

The Year-Day Principle



by Desmond Ford

God permitted the year-day principle to encourage believers during the long delay of the Lord's return. Our twentieth century understanding of the Bible no longer requires this extra-biblical principle.

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he year-day principle of prophetic interpretation is a simple one. It is

this: In the symbolic prophecies of the apocalyptic portions of Scripture a day is used as the symbol of a year.

So, if a student of prophecy comes across a symbolic prophecy in the Bible that mentions, for example, 1,260 days, then it is assumed to mean 1,260 years in real time. The student can then seek a period in history of 1,260 years, to fit the prophecy.

We have often been reminded that big doors swing on little hinges. It is true in all doctrinal structures. Some of Adventism's distinctive teachings rest upon the genuineness of the year-day principle. This might never be guessed from reading Adventist literature, for the principle is ever assumed rather than proved. Take away the year-day principle and what would happen to 1798, August 11, 1840, and October 22, 1844?

Year-Day Principle Ancient

Let it first be made clear that Adventists did not invent the year-day principle, which is used to interpret apocalyptic chronological prophecies. They inherited it from centuries before. Not long after Christ, Jewish scholars taught that in prophetic symbolism a day represented a year. By the time of the Protestant Reformation, the year-day principle was an hermeneutical dictum.

Principle Is Providential

When you review church history, you sense it was in the permitted providence of God that the church came to view short periods in Bible prophecy as typical of longer periods in history. This cushioned the agony of the delay of the second advent of Christ.

But in the twentieth century we have a better understanding of biblical eschatology. It has to be said that there is hardly a nondenominational scholar today who clings to the year-day principle.

I believe that it was in the providence of God that the year-day principle was taught after the Advent hope of the early church faded away. Prophecy was written in such a way that

what could have been quickly fulfilled could also match the march of centuries—if God’s people tarried in the discharge of their task.

Bible prophecies about Christ’s return were for the generation that originally heard them. It was the church’s privilege to quickly take the gospel to all the world, that Jesus might return soon (Mt 24:14). But it did not do the job. The second coming of Christ was delayed. In mercy, God allowed many in the church to use the year-day principle to explain the delay.

Principle Lacks Proof

But there are problems with the year-day principle we should frankly acknowledge. For Adventists, many prophetic termini (which were very current when the Advent movement was new) are now far back in the past. No great prophetic fulfillments have happened since. It is time to look again at the evidence.

Where is the biblical proof for the year-day principle?

Numbers 14:34, Ezekiel 4:6, and Daniel 9:24-27 are usually volunteered as proof. But these certainly do not yield what is demanded of them.

None of these passages state that it is a rule for all symbolic prophecy that a day signifies a year.

Numbers 14:34 is not symbolic prophecy. It speaks of **years** in the future, not days.

In Ezekiel 4:6 the years are in the past, and actual days ahead are contemplated.

Daniel 9:24, as with Daniel 8, does not use the word “day.” The Hebrew word in the passage translated “weeks” is actually “sevens,” and is not in itself related to days at all.

Understanding Time Words

It is now universally recognized that key Hebrew words for time do not have the meaning that adherents of the year-day principle attribute to them. For example, the word “weeks” in Daniel 9:24-27 is clearly a term for “sevens.” (See modern Bible versions such as Moffatt, NASB margin, NIV, RSV, and Smith and Goodspeed.) It’s similar to our word “dozen,” which is twelve

of anything you apply it to.

The reason we think of Daniel’s 70 “weeks” as being “weeks of years” (in Daniel 9:24) is because of the context. At the beginning of the chapter, Daniel speaks of a period of “seventy years” (Dan 9:2). Daniel is later told that before Messiah arrives there are to be “seventy ‘sevens’” (Dan 9:24 NIV)—that is, a week of seventies (years).

Furthermore, the word translated “time” or “times” (Dan 7:25) has often been declared to mean a year. That is certainly not its lexical meaning, though it can be applied to a sacred time of a day, a week, a month, or a year. Literally, it simply means an appointed period, without defining how long that period is.

NT Does Not Teach Principle

A major reason for the abandonment of the year-day principle is that every section of the New Testament is so written that its readers could expect the second advent at any time. (See Mt 16:28, 24:34; 1 Th 4:15; Rev 22:7, 10, 20.)

The whole weight of New Testament testimony is that God’s *ideal* plan was for Jesus to return in the first century A.D., not long after his ascension to heaven. This is taught clearly from Matthew to Revelation and recognized by the majority of New Testament scholars.

This helps us understand why the

book of Hebrews could apply the Day of Atonement to Christ’s ascension “within the veil.” The promise is that **soon** Jesus would emerge to bless those who were outside in the earthly courtyard, eagerly awaiting him. (See Heb 9:26-28; and Westcott and other commentators who so apply Hebrew 9:26-28.)

This thought is not revolutionary. Ellen White says it clearly in her book *Prophets and Kings*, pages 703-704. What Christians are now doing to warn the world so that the eternal kingdom might be set up was originally the task of Israel after returning from Babylon. Israel’s should have fulfilled the task by the end of the seventy weeks of years, when the Messiah would appear (Daniel 9:20-27).

The *SDA Bible Commentary* is also emphatic that the end of all things should have come in the first century (SDABC 7:729).

It is well-nigh impossible today, to find a reliable scholar who holds to the year-day principle. Unless, of course, the scholar is attached to a denomination that demands the year-day principle be believed. ❖

[Adapted from Dr. Desmond Ford’s *Daniel 8:14: the Day of Atonement and the Investigative Judgment*, page 178. Available from Desmond Ford Publications, 7955 Bullard Drive, Newcastle, CA 95658. \$11.00 total.]

