have been so earthly minded as to be of no heavenly good. But is it really so that we have nothing to contribute to either the fatalistic or the optimistic assessment of humanity's future? If we do not think the Bible should be used to prepare charts for the end-time, are we reduced to silence? The people of our churches deserve something more than an occasional funeral sermon laced with platitudes and generalities about survival beyond death. Because of our lack of a clear word of hope a pastor's widow recently wrote to ask whether she dared to believe she would recognize her husband in the hereafter. People do have questions not only about the end of the world but about their own end as well. But we would rather wait for a new book from the dispensationalists to criticize than to look at the biblical texts ourselves.

This essay promises no time chart or definitive word about the end times, but it does invite you to look at one biblical text. Chapter 9 of the book of Daniel (especially verses 24-27) has received high praise in the past as the most significant Old Testament prophecy. Earlier generations of Christians found in this chapter the most explicit prophecies concerning Christ's cross and the Roman destruction of Jerusalem. With the advent of dispensationalism and historical-critical studies in the nineteenth century this christological interpretation was largely lost. Dispensationalism focuses on current events predicted by the sixth-century B.C. Daniel so we can prepare for the rapture. Historical-critical studies focus on a pseudonymous message of hope for second-century B.C.E. Jews who were tempted to abandon the faith because of persecution. In both cases the traditional biblical message of Christ's cross as the center of the faith is gone.

II. HISTORICAL-CRITICAL READINGS OF DANIEL

Since the historical-critical approach to Daniel is the most well represented currently in commentaries, let us first look at these.² By and large these interpreters

²Robert A. Anderson, *Daniel: Signs and Wonders*, International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984); G. K. Beale, *The Use of Daniel in Jewish Apocalyptic Literature and in the Revelation of St. John* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1964); John J. Collins, *Daniel, The Forms of the Old Testament Literature 20* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984); John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Vision of the*

agree that the book is a literary construction of the second century B.C.E. that seeks to give the impression that events of the sixth through early second century B.C.E. were prophesied already in the sixth century. This makes it look as though history were predetermined when actually it was for the most part written *post eventum*. The stories in chapters 1-6 are now sometimes viewed as reworked earlier materials intended to inspire second-century Jews to follow the faithfulness of Daniel and his three friends. Were these stories free creations of the second century, it is hard to imagine why they portray foreign kings in such a favorable light. The visions of chapters 7-12 are perhaps genuine divine revelations but more likely are the literary creations of a concerned pious author. The historical knowledge in these visions, not too accurate, becomes more reliable regarding the Greek period of Palestinian history. It ceases to be accurate again where genuine prophecy finally promises the downfall of the tyrant, Antiochus IV Epiphanes. The book is preoccupied with this man. The stories and visions of Daniel 2 and 7 combine to encourage beleaguered Jews who might otherwise apostatize.

As to Daniel's contemporary relevance, we are told by the commentaries that God's purposes in history will finally be achieved – when, we do not know. We should therefore do as the author of Daniel admonishes us, should we find ourselves tempted to compromise with godless governments. Just what if anything God has been doing in human history in the last 2000 years is anyone's guess. How or when or why God will finally achieve the purposes for which the people of God have been chosen is equally unclear. Though these commentaries make the biblical narrative come alive, they do little to relate the critical message of the text to modern believers' interests. As a matter of fact, they generally undercut the book's credibility by alluding to the author's mistaken notion that he was living in the last times. Thus, we too should stop speculating about eschatology and just live faithful lives. For the commentators, this is what the Bible is about.

Historical-critical scholars have contributed much to our understanding of Daniel 9, including more accurate and readable translations. Here, too, they caution against time charts and unwarranted speculations concerning the future. They honestly face the difficulties in translating and interpreting the text.

My own quite literal translation of verses 24-27 follows (for smoother English, check a modern translation):

Book of Daniel (Missoula: Scholars, 1977); John E. Goldingay, *Daniel*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1989); Raymond Hammer, *The Book of Daniel*, The Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1976); Louis F. Hartman, "Daniel," in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, Roland E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1968); Louis F. Hartman and Alexander A. Di Lella, *The Book of Daniel*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977); E. W. Heaton, *The Book of Daniel* (London: SCM, 1959); Carl G. Howie, *The Book of Ezekiel and the Book of Daniel* (Richmond: John Knox, 1961); Klaus Koch, *Das Buch Daniel* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1980); Andre Lacocque, *The Book of Daniel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979); James A. Montgomery, *The Book of Daniel*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1964); Norman W. Porteous, *Daniel*, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965); H. H. Rowley, *Darius the Mede and the Four World Empires in the Book of Daniel* (Cardiff: University of Wales, 1964); D. S. Russell, *Daniel*, The Darby Study Bible Series (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981); Judah J. Slotki, *Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah*, Soncino Books of the Bible (London: Soncino, 1951); W. Sibley Towner, *Daniel*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta: John Knox, 1984).

²⁴ Seventy sevens [probably weeks] it is determined concerning your people and concerning the city of your holiness: to end the rebellion and to seal sin; to atone iniquity and to bring in righteousness of remote ages; to seal a vision and a prophet and to anoint a holiest place.

²⁵ Then you shall know and discern: from (the) going out of a word to restore and to (re)build Jerusalem until a designated anointed one (are) seven sevens [weeks]. And sixty and two sevens [weeks] it shall return and be (re)built (with) open places and trench, but in an oppression of the times.

²⁶ Then after the sixty and two sevens [weeks] an anointed one will be cut off and he will have no one (nothing). And the people of the coming designated one will destroy the city and the holy place. But his end (will be) in the flood and, until an end of war is fixed, (there will be) desolated things.

²⁷ And a covenant for the many will prevail one seven [week]. The half of the seven [week] he will cause sacrifice and offering to cease and upon a wing of abominations will be a desolating thing and until it has ended (finished), when it is determined, it will be poured out upon a desolating thing.

Most modern interpretations consider Daniel 9 to be a second-century pesher (a reinterpretation) or a midrash (an expansion) of Jeremiah 25:12 and 29:10. In 606/605 B.C.E. Jeremiah announced that the coming desolation of Jerusalem would last 70 years. But now in the first year of Darius (522) it still has not happened. This Darius is said to be the son of Ahasuerus (Xerxes) who was actually Darius II (404-358 B.C.E.). This means that either the seventy years are far overdue or that Darius the Mede is someone else. He may be Darius I (522-486), the father of Xerxes (539-530), or Cyrus, or someone else lost to us from history. If the seventy years are supposed to be just ending, the time would be 536/5 B.C.E. or shortly after Cyrus issued his decree making possible the return of the exiles from Mesopotamia (539/8). Most writers assume that the author of Daniel 9 is not well informed and has thus created difficulties for our learning just who was king at the time. This does not matter so much, for the author is actually concerned with the situation centuries later when Antiochus IV (175-164 B.C.E.), the Syrian tyrant, is persecuting the Jews and has desecrated their sanctuary. It is this man and his empire (the fourth one and Greek) with whom the book is preoccupied. Daniel proceeds to ask for a divine answer to his problem: Will God soon make good on Jeremiah's promise?

The request in the form of a prayer of repentance is deemed by some to be inappropriate to this purpose and thus likely to be a later insertion. One can, in fact, jump from verse 3 to verse 21 without losing continuity. Those who comment positively on the prayer note its excellent Hebrew, its appropriateness to what we know of exilic/postexilic prayer, and its dependence upon other biblical passages. While still in prayer, Daniel is interrupted by an angel who was sent with an answer as soon as Daniel began to pray. How much time was needed to come from heaven to earth is determined by the time required to pray the inserted prayer. The answer will make no note of Daniel's confession, or of his request for forgiveness. Daniel, almost like Job (in Job 1 and 2), is addressed as a man with no need to confess sin. He is obviously a good candidate for successful intercession (cf. Ezek 14:14). Israel has gotten what they deserved for their unfaithfulness to God. Is now

the time when the faithful, merciful God will hear their repentant cries for forgiveness? The man/angel, Gabriel, has the answer.

The meanings of the angel's message to Daniel are assumed to be addressed to second-century B.C.E. saints who need it to avoid becoming apostates. The seven weeks of years (49), the 62 weeks (438 years) and the one week (7 years) are totalled in such a way as to pinpoint the events between 171 B.C.E., when Onias III, the high priest, was murdered, and 164 B.C.E., when Antiochus IV died. Problems with the chronology (538-434 years = the year 95, rather than 171) are assumed to be the fault of poor historical records available in the second century or lack of clarity in how to begin the calculation. One can start a second time from 606/5 with the 62 weeks and come up with 171, but, unless we knew that 171 was intended to be the final date, we would probably not have arrived at it. Figures and events between 171 and 164 B.C.E. are reasonably accurate. In 167 (half a week) Judaism was proscribed, sacrifices ceased, and the temple was desecrated with an altar and image of Olympian Zeus. Sometime after 167 but prior to 164 the message was written and promulgated. It, in the context of the other visions of chapters 2, 7, and 11, assures the faithful that the days of Antiochus are numbered. One should then be faithful to God just as Daniel and his friends were in the stories (chapters 1-6). All the visions (chapters 2, 7-12) have the same basic message: Just as God has foreordained the rise and fall of the empires beginning with Nebuchadnezzar's, so the Syrian emperor is soon to fall. Chapters 2 and 7 add that the kingdom of God will soon replace all these tyrannical empires. While Daniel was quite correct in dating the end of the tyrant Antiochus, he was dead wrong about the rest of it. So much for time charts! Find your hope and meaning somewhere else. Yet, for all that, God is mysteriously, hiddenly active in human history.

III. DISPENSATIONALIST READINGS OF DANIEL

The second way of interpreting Daniel 9 in our day is that of the dispensationalists, the heirs of John Darby of the Plymouth Brethren and students of the Scofield Bible.³ Interpreters of this school are especially tied to a time chart in which, strangely, the era of the church is viewed as a 2000-year hiatus. For them, events of the end times were predicted accurately and precisely by Daniel in the sixth century B.C. The predictive element in prophecy is of the greatest consequence since many events foretold by Daniel have already happened or soon will. In 1948, God's time clock, which apparently stopped when Jerusalem fell to the Romans, was restarted by the beginning of the state of Israel, and the 70th week of Daniel 9 will soon unfold. We may thus confidently soon expect the rapture, the great

³Arthur E. Bloomingfield, *The End of the Days* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1961); A. C. Gaebelien, *The Prophet Daniel* (New York: Our Hope, 1911); Robert M. Gurney, *God in Control* (Worthing, England: H. E. Walter, 1980); Joseph J. Han, *A New Light on the Visions of the Book of Daniel* (Seoul, Korea, 1976); Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Interpreting Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976); Robert Jewett, *Jesus Against the Rapture* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979); Kurt E. Koch, *The Coming One* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1972); Albert J. Lindsey, *Understanding Our Times* (Portland: Good News Agency, 1976); Stephen Travis, *The Jesus Hope* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1976); John Wesley White, *Re-entry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970).

tribulation, the millennium, and Christ's second coming (actually his third, since he will, prior to this, come for his disciples in the rapture to take them up and out of the great tribulation). Passages which critical scholars interpret as referring to Antiochus IV are assigned to our twentieth-century near future when Antichrist ruling a revived Roman world will persecute Christians. Daniel 9 sets the dates, but other chapters such as 2, 7, and 11 give the details of coming political events involving the European common market countries (as successors of the Roman Empire), Russia, China, and Egypt. Everything centers around Israel, a modern nation whose history since 1948 was predetermined by God over 2500 years ago. Of great importance is the projected rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple and the return to sacrificial worship there. Yet, important as the Jews are to the end times of human history, they are finally expendable through war, as are the Russians and 200 million Chinese soldiers. What really matters to dispensationalists is that Christians, who are prepared for Christ's coming for them, will escape the most horrible events in history to take place during the great tribulation. This will last 7 or 3 1/2 years (the last week or half-week of the 70th week of Daniel 9). Mainline apostate Christians, Jews, and unbelievers must endure this terrible period on earth, presumably for failure to take the time charts seriously. Some in the middle of the great tribulation will be converted and finally saved but not soon enough to avoid the tribulation. What one likes here is the dynamic view of God's activity in the present time. Much is there, however, which does not seem really to be in the texts, especially the preconceived time chart and the mean-spirited view of non-dispensationalist churches. Unsatisfactorily explained is how the last 2000 years happen to be a great hiatus not even mentioned by Daniel. Yet he is assumed to have lots to say about the seven-year end time.

Dispensationalists share with pre-modern Christians and present-day Christians such things as the traditional sixth-century B.C.E. dating of the book, which means there is a large element of predictive prophecy in it. They claim to be faithful interpreters of scripture and do not claim any special ability to receive divine revelation apart from biblical texts. Dispensationalist writings are interspersed with altar calls inviting unregenerate readers to avoid the great tribulation by getting ready to participate in the rapture. Daniel and Revelation are presented as the most relevant books of the Bible because we are believed to be living in the end of which they speak. But this necessarily suggests that much in Daniel's visions was of little consequence for and incomprehensible to previous generations. Second-century B.C. Jews and even first-century Christians should have found Daniel to be an enigma, for they did not yet live near the days which were most central to its message. If they thought they were living in the end times, they were as wrong as those who have thought the same more recently, but prior to the reestablishment of the Jewish state in 1948.

As a member of a mainline church, one reads this material with considerable dis-ease. It is rather like overhearing but not engaging in a conversation in which we are being held up for censure. Do these folks really believe that Christ will leave us behind when he comes because we have dated Daniel in the wrong century? Do

they talk this way about us when we are not there to defend ourselves? Is it not enough that we confess our sins and rely totally upon God's grace for our salvation? Must we also espouse the right hermeneutics for interpreting Daniel? Is it not enough to leave the future up to God in faith? Must we also at least know the decade, if not the hour, of Christ's return? Or are we feeling a little defensive because some of the criticism we've overheard is actually deserved? One thing is certain, Daniel has never been on the best-seller list of mainline churches. This was true even in precritical times and during the reformation. So we have only ourselves to blame if most of what is available on Daniel is not to our liking.

IV. EVANGELICAL READINGS OF DANIEL

Actually, there have always been evangelical treatments of Daniel,⁴ at least since the reformation when Calvin wrote his two-volume commentary. Recent volumes from this group are sometimes caught up also in the numbers game of the dispensationalists or the "problems approach" of the critics. There still seems to be too much attention to prophecy as prediction, as though faith could be compelled by someone who accurately foretold a coming event. There is also too much polemic against critical studies rather than clarification of the positive message of the text. It is a bit much to hear over and over again that our professors with whom we studied in graduate school were the predecessors of the antichrist. Aside from the polemics, what do these evangelical interpreters find in Daniel 9? In the interest of space, some of my own views will be incorporated here too.

The most commendable element in these readers is their christological exegesis. Sometimes it is introduced through unconvincing mathematical antics intended to prove that the text is reliable, since a sixth-century prophet accurately foretold the date of Jesus' baptism (anointing) and crucifixion. But once this has been accomplished, the gist of the matter appears: Daniel was right in recognizing that one can get answers to faith's questions, and that sin must be confessed and forgiven before any better times can come (9:4-19). Holding up the prayer in Daniel 9 as a model for the church's prayer is most helpful. This is not the way we naturally pray, but it is in accord with the nature of God and the reality of our needs. People may naturally wonder how long it will be until their present troubles are over. It might be tantalizing to try to foretell that, but it is far more important to lead people to a right relationship with God. This prayer and its modern parallels lead in that direction. The assurance given by Gabriel to Daniel is the same

⁴Joyce G. Baldwin, *Daniel* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1978); James Montgomery Boice, *Daniel, An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989); Jacques B. Doukhan, *Daniel: The Vision of the End* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University, 1987); Desmond Ford, *Daniel* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1978); Jerome, *Jerome's Commentary on Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958); Geoffrey R. King, *Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966); H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Daniel* (Columbus: Wartburg, 1949); Martin Luther, *Preface to the Prophet Daniel* (1530), *LW* 35:294-316; A. Burkley Michelson, *Daniel and Revelation: Riddles or Realities?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984); George C. Miladin, *Is This Really the End?* (Cherry Hill: Mack, 1972); Ronald S. Wallace, *The Message of Daniel* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1979); Edward J. Young, *The Messianic Prophecies of Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954); Edward J. Young, *The Prophecy of Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949).

assurance announced to us each Sunday in the absolution after our confession of sin. It is a relief not to hear any more of the arguments regarding the inappropriateness of the prayer to its context or reasons as to why it could not be from the author of the book. What we really wanted to know was how this prayer can be helpful to our prayer life.

Following this, the revelation by Gabriel to Daniel is taken seriously. Liberals may again take a few blows to the knuckles for their disbelief in angels, divine revelation, and the historicity of Daniel but, once we are beyond this, there is usually something useful for teaching and proclamation. Poring over a biblical text (Jeremiah 25) as Daniel did (9:2, 23) bears fruit. God blesses our desire for insight with knowledge and light. Jerusalem and Israel are precious to God and have not been abandoned. God is faithful to the many promises made over many centuries. First on the list, following directly upon Daniel's prayer, is God's final dealing with human rebellion and perversity (v. 24). The inter-testamental community was most serious about this and fastidiously observed the Day of Atonement and daily sacrifices for sin. No wonder the desecration of the sanctuary by Antiochus was a monstrous act. But rededicating the temple at Antiochus' death did not solve the problem for long. In 70 C.E. the Romans totally destroyed it. Rabbinic Judaism has had to observe Yom Kippur and deal with sin in other ways than through animal sacrifice. Christians have a very different answer to the problem of sin. It is once for all atoned on the cross by Christ. There need be no further sacrifice for sin.

Thus, whether Dan 9:24 is a messianic verse or not, we cannot interpret it except in the light of what we know to be its fulfillment. This is what the New Testament did when its authors looked at these same verses. The New Testament is a reinterpretation of Daniel, just as Daniel was of Jeremiah (Matthew 24 a kind of peshet on Daniel 9). The vision and the prophet (Daniel and Jeremiah?) have been sealed (9:24). They are confirmed by God's subsequent acts in history and affirmed over and over again in the experience of the people of God. It was so in the second century B.C.E. when the temple was rededicated, as Hanukkah reminds our Jewish friends, and it was confirmed when God raised Jesus' temple (his body) on the third day.

Jerusalem seems always to be in the process of rebuilding and today is golden and beautiful again. But its enemies forever want to destroy it. What Antiochus did in the second century B.C.E. was only partial. Titus was more thorough. Subsequent wars have done their share too. But God will not forget Jerusalem, nor should we. Faith needs anchors in geography and history as well as in spiritual realities and doctrines. Jerusalem and God's people often live under duress (v. 25) but God's faithfulness to them will not let them be overcome. Even its leaders, such as Onias III in 171 B.C.E., may be killed, and many more martyrs since are recalled on the anniversaries of their deaths. But we never let their deaths overshadow our Lord's death, for his is the only atoning death for our sins. Whether a sixth-century seer or a second-century one saw this does not matter much. God is ever watchful over the deaths of his saints and one death (Jesus') has already been overcome. The Antiochuses of this world are swept away (v. 26). They generally leave behind desola-

tion and ruin, as did Hitler and Stalin in our century. God has decreed that their dreams of thousand-year Reichs will last but one seven. They may trample on sacred sites, turn churches into warehouses, attach their profane insignia to steeples, but God is the one who finally decides (v. 27) when it will end. The covenant that God has made with us in Christ endures. It may be wrong-headed to prepare time charts that we expect God to follow, but it is not wrong to see that the oppressions of tyranny point to the end. The worse the times get, the more sure we are that they will be short.

Some pious saints have always believed that they were living in the last times. St. Paul was among them (1 Thess 4:15-17). When 2 Peter (3:8) was written, the earlier expectations had to be revised. We too feel quite confident in revising especially the time charts of the dispensationalists. Those prepared before the fall of the "evil empire" and the Berlin wall are now in need of serious revision. But God's time chart will prevail. The Lord will return. The nations of the world, even the good ones, will be replaced by the kingdom of God. We don't just hope so. It has been promised. Maranatha.