

The Year-Day Principle

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Until the 19th century, most students of the apocalyptic books Daniel and Revelation used the historicist method to interpret the time prophecies in these books. One of the main pillars of the historicist method is the year-day principle which says that a day in apocalyptic time prophecies represents a year. During the 19th century, the historicist method was slowly replaced by the preterist and futurist systems of interpretation both of which deny the year-day principle. Preterists place most of the prophecies into the past up to the time of the Roman Empire; futurists place most of them into the future, specifically into the last seven years prior to the Second Advent. According to their view, the beginning point of the seven years is the secret rapture of God's people.

Seventh-day Adventists continue to use the historicist method of interpretation because they believe that the year-day principle is not a paradigm imposed on the text, but that it is found in Scripture itself. In Daniel chapters seven and eight, for example, the interpreting angel uses the historicist method to explain the various symbols as empires in history, one following the other.

It is ironic that one of the best summaries of the year-day principle, based on the works of T. R. Birks¹ and H. G. Guinness,² is found in Desmond Ford's first commentary on Daniel.³ In his second commentary on Daniel, eighteen years later, he no longer uses it.⁴ Contrary to this position, most Seventh-day Adventist interpreters believe that the year-day principle is based on Scripture. The main points in support of it can be summarized as follows:⁵

1) Since the visions in Daniel 7 and 8 are largely symbolic, with a number of different beasts representing important historical empires (7:3-7; 8:3-5, 20-21), the time periods (7:25; 8:14) should also be seen as symbolic.

2) The fact that the visions deal with the rise and fall of known empires in a history, which extended over hundreds of years, indicates that the prophetic time periods must also cover long time periods.

3) The peculiar way in which the time periods are expressed indicates that they should not be taken literally. If the "time, times, and half a time" in Daniel 7:25 stands for three and a half literal years, God would probably have said "three years and six months." In Luke 4:25 and James 5:17 where three and a half literal years are referred to, each time the phrase is "three years and six months" Similarly, Paul remained in Corinth "a year and six months" (Acts 18:11), and David reigned in Hebron "seven years and six months" (2 Sam. 2:11).

4) In Daniel 7 the four beasts which together account for a reign of at least one thousand years are followed by the little horn power. It is the focus of the vision since it is most directly in opposition to God. Three and a half literal years for the struggle between the little horn and the Most High are out of proportion to the comprehensive scope of salvation history portrayed in this vision. The same applies to Revelation 12:6 and 14 where the one thousand and two hundred and sixty days or three and a half times cover most of the history between the first and second advent of Christ.

5) According to the context, the expressions "time, times, and half a time" (Dan. 7:25; 12:7; Rev. 12:14), "forty-two months" (Rev. 11:2; 13:5), and "one thousand two hundred and sixty days" (Rev. 11:3; 12:6) all apply to the same time period, but the natural expression "three years and six months" is not used once. "The Holy Spirit seems, in a manner, to exhaust all the phrases by which the interval could be expressed, excluding always that one form which would be used of course in ordinary writing, and is used invariably in Scripture on other occasions, to denote the literal period. This variation is most significant if we accept the year-day system, but quite inexplicable on the other view."⁶

6) The prophecies in Daniel 7-8, and 10-12 lead up to the "time of the end" (8:17; 11:35, 40; 12:4, 9) which is followed by the resurrection (12:2) and the setting up of God's everlasting kingdom (7:27). "In the

sweep of history described in these prophecies that extends from the prophet in the sixth century B.C. to our time and beyond, literal time periods of only 3½ to 6½ years are not capable of reaching anywhere near this final end time. Therefore, these prophetic time periods should be seen as symbolic and standing for considerable longer periods of actual time extending to the end of time.”⁷

7) The only commonly used measure of time not used in the apocalyptic prophecies of Daniel and Revelation is the year. Days, weeks, and months, are referred to, but not the time unit “year.” The most obvious explanation is that the “year” is the unit symbolized throughout these prophecies.

8) There are a number of texts in the historical narratives of the OT in which “days” stands for “years” (Ex. 13:10; 1 Sam. 2:19; 20:6; Judges 11:40 etc.). Also in the poetic portions of the OT “days” at times stands in parallel to the word for “year” (Job 10:5; 32:7; 36:11; Ps. 77:5; 90:9-10; etc.). “Both of these usages provide a ready background for the kind of thought that could be extended to the more specific quantitative application of this relationship in apocalyptic.”⁸

9) In the judgment prophecies of Numbers 14 and Ezekiel 4 God deliberately used the day for a year principle as a teaching device. “According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, for each day you shall bear your guilt one year, namely forty years, and you shall know my rejection” (Numbers 14:34). And in an acted-out parable the prophet Ezekiel was told to lie 390 days on his left side and 40 days on his right side, “I have laid on you a day for each year” (Ezekiel 4:6).

10) In Dan. 9:24-27 the 70-week time prophecy met its fulfillment at the exact time, if we use the year-day principle to interpret it. Many interpreters, who in other apocalyptic texts do not use the year-day principle, recognize that the 70 weeks are in fact “weeks of years” reaching from the Persian period to the time of Christ. Thus the pragmatic test in Daniel 9 confirms the validity of the year-day principle.

References to the year-day principle can be found in Jewish writings of the intertestamental period.⁹ The *Book of Jubilees*, for example, uses the word “week” to refer to seven years. As O. S. Wintermute explains, “Each period of seven years is referred to as a ‘week of years’ or simply as a ‘week.’ Each period of seven weeks of years, i.e., forty-nine years, is designated a jubilee.”¹⁰ Thus Noah’s age in Jubilee 10:16 is given in these words, “Nine hundred and fifty years he completed in his life, nineteen jubilees and two weeks and five years.”¹¹

19 jubilees	=	19 x 49 years	=	931 years
2 weeks	=	2 x 7 years	=	14 years
5 years	=	1 x 5	=	<u>5 years</u>
				950 years

Time periods and dates in the book of Jubilee are frequently given with the week standing for 7 years. For example, the marriage of Abram to Sarai in 12:9 took place “in the fortieth jubilee, in the second week, in its seventh year;”¹² and Abram’s change of name in 15:1-7 occurred “in the fifth year of the fourth week of that jubilee in the third month.”¹³

Conclusion

Our study has shown that the historicist method of interpretation is not a Johnny-come-lately on the theological scene, rather it rests on a solid biblical and historical foundation. It was used by the angel interpreter in the book of Daniel and during the intertestamental period by Jewish writers. Until the nineteenth century it was employed by most interpreters of the Bible. And in spite of what some may claim, it is not an outdated method belonging to the past, but a valid principle of interpreting apocalyptic prophecies today.

¹Thomas R. Birks, *First Elements of Sacred Prophecy* (London: William E. Painter, 1843).

²H. G. Guinness, *The Approaching End of the Age, Viewed in the Light of History, Prophecy, and Science*. 8th ed. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1882).

³Desmond Ford, *Daniel* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1978), 300-305.

⁴In his latest Daniel commentary he denies that the 70 weeks are cut off from the 2300 years of Daniel 8 and adds, "Neither do I consider that the year-day principle should be applied in the study of the prophecies of Daniel, though I recognize it as a providential aid over long centuries of Christ's delay." (D. Ford, *Daniel and the Coming King*, [Newcastle, CA: Desmond Ford Publications, 1996], 298).

⁵See Ford, *Daniel*, 300-305 and William H. Shea, *Selected Studies on Prophetic Interpretation*, Revised edition, DARCOM , 7 vols. (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), 1:67-104.

⁶Thomas R. Birks, *First Elements of Sacred Prophecy* (London: William E. Painter, 1843), 352.

⁷Shea, 73.

⁸Ibid. 103.

⁹See *ibid.*, 106-110.

¹⁰O. S. Wintermute, "Jubilees: A New Translation and Introduction," *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed., James H. Charlesworth, 2 vols. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co. Inc., 1985), 2:39.

¹¹Ibid., 76.

¹²Ibid., 81.

¹³Ibid., 85.

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