

A Dispensationalist Calculation Error

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An arithmetic error in Dispensationalist prophetic calculation seriously challenges dispensationalists' position on the interpretation of biblical prophecy. The prophetic core of the Futurist School, to which Dispensationalists belong, is the 70 weeks prophecy of Daniel 9:24-27. Into the last of these weeks of this period they fit the three and a half years referred to in Daniel 7:25 and other scriptures. They believe these three and a half years to be literal, calendar time—1,260 nonsymbolic days or 42 actual months that make up the first half of a seven-year period of tribulation. Then, they aver, a personal, future antichrist will dominate the world.

It is argued further that this period will begin with the rapture and end with Christ's return in glory. However, a serious calculation error undermines this scenario.

But first a little background.

Origins of Dispensationalist and secret rapture teaching

The rapture has been depicted spectacularly by Charles C. Ryrie, Hal Lindsey, and lately Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) became a worldwide bestseller, a success repeated 30 years later by the *Left Behind* series. A dust-cover advertisement hails the series as "the fastest-selling fiction . . . ever."

Dispensationalists interpret the full 70 weeks period symbolically, maintaining it is a period of 490 years. This they do either according to the year-day principle (Num. 14:34; Ezek. 4:6) or because of the Hebrew word *shabua* in the original text that may be translated as "sevens."¹

The first 69 of the 70 weeks are therefore 483 years. Up to this point, they reason much like theologians of the Historical School, including Seventh-day Adventists. But then they introduce a long gap by moving the seventieth week into the distant future just before the Second Coming. Even more startlingly, they believe the happenings of the seventieth week do not have to do with Jesus the Messiah, but with the antichrist.

Again, much in Dispensationalist interpretation depends on the 1,260 days/42 months/three and a half years being literal time so that the combined numbers total precisely 50 percent of the last prophetic week of Daniel 9:24-27. If this is correct, it discredits the Historical School to which Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, and many other Reformers belonged.

The original essentials of Dispensationalist thinking did not, as is often believed, originate with John N. Darby and the Plymouth Brethren, but rather with writers like Francisco Ribera (1537-1591), a Jesuit scholar at the Spanish University of Salamanca, more than 400 years ago.

Known as Futurism, his approach to prophecy was intended to refute the teachings of the sixteenth-century reformers and their antecedents, including medieval Catholics like Joachim of Floris (c. 1135-1201), "the first to apply the year-day principle to the 1260 years."²

Ribera reached back to the early church fathers, such as Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons (c. 130—c. 200), who also located the antichrist in a temple and believed that the three and a half years were literal time.³ With this view, Irenaeus differed from Tertullian (c. 160—c. 240), his North African contemporary, who maintained that the entire 70 weeks were fulfilled by the First Advent.⁴

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Though sometimes at loggerheads with the pope, Irenaeus also furthered the Latin interpretation by teaching that the church should rely more heavily on tradition and that all Christians should be guided in their thinking by the bishops.⁵

At first, for two centuries, Protestants dismissed or ignored Ribera's Futurism. Later it began to appear in their theology in the works of Anglican scholars like Samuel R. Maitland (1792-1866), his disciple James H. Todd (1805-1869), and others who followed.

Todd emphatically denied that the papacy was the antichrist or that Catholicism was a flawed religion. He (and through him both Maitland and Ribera) had a substantial influence, not only on Dispensationalists but also on the thinking of John Henry Newman (1801-1890) and Henry Edward Manning (1808-1892). These were prominent members of the Oxford Movement who, shortly after the mid-1840s, along with other Anglican priests, converted to the Roman Catholic Church.

Newman and Manning, who eventually became Cardinals, saw Protestantism to be a fulfillment of Daniel's prophecies. That is, they saw the Protestant faith to be an installment or forerunner of the abomination that makes the Catholic sanctuary service desolate.

To them, the continual sacrifice taken away was the sacrifice of the Mass, which Protestants reject. Manning, who headed the Catholic Church in England, was particularly emphatic on this point.⁶

Again, it was the influence of Futurist presuppositions that played a major part in convincing these and others of the truth of the Catholic position.

The intellectual basis for these developments began with Samuel R. Maitland early in the nineteenth century. His first and key publication on prophecy was a 72-page pamphlet: *An Enquiry into the Grounds on which the Prophetic Period of Daniel and St. John Has been Supposed to Consist of 1260 Years* (1826).

Its mainstay was a major denial, on page 2, of the year-day principle. This is what he wrote: "After much consideration, I feel convinced that, '*the time, times, and dividing of time;*' Dan. vii.25: '*Time, times, and a half;*' Dan. xii. 7: '*Time, times, and half a time;*' Rev. xii. 14: '*Forty and two months;*' Rev. xi. ii—xiii.5: '*the thousand two hundred and threescore days;*' Rev. xi.3: are not mystical phrases relating to a period of 1260 *years*: but, according to their plain meaning, denote a period of 1260 *natural* days."⁷ We will see, however, that this is impossible.

Maitland refers to six of the seven scriptural passages that mention this period, omitting only Revelation 12:6. In chapter 23 of my book, *Christ and Antichrist in Prophecy and History*,⁸ I deal with them synoptically as "the Sevenfold Prophecy and the Year-Day Principle." How readers understand the three and a half years/42 months/1,260 days is crucial to prophetic interpretation. This is true for adherents of the Historical School, Dispensationalists, and the Roman Church.

In equating the antichrist's 42 months referred to in Revelation 13:5 with the three and a half years that make up half of the week described in Daniel 7:25, Dispensationalists rely on the literalized calculations made by Maitland.

The entire Dispensationalist end-time scenario depends heavily on these calculations: the idea that the Tribulation will last for seven years (from the rapture to Christ's return in glory), the denial that the papacy is the antichrist, and the notorious Gap theory. This interpretation has far-reaching implications. Millions could be confused and even lost as they await the rapture

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thinking, “When my Christian friends disappear, I will have a second chance of seven more years to prepare before the end!”

Futurism

Futurism also blinds the world to the perils posed by the real antichrist, who is not a bogeyman of the future but an entity that is already active in the world.

But, alas, there will be no rapture, only a single Second Advent, to burst upon a startled planet, like lightning that illuminates the sky (Matt. 24:27). Jesus and countless radiant angels will descend with a shout and trumpet blasts to announce the day of salvation and doom, invading the atmosphere with unimaginable splendor (Matt. 16:27; Luke 21:27; 1 Thess. 4: 16-18). Every eye will see Him, and the nations of the lost will wail because of Him (Matt. 24:30; Rev. 1:7); for it is suddenly too late to accept Him as their Savior. They call to the rocks and mountains to fall upon them and hide them from His face (Rev. 6:14-17).

The Gap theory

The Gap theory is inherently and deeply flawed, for it defies all known laws of arithmetic and common sense, as well as what the Bible teaches.

Miles Beardsley Johnson says: “As a result of the rejection of Christ and His crucifixion, Israel’s clock stopped and the Mystery of Grace, the church, was introduced. Israel, like a train, was taken off the main line and shunted into a sidetrack where she has remained for 1900 years. Her steam is up again; her bell is ringing; she is poised, ready to complete her run. Since the period of the church is signless and timeless, these past 1900 years are a ‘time-out’ period as in football and basketball.”⁹

Such language is certainly picturesque and, for certain minds, beguiling. The Lord’s great time prophecies are not really a train or a football game. There is nothing in any of them, and especially not in Daniel 9:24-27, to suggest the kind of gap proposed in this theory. God thinks and expresses Himself clearly, coherently, without theological double talk.

Suppose a friend invites our family to visit him for a week. We go to his house, but then at the breakfast table on the sixth day we announce that the seventh day of our visit will occur a year into the future. For this reason, we shall in the meantime just linger around in his home and on his property. That would be foolish.

No, when the Lord’s messenger said to Daniel, “Seventy weeks are determined upon thy people and upon thy holy city” (Dan. 9:24), he had been sent specifically to explain, not obscure, the prophecy. Obviously he meant exactly 490 consecutive years, not 2,490 years or more.

If God had wished to put the Jewish nation on hold for two millennia, he would have said so quite clearly, for “the Lord God does nothing, without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets” (Amos 3:7, RSV). But the fact is that after AD 34 He would no longer work in the same way through His people Israel as in ages past, but through the Christian church consisting of converted Jews as well as Gentiles.

The period of the church, moreover, is not—as Miles B. Johnson puts it—“signless and timeless”; for the Bible does mention specific signs, as in Matthew 24:30 and Luke 21:25. It also

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deals with many time periods of varying length, including the 1,260, 1,290, 1,335, and 2,300 years.

Why the Gap theory is embraced

If the Gap theory is so seriously flawed, why would thinking people insist on it?

It rationalizes the ancient error of Irenaeus and others like him, who believed that the Second Advent would take place in what was, for him, the near future. But Christ did not return within that period. So by the sixteenth century, when Ribera was pondering these matters, 1,400 years had passed—and now almost 1,900 years have elapsed.

How should this be dealt with? The correct approach is simply to admit that early Catholics like Irenaeus were wrong, and that the root of their error was the failure to apply the year-day principle. To deny this fact, however, is to be stuck in a mental time warp, the viewpoint of about AD 200, creating a need for Jesuitical ingenuity—which really seeks to explain away that vast expanse of centuries.

The Gap theory, then, is closely bound up with the idea that the three and a half years/42 months/1,260 days are literal, calendar time. So for Dispensationalists much depends on Ribera's ideas and particularly Maitland's explicit denial of the year-day principle. Thus, if the argument that the 1,260 years are literal time can be disposed of, the 1,260 prophetic days must be symbolic, representing as many years.

The eighteen-day discrepancy

Simply stated, the heart of the error—the Dispensationalist error—is that the three and a half years/42 months/1,260 days must be prophetic and not literal time, because they are shorter than three and a half years on the calendar.

How many days are there in a year? According to the calendar, it is 365 days, except in the case of leap years. The actual number is 365.2422 days. Calculating on this basis we have the following: $365.2422 \times 3.5 = 1,278$ days; not 1,260 days. There is an 18-day discrepancy!

This being true, the Dispensationalist computation also does not constitute 42 months of literal time but somewhat less than 41 and a half months. Therefore the 1,260 days cannot be part of the seven-year tribulation that Dispensationalist theology insists on. Further, they therefore can have nothing to do with the 70 weeks of Daniel 9:24-27.

Interpreters of the Historical School do not run into this problem: their calculation is different: 360×3.5 (or 42×30) = 1,260. These, however, can obviously not be natural time units. An ordinary year does not contain 360 days, nor are all months made up of 30 days—not even in the lunar calendar used by ancient Israel. If such a year is arithmetically impossible in a literal sense, it must be a symbolic entity. It can therefore be reasonably based on the year-day equivalence explained in Numbers 14:34 and Ezekiel 4:6.

The literalism of Ribera (together with Irenaeus), Maitland, and the Dispensationalists is also discredited by the fact that the medieval papacy has already to an astonishing extent fulfilled the 1,260 prophetic days as years in real time—between 538 and 1798. But for many adherents of Futurism and Dispensationalism, such argumentation is too indirect. Laying bare their fuzzy

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math with its faulty arithmetic is quicker and more to the point. It is an axe that cuts such an eschatology off at its roots.

The importance and precision of the 1,260-day period

The 1,260-day time period seems to be particularly important because the Bible mentions it seven times and in different ways. We may have wondered why the Lord did not, to keep it simple, refer in every case to three and a half years. Why did He in some verses also speak of days or months?

He may have first equated 1,260 days with 42 months and three and a half years (as in Rev. 11: 2, 3 and Rev. 12:6, 14) to ensure that we would understand this to be an exact, specific period—not the approximation that the sixteenth-century Jesuit tried to pass off to his readers.

Second, God may also have wanted us to compare these figures and notice that they cannot be literal time, as some expositors would one day assert. The biblical 1,260-day period makes prophetic sense only on the basis of the year-day principle.

Dr. Ribera, more than 400 years ago, had been more clever—though more devious—than his Anglican and other Protestant disciples. He realized quite well that from the very beginning (even in the time of Irenaeus) there had been a problem with his reckoning, so he slipped in an unobtrusive gloss: “Note that these days do not completely make up three years and a half, just as Christ did not complete a half year of preaching.”¹⁰

The implications of the error

One purpose for this article is to claim priority in exposing this error. More important are its implications.

The seven-years’ tribulation, supposedly beginning with the three and a half years referred to, becomes an unnecessary hypothesis, together with that of the peculiar Gap mentioned above. So does the rapture (allegedly separated by seven years from the Lord’s return in glory). Furthermore, the discovery of this error undermines the idea that Israel and the Christian church are separate, discontinuous entities.

This Dispensationalist doctrine teaches that the Jews, and even the modern Israeli state, are still the favorite people of God.

All this can now be discarded.

Furthermore, for Seventh-day Adventists the interpretation of the 70 weeks is crucially important as the first part of the 2,300 days in Daniel 8:14. This is essential for the integrity of the Seventh-day Adventist sanctuary doctrine. Making the 70 weeks coincide with the end of human history, as Futurism does, dissociates them from the 2,300 days. But exposing Maitland’s and Ribera’s error vindicates the year-day principle and indicates that the 2,300 prophetic days should be calculated as years.

The time has come to discard emphatically Ribera’s Futurism and Dispensationalism, its offspring, by insisting with greater vigor on the Historical School of prophetic interpretation. It is the only one that actually fits the facts of the Bible’s predictions and their fulfillment in history.

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1. D. Guthrie. et al. eds.. third ed. *The New Bible Commentary Revised* (Grand Rapids. Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1975), 698.
2. LeRoy Edwin Froom, *Finding the Lost Prophetic Witnesses* (Washington. D.C.: Review and Herald Pub, Assn., 1946), 31
3. Quoted In LeRoy Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers: The Historical Development of Prophetic Interpretation* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1946), 1:247-249.
4. Tertullian. quoted in Froom, *Prophetic Faith*, 1:260.
5. Irenaeus quoted in Willis Lindquist, *Christianity and Byzantium*, vol. 4 of *The Universal History of the World*, ed. Irwin Shapiro. et al. (New York Golden Press. 1966), 304.
6. Henry Edward Manning. *The Temporal Power of the Vicar of Jesus Christ* (2nd ed.), 159-160, quoted in Froom, *Prophetic Faith*, 3:736.
7. Samuel R. Maitland: “An Enquiry into the Grounds on Which the Prophetic Period or Daniel and St. John Has Been Supposed to Consist of 1260 Years (1826)” quoted in Froom, *Prophetic Faith*, 3:542
8. Available for \$23.95 (postage and handling included) from the author. edwdecock@yahoo.com (12916 Los Terrazos Blvd., Edinburg, TX 78541). See book review on page 31 of this issue.
9. Miles Beardsley Johnson, quoted in Sakae Kubo, *The Open Rapture* (Nashville. Tenn. Southern Pub. Assn. 1978), 15.
10. Francisco Ribera, quoted in Froom, *Prophetic Faith*, 2:492

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Typographical errors also eliminated. Under footnote 8, a new address was inserted, for the sake of readers who may want to order the writer's *Christ and Antichrist in Prophecy and History*.