

APPENDIX TWENTY-ONE

The Year-Day Principle



Desmond Ford
Bible Teacher
Australasian
Missionary College
Avondale

The Year-Day Principle

(Part 1)

The Seventh-day Adventist claim to divine sponsorship largely rests upon the significance of the date 1844. This date, in turn, for its location as the terminus of the 2300 days, depends upon the reliability of the year-day principle. While most Adventists accept this principle of prophetic exegesis without question, our critics are neither so naive nor as accommodating. They ask of us, “What have the historical records — that is, Numbers 34 and Ezekiel 4 — to do with the apocalyptic symbolism of Daniel and Revelation?” Furthermore, they point out that neither Daniel nor Revelation make any statement regarding a day being the chosen symbol in prophecy for a year. Typical of our critics is Norman F. Douty who says:

Based upon the fallacious year-day theory and interpreting literal periods of time symbolically, it involves, among many others, two major errors: the ascription of prophetic significance to the year 1844 and the claim that the Adventist movement fulfils the symbolism of the flying angels of Rev. 14 ... Its exponents speak with a tone of finality that few will think justified.¹

In answer to such accusations, let us glance afresh at the evidence that supports the historical mode of interpreting the time periods of Daniel and Revelation.

The time-honoured formula for the year-day principle is that set out by T.R. Birks in his book *First Elements of Sacred Prophecy* and quoted by our own *Source Book for Bible Students*, pp. 585, 586 (1919 edition). It reads as follows:

A recent book by Norman F. Doty, *Another Look at Seventh-day Adventism*, attacks what he calls “the fallacious year-day theory,” which is basic in Seventh-day Adventist prophetic chronology. Desmond Ford, head of our Australasian Missionary College Bible department, here answers Douty on this important year-day principle of interpretation. We are sure our ministers will find this a timely and helpful article. — Editors.

Year-Day Principle, General Nature of. — It may be summed up in these maxims:

1. That the church, after the ascension of Christ, was intended of God to be kept in the lively expectation of His speedy return in glory.
2. That, in the divine counsels, a long period of nearly two thousand years was to intervene between the first and the second advent, and to be marked by a dispensation of grace to the Gentiles.
3. That, in order to strengthen the faith and hope of the church under the long delay, a large part of the whole interval was prophetically announced, but in such a manner that its true length might not be understood, till its own close seemed to be drawing near.
4. That, in the symbolical prophecies of Daniel and St. John, other times were revealed along with this, and included under one common maxim of interpretation.
5. That the periods thus figuratively revealed are exclusively those in Daniel and St. John, which relate to the general history of the church between the time of the prophet and the second advent.
6. That, in these predictions, each day represents a natural year, as in the vision of Ezekiel; that a month denotes thirty, and a time three hundred and sixty years. — Rev. T.R. Birks, *First Elements of Sacred Prophecy* (London: William Edward Painter, 1843), p. 311.

This statement recommends itself to a candid mind, but some may be led to inquire, “Is this all that can be said?” The purpose of this article is to make some additional observations on the matter, and these will now be set forth in point fashion.²

1. *The time prophecies are essential parts of two Bible books that God Himself has urged us to understand.* Daniel, for example, is the only Old Testament book concerning which we have record of Christ Himself urging its specific study (Matt. 24:15), and the Apocalypse opens with a divine blessing upon both “he that readeth” and “they that hear.” We are assured by the Sacred Record that all the “sealed” portions of Daniel’s prophecy would be understood by the wise “in the time of the end,” and the situation would need to be similar regarding those prophecies in the Revelation that are so closely allied to Daniel’s. Understanding of both, including the time periods, would of necessity eventuate together, and it is *the time periods particularly* that are referred to in Scripture as being sealed until the latter days. Compare Dan. 8:26; 12:4; Acts 1:7.) That God should require His church to gain an understanding of the eschatological portions of His Word with the exception of the time periods is not likely. They too were written “for our learning” (Rom. 15:4).

2. *The time periods in more than one place are announced amid settings of particular solemnity.* In three instances we find Christ Himself as the Revelator of the time messages. (Compare Dan. 8:11-14, Dan. 10:5,6, and Dan. 12:6, 7 with Rev. 1:13-16.) The theme in each instance is likewise impressive. The context of the 2300 days, the 1290, and the 1335 days stresses the cataclysmic events associated with the close of the great controversy between Christ and Satan. (See Dan. 8:17, 25, 26; 12:3, 4, 9-13.) Therefore Bible students have ample encouragement for regarding these prophetic periods as significant and important aspects of revelation rather than as mere imagery or “drapery.”

3. *The preceding point regarding the divinely indicated importance of the prophetic times finds support in the abundant evidence for the fact that ordinary “days” cannot be here intended by these prophecies.* As the visions themselves embrace comprehensive rather than trifling themes, so the time periods emphasized are symbolic of extensive rather than limited eras. Points *a, b, c*, which follow, support this conclusion.

a. The visions, including the time periods, are obviously symbolic, but *the basic symbolism employed in each instance has definite ascertainable significance.* In Daniel 2, for example, the four metals of the image are identified as signifying four kingdoms. Likewise the four beasts of Daniel 7 are interpreted as representing four kingdoms. Thus the time periods incorporated in such prophecies must, as with the other features, be of necessity symbolic rather than literal, and capable of elucidation.

b. *The peculiar way in which the time periods in Daniel and Revelation are expressed also indicates that they must apply symbolically.* Consider, for example, the “time and times and the dividing of time” of Daniel 7:25. Why is it phrased this peculiar way if it refers but to three and one-half years? In two other places this interval occurs in Scripture, and in both these cases it is expressed by its natural phrase “three years and six months.” (See Luke 4:25 and James 5:17.) This is true in every similar case. Paul remained at Corinth “a year and six months” (Acts 18:11). David reigned in Hebron “seven years and six months” (2 Sam. 2:11). He is described as being in the Philistine camp “a full year and four months” (1 Sam. 27:7). How different from these cases is the expression “a time and times and the dividing of time”! The year-day theory would require that the symbol be expressed in such a way as to indicate that it is not to be taken literally. Does not Daniel 7:25 do this admirably?

The different expressions used to denote the same period are an added proof that the time, times, and a half of Dan. 7:25 cannot represent three natural years and a half. Twice it is mentioned as a time, times, and a dividing of time: once as a time, times, and a half; twice as forty-two months; and twice as 1260 days. By comparing the context in each case, the evidence is that all these apply to the same period. But the natural expression of “three years and six months” is not once used. Obviously, God is indicating the symbolic nature of the expressions.

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.³

The case is similar with the next great time period — the 2300 days. Is this expressed in the normal way for an ordinary literal period of time? Quite the reverse. To use a marginal reading of Daniel 8:14, “Unto two thousand and three hundred evening morning; then shall the sanctuary be cleansed.” This is certainly not the usual and literal expression for a period of between six and seven years. *There are only three instances in all Bible history where a period beyond forty days is expressed in days only, and it is absolutely without precedent in Scripture that periods of more than one year should be thus described* (Gen. 7:4; Neh. 6:15; Esther 1:4).

c. *The context of both Daniel 7 and 8 forbid the idea that the periods mentioned could be literal.* In the first case the little horn emerges from the fourth world empire and endures till the time of the judgment and the Advent; and Dan. 7:25 declares that the period of “a time and times and the dividing of time” extends over most of this period. How impossible this would be if three and one half years only were intended! Similarly in Daniel 8:17, the prophet is told that the 2300 days would extend from the restoration of the sanctuary until “the time of the end.” This means that a period of approximately 2300 years is involved. The treading down of the sanctuary brought to view in Daniel 8:11-13 could not begin before the restoration spoken of in Daniel 9:25, in the fifth century B.C. And besides this, its terminus is expressly stated as belonging to the latter days, just prior to the final proclamation of the gospel by the “wise.” (See Daniel 12:3, 4.) *It has been largely overlooked by our critics that Daniel 8:17, when linked with Daniel 12:3, 9, 10, 13, makes it conclusive that the 2300 days covers many centuries.* Likewise, in Revelation 12 the 42 months cover the greater part of the time between the first and second advents when the church would be in the wilderness of persecution during the Dark Ages. This is granted by almost all expositors.

4. *Inasmuch as short-lived beasts are employed as symbols of long-existent empires, it is most likely that the times mentioned are also presented to scale, with a small time unit representing a larger one.*

5. *The one measure of time commonly used by man which is not employed in the time symbolisms of Daniel and Revelation is that of a year.* Days, weeks, and months are referred to 1260 days, 70 weeks, 42 months), but the ordinary word for year is not found.⁴ Instead, the Hebrew word *moced* is the basic term employed (Dan. 12:7). This term, translated “a time,” does not have for its usual meaning “a year.” The word occurs often in the Old Testament and is used to designate periods of different lengths. The first occasion it is used is in Genesis 1:14: “Let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years.” The word is often

used to state the appointed time of all the feasts of the law. (See Lev. 23:2, 4, 37, 44; Num. 9:2, 3, 7, 13; et cetera.) The Greek *kaipous* of Revelation 12:14 is likewise indefinite. The most obvious explanation of this omission of the usual word for year in the symbolism of time duration in Daniel and in Revelation, while the other calendar terms **are** found, is that the year is the measure typified throughout these prophecies and that the day, the smallest of the symbolic calendar times, is employed to represent it. There is a natural appropriateness in the year-day principle being chosen by the Creator when we remember that there are two great revolutions of the earth, one on its axis occupying twenty-four hours, which gives rise to the “day,” and the other the earth in its orbit occupying 365 days, which gives rise to the “year.” It is appropriate indeed that the lesser should be used as symbolic of the greater.

¹ Norman F. Douty, *Another Look at Seventh-day Adventism* (Michigan: Baker Book House, 1962), pp. 102, 103.

² The writer *acknowledges* his indebtedness to T.R. Birks and to H.G. Guinness for several of these points. Because such works as *First Elements of Sacred Prophecy* and *The Approaching End of the Age* are now difficult to procure, this emphasis on some matters set forth therein may not be amiss.

³ T.R. Birks, *First Elements of Sacred Prophecy* (London: William Edward Painter, 1843), p. 352.

⁴ The Hebrew preposition *lamed*, translated “at” in this verse, would be better translated as it is elsewhere in this chapter, namely “unto.” The sense “at” or “it” fits *lamed* nowhere in this vision: e.g. “toward, or unto, the four winds of heaven” (v. 8: “unto that certain saint which spake” the *lamed* associated with “the vision” in v. 26 as “at,” for it would be senseless. Its meaning is “unto,” and the same can be said of v. 17. Compare also Dan. 4:11 and Deut. 16:4. In harmony with this is the promise that Daniel shall stand in his lot for judgment and reward at “the end of the days” under discussion. This fact alone makes it certain that the prophetic times of Daniel extend until the latter times.

⁵ The Greek of Rev. 9:15 suggests that a point of time rather than a period is here referred to. See modern translations and *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, pp. 793, 796, 856, 857.

(To be continued)

June, 1964

THE MINISTRY

The Year-Day Principle*

(Concluded)

Next we are led to inquire whether there are any indications in the rest of the Scriptures that God has ever chosen such symbolism. In Numbers 14:35 and Ezekiel 4:6 we find evidence that such is the case. *On the other occasions God has chosen to use precisely this symbolism, and one of these occasions was during the time of Daniel’s captivity and its use was in connection with a contemporary prophet.* Therefore, that God should use the same symbolism in apocalyptic prophecy is not surprising.

6. *The pragmatic test should now be applied, and the question asked, “Have any of Daniel’s prophecies already met with a precise fulfilment that accords with the principle we are studying?”* Daniel 9: 24-27, the prophecy of the 70 weeks, seems to offer just such a fulfilment. While the Hebrew word here for weeks, *shabua*, simply means a hebdomad, nevertheless the scriptural usage of this term is ever for a week of days. (It is not used, for example, in Leviticus 25:1-10 for this seven-year period.) See Gen. 29:27, 28; Dan. 10:2; Eze. 45:21, et cetera. Inasmuch as other evidence shows that this period of 490 years reaching to the Messiah is cut off from the longer period of the 2300, it is obvious that the latter must consist of years also. Thus here in Daniel 9 we have the pragmatic test met and the year-day principle justified, despite the fact that the word *day* is nowhere used in this passage.⁶

7. *Another testimony that should not be omitted is that found in Revelation 10:5-7.* Here we read: “And the angel which I saw stand upon the sea and upon the earth lifted up his hand to

heaven, and swear by him that liveth for ever and ever, ... that there should be time no longer: but in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he shall begin to sound, the mystery of

*The first part of this challenging presentation appeared in the last issue. In order to get the full impact of this author's thesis it would be wise to study these two sections together. We are assured our readers will appreciate the research Dr. Ford has made in this important area of prophetic truth. — Editor.

God should be finished.” Every Bible margin refers the reader from this passage to Daniel 12:6, 7. It is obvious that the first quotation refers to the second one, and in so doing it shows clearly that *the time periods alluded to in the passage quoted from Daniel still had their fulfilment centuries ahead from John the Revelator's prophecy, and that they would reach to the time of the end when “there should be time no longer” and “the mystery of God should be finished.”* Similarly, Revelation 11:2 quotes from Daniel 8:14, indicating that the fulfilment of the 2300 days was projected well into the Christian Age. Only the year-day principle applied to Daniel's period could make these New Testament fulfilments possible, provided that these periods were meant to be as specific as other Bible periods, such as the 120 years before the Flood, or the 450 years concerning Abraham's seed, or the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness.

8. *The principle of repetition and enlargement that characterizes the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation also casts light on the time periods employed in these books.* It is obvious to any unbiased reader of Daniel that the seventh chapter covers the same ground as the second. Similarly, chapter eight again traverses the world empires. Even naming two of those first mentioned in the first outline of Daniel 2. Daniel 8 finishes with the destruction of the wicked by the stone cut out “without hands” as does Daniel 2. As certainly as the fourth empire is pictured as remaining in its fragmentary state till the Second Advent, so it is with the little horn of Daniel 8.

Furthermore, the fourth outline in Daniel, that of chapters eleven and twelve, again covers the identical ground of chapters two, seven, and eight. The description found in Daniel 11:31-45 clearly accords with Daniel 8:11-13, 23-25. The final chapter of Daniel gives in greater detail what is found in verses 44 and 45 of chapter two. *Thus in order to interpret the period mentioned in Daniel 8:41 it is essential that we take into consideration the fact that the chief power prominent for the 2300 days is represented in Daniel 11 as enduring until the kingdom of God is set up.* The inadequacy of interpreting, therefore, the 2300 evening-mornings as days only during the Maccabeus era is apparent.

Let us now consider one or two specific objections to the year-day principle. Evangelical scholars for whom we have respect, such as Edward J. Young, assert that prophetic periods are symbolic only. In answer we would quote Nathanael West:

Even granting that prophetic numbers are symbolic and schematic, IT DOES NOT FOLLOW that they have no temporal value. The fact that they represent an “IDEA” — and no one denies this — does not prove that they do not represent “time” also.

And in another place this writer says:

The prophetic numbers are symbolical only because, first of all, they are literal. The four hundred years DID begin and end. The seventy years DID begin and end. The one thousand years SHALL begin and end. All are spoken of in the same way. The seven weeks, and sixty-two weeks, DID begin and end ... Messiah DID come “after threescore and two weeks,” and “seven weeks.” “After” “until,” “unto” in answer to the question, “How long?” and “O my Lord, When?” ARE chronological.

Another objection to the year-day prophecy should here be considered. This is that there have been so many different dates set for the conclusion of the time periods, and thus obviously, the majority of them wrong, that therefore such a hazy method of conveying truth could not come from God. Notice the well-worded objection of Thomas Maitland regarding the 1260 days:

If such an event as this [the delivery of the saints into the hands of the blasphemous and persecuting power] has taken place, is it possible that the Church of God can be at a loss to decide *when* and *how* it happened? Can there be a difference of opinion among pious, and learned, and laborious inquirers into the Word of God and the history of the Church? Nay, further we ask — “Is the Church at this moment in the hands of the blasphemous little horn, or is it not?” Mr. Faber, and many more, assert that it is. Mr. Cunninghame, Mr. Frere, and others, are as fully convinced that it is not. And 9/10ths of the Christian world stand silent, avowedly unable to give an opinion on the subject.⁷ ...When did the saints find out that they had been delivered over, not for ages. Is this credible? But, in fact, when did it happen? ... On this point, too, there is a great difference of opinion ...⁸

What shall we say about this objection? Birks, in his day, affirmed that we should say that the objection is a plausible one, but that it assumes that which it sets out to prove — namely that the prophecy was of no help to the church unless all its members accurately located its application. However, if the prophecy was given for the church throughout many generations, to reveal a dangerous opposer and to give light in regard to the moral features of divine providences through many centuries of time, then it is clear that all these purposes could be fulfilled even if the exact application was not seen for several generations. And, likewise, if mistakes of even a century or more were made at first in the date of the event. All the main features and practical lessons would still be substantially the same, just as surely as the features and character of a person could be well known even though we were a few years in error as to the date of his birth.

A parallel case pointed out by Birks is the revelation made to Abraham regarding his seed sojourning for 400 years and enduring persecution. It cannot be proved that the seed of Abraham did actually serve and were afflicted by a strange nation during the whole of the 400 years. Similarly, during the 1260 years, while a precise period was intended, the recognition of that time by the church could be more definitely recognized by the people of God during part of that time rather than during the whole. And, lastly, it should be remembered that the maxims already declared to be the foundation of the year-day system actually demanded the situation that the critic presents. We would expect successive anticipation, for example, as to the dates involved. Only by such gradual approach to the correct view could the two main purposes have been fulfilled — growing understanding of the prophecy, and a constant and unbroken anticipation of the Lord’s coming. Maitland’s objection assumes that the church must either be in total ignorance of the times, or come at once into full possession of perfect knowledge. All analogies of the church’s past, and even of individual Christian experiences, declare such an objection false.

As the author of *First Elements of Sacred Prophecy* has well said, there are only three alternatives God could have adopted with reference to revelation of the times and seasons to His church. He could keep the church in total ignorance till the end; or translate it suddenly from complete ignorance to complete knowledge, or, third, give gradually increasing light, till at length the sun of righteousness actually arose. Suppose God had adopted the first alternative and had given the church nothing but the most general statements for her guide

through the centuries? As century after century passed, would not believers have been lulled into slumber, believing that the return of the Master was a vague, indefinite possibility, infinitely afar off? After ten centuries of waiting could not the church rationally assume that there could quite easily be ten centuries more of waiting, and therefore relax? Each generation would have had a still weaker expectation of the Advent.

Consider the next possibility — that the light be given suddenly in its completeness. How then could the church fulfil the instruction, “Watch and pray; for ye know not what the time is”? The testimony of the ages is that always, and on every subject, the increase of knowledge has been gradual. “Many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased.” The gradual unfolding of the light of prophecy, the third possibility of revelation, is in exact accord with God’s purpose of sustaining His church in anticipation of His return.

The believer in the year-day principle has just as much evidence of truth of this belief as he could expect. He will admit that objections can be raised to the theory but realizes that these are few compared with the objections that can be raised to the rejection of the principle. Truth here, as in every other philosophical matter, is determined by the weight of evidence. Undoubtedly the scales are well down on the side of the historical interpreters of the ages who represent more of the church invisible than any other interpretative group. Thus Seventh-day Adventists find themselves in good company in their application to years of prophecies of the 1260 and the 2300 days. Among evangelicals, those who literalize the time periods are for the most part dispensationalists, and their attitude in this matter is part and parcel of their erroneous literalistic and futuristic exegesis of the Old Testament and the book of Revelation.⁹

It should be noted that the prophetic times are the most certain identifiers of the nearness of Christ’s coming that the Scripture affords. It is doubtful that any of the other signs customarily quoted are nearly as conclusive. Without the time prophecies we would be left to wonder whether the world had yet another weary millennium or two to endure before Christ appears to banish sin and sorrow.

To quote Birks once more:

That entire rejection of all prophetic chronology, which follows, of course, on the denial of the year-day, is most of all to be deplored, from its deadly and paralysing influence on the great hope of the church ... The prophetic times, indeed, when separated from the context, and viewed in themselves only, are a dry and worthless skeleton; but when taken in connection with the related events, clothed with historical facts, and joined with those spiritual affections which should attend the study of God’s Providences; like the bones in the human frame, they give strength to what was feeble, and union to what was disjointed, and form, and beauty, and order, to the whole outline and substance of these sacred and divine prophecies.¹⁰

⁶ It is a fact that the Hebrew term here employed for “weeks” does not of itself necessarily mean seven days. But neither does it *of itself* mean seven years. Furthermore, in every other case of scriptural usage it is associated with the former and not the latter. This being the case, how very appropriate is its employment in Daniel 9 where part of the symbolism of Daniel 8 is being interpreted. A word is chosen that harmonizes both with the symbolic “evening-mornings” of Daniel 8:14, and with its literal application of years. Daniel 9 supports the year-day principle, not just as it stands by the evidence of the chapter alone, but by virtue of its connection with Daniel 8. It is not proposed here to review the well-known evidences of this connection but we would point out one feature of linkage between the two that is often overlooked. Both chapters are vitally concerned with the future of the sanctuary. Daniel 8 by its references to the daily, the “evening-mornings” (burnt offerings), the sacrificial animals — ram and the he-goat (in contrast to the animals of Daniel 7) and the naming of the sanctuary itself as well as a technical term for the Temple service (*tzaba*, Num. 4:23) — clearly evidences its theme. But Daniel 9 does similarly: (1) it includes a prayer concerning the restoration of the sanctuary, (2) it specifically names the time of this prayer as being an hour of particular importance in the sanctuary ritual, (3) it points to the anointing of the sanctuary’s high priest and of the Most Holy itself (that is, the antitypical priest and sanctuary in each instance), (4) it predicts the end of the typical

sanctuary services when the offering and the oblation would be made to cease by meeting their fulfilment, (5) the sanctuary key term “atonement” is employed (verse 25), (6) the destruction of the typical sanctuary is foretold.

Thus it is no arbitrary exegesis which asserts that Daniel 9 is a logical continuation and explanation of Daniel 8, and which makes the seventy weeks a part of the 2300 days.

⁷ Nathanael West, *The Thousand Years in Both Testaments*, pp. 94, 98, 99.

⁸ T. Maitland, *Inquiry Into the Nature of the Prophetic Times*, pp. 53, 76.

⁹ See *Prophecy and the Church*, Oswald Allis (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reform Pub. Co., 1945), p. 19.

¹⁰ T.R. Birks, *First Elements of Sacred Prophecy* (London: “William Edward Painter, 1843), pp. 415, 416.

July, 1964

THE MINISTRY