

The Day-for-a-Year Principle— Is it Biblical? (Part One)

Is there a day-for-a-year principle that can be applied to prophetic interpretation? Is it possible to selectively choose when and where to apply a day-for-a-year principle respective to biblical prophecy? Can we have confidence in the prophetic outcomes and conclusions when using a day-for-a-year principle to interpret biblical prophecy?

It is safe to say that Jesus never invoked or used a day-for-a-year principle when speaking of the messages delivered by the prophets. The same can be said of the apostles as well. Even the prophets themselves never discussed such a prophetic principle, and they certainly didn't introduce the concept of "prophetic years" for the sake of believers or the church of God.

Why then do some Christian church organizations continue to believe in such an idea as a day-for-a-year principle respective to prophecy? Why place trust in an appropriated methodology, that is to say, borrowed without biblical permission, to calculate the timeframe of selected prophecies to determine when such prophecies have been or will be fulfilled?

Oddly enough, people will go to almost any length to defend their personal beliefs about any given subject in the Bible, even if that belief has no basis in the Bible. As a result, we find everything from sermons to scholarly dissertations being churned out in defense of the day-for-a-year principle in the context of biblical prophecy, while taking little heed to the potential problems created by this idea.

Why would this be?

Over time people have cultivated the notion that the Bible may be subjected to schools of thought, and so we find categorized approaches to prophecy—historicists, preterists or futurists—to name a few—all of whom create a multitude of different prophetic conclusions. Consequently, some of these approaches to prophecy only serve to create a polarization of the issues when they allow for misappropriated methods of interpretation. Proving in the end that the Bible is indeed often made subject to frivolous opinion as much as it is made subject to the currently knowable facts surrounding the book.

Now, we can say that the Bible requires interpretation for the sake of application, in the sense that we understand the weight of its words—correctly defined—with their

meanings placed in their intended cultural, historical, and future contexts. But when something in the Bible is removed from its context and is placed into a different one for the sake of interpretation, related to prophecy, then we have in a sense created a new paradigm. One that cannot be substantiated without shaving the facts to fit looked-for outcomes when it comes to the fulfillment of prophecy. Even if the intent has been to overthrow critics of the Bible, or to demonstrate the “accuracy” of prophecy historically, the notion of changing a day into a symbolic concept and then claiming it represents a year in prophetic fulfillment, only serves to marginalize the truth of biblical prophecy.

Notably, we could say that a principle is one thing, and the application of a principle is yet another, which means that if one attempts to predict a prophetic timeframe using the day-for-a-year principle, or set some visions into an historical sequence, then one is required to demonstrate an accurate and valid starting point to begin the counting of the years. This forces one to assess the secular record and make an informed guess as to when, and how and who it was or will be that fulfills any specific prophecy. An example of this “guessing” is the erroneous assumption that Daniel was equating the “little horn” with Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Such an assumption proves that if we do not choose the correct starting point or historical event

for a prophecy then the fulfillment date for any prophetic prediction is questionable at best (Dan. 7:8; 8:9).

Commonly, when we see the day-for-a-year principle applied to prophecy we often witness the effort of some to rewrite history as it relates to the Bible, leading to false conclusions about secular dates in history, such as figuring the year that Herod the Great died. For there are those who use a prophetic day-for-a-year principle to supposedly affirm a c. 4 BCE date for Herod’s death, noting that this date is on shaky ground, and it is no longer considered a plausible conclusion given the available information we have today.

Another example of tampering with prophetic interpretations by adopting a day-for-a-year principle is found with the seventy-weeks prophecy, which is commonly given the starting point of the seventh year of Artaxerxes I (Longimanus), which cannot be dated to the historically contestable date of c. 457 BCE (regnal dating). Seeing that it is reasonably clear from the biblical account, and from the available historical records, that Artaxerxes’ seventh year was c. 458 BCE, and Ezra was certainly in possession of the decree in question before the first day of that seventh regnal year, which places the time of Artaxerxes I’s decree into the previous regnal year—at least. (The date of c. 457 BCE is

often cited based on the chronology of James Ussher.)

Bringing us to say that because the biblical account doesn't contain a complete word-for-word copy of Artaxerxes I's decree, and the portion of the decree we have available does not mention the restoration of the city-state of Jerusalem, we cannot begin to say that Artaxerxes' decree is indeed the one that applies to Daniel's prophecy in the first place. Consequently, by using the prophetic day-for-a-year principle, and by reading into the decrees given by the Persian kings regarding the rebuilding of the Temple, many have reshaped the timeframe of the seventy-weeks prophecy and its starting point, which will only serve to disillusion people about prophetic events as they unfold in the future. (Some take the concept of making a 1000 "years as one day" and overlay the notion onto the seven-day week, and by doing so they try to establish a 7000-year plan of God on earth, but the proposed allotment of 6000 years of human rule has already passed (II Pt. 3:8).)

In a sense, it does more harm than good to meddle with prophetic conclusions using artificial means, and the credibility of any church organization is certainly diminished in the eyes of the public when it follows discredited ideas of prophetic interpretation.

We can take a relatively more modern example from the life of the Baptist minister, William Miller, who had concluded that the world—as he knew it—would come to an end with the return of the Christ in the 1840s. He had "calculated" that Jesus' return would occur in the year AD 1843 (reset to AD 1844) using the day-for-a-year principle, which, in the end, led to no little discontent with the idea of such a principle, causing the movement to divide and evolve into a number of different groups and movements of well-intentioned people, some of whom reconsolidated and began the Christian Adventists and also the Seventh-day Adventists (Dan. 8:14). (Miller used a Hebrew calendar reckoning from March 1843 to March 1844.)

Leading us then to reexamine the prophetic day-for-a-year principle to see that the idea is not biblical at all, but rather, as we will see, the Bible actually refutes the idea of a day-for-a-year principle respective to biblical prophecy, which brings us to the story of the spies who were sent by Moses to search out the land of Canaan.

Now, there is no need to rehearse the whole story for this discussion, but we know that twelve men were chosen, one from each of the tribes of Israel, to spy out the region of Canaan, and as the story goes there was a great dispute among those who searched out the land. The majority of those who spied out

the land attempted to turn the people away from entering Canaan for fear of the people who lived there, which was a contradiction to the will of God, and the covenant made with Abraham, and so the rebellion they started became a riotous attempt to annul the authority of Moses. The result was a punishment from God based on the number of days the men had searched out the land, which was a period of 40 days, and the consequence of their rebellion led to a sentence of wandering in the wilderness for 40 years (Num. 13:1-33; 14:1-12)

Of course, it should be pointed out the initial penalty that God was going to bring upon the people for their rebellion was to disinherit them completely, and let them all die by disease, leaving God to form another nation through Moses.

However, the impending punishment prompted Moses to intervene on behalf of the people of Israel. The result was a change in the sentence that allowed for a measured punishment, and one that would mitigate the issue for those 19 years of age and younger and also for all those who did not rebel against God. This meant that the judgment was based on a matter of scale, a “day for a year,” and so we read in the book of Numbers that God said: “your carcasses, they shall fall in this wilderness. And your children shall wander in the wilderness forty years, and bear your whoredoms, until your carcasses be

wasted in the wilderness. After the number of the days in which ye searched the land, even forty days, each day for a year, shall ye bear your iniquities, even forty years, and ye shall know my breach of promise” (Num. 14:32-34). (Notice that the children would bear the burden of the parent’s rebellion against God.)

Now, what is interesting about this judgment from God is that it was a legal matter, not a prophetic matter, and God used a scale of sentence severity—a day for a year—and by this scale God had determined the people would bear the burden for 40 years. So, we can say that God used a scale indicator to make a legal judgment, which it is somewhat like a legend on a travel map, which has various symbols and markers that represent places of importance on the map, and the mileage scale indicator on the map is used to associate a predetermined number of miles to the length of one inch on the map, and so we could say, for example, that one inch on the map is equal to 20 miles.

Thus, in a similar fashion, God had determined the penalty for the rebellion would be based on a scale of sentence severity, and that scale was a “day for a year,” or one day represents one year.

However, the application of the penalty in this case was not really a day for a year.

What happened was the people were penalized with 40 years of wandering instead of an immediate plague, and the punishment was associated with the days spent searching out the land, and so in application what befell the people was a “year for a day,” which means that they were given a year for each day they spied out the land.

In this case the “day for a year” is used in a legal context, and it used as a scale of sentence severity, but the people received a year for each day in application, even though the legal principle was founded upon a scale of “each day for a year” (Num 14:34). Simply, the people had to bear the burden of their iniquities for 40 years, and that meant the days became years based on the formula that God used to reckon their collective punishment. Thus, a legal precedent was established, so to speak, for the act of sedition and rebellion against God and his representative government for Ancient Israel.

So, it is a bit perplexing then when some cite these verses as an example to justify a day-for-a-year principle respective to prophecy, because the original context is a legal matter regarding a judgment and sentence for Israel’s rebellion against God. The consequence being a loss of inheritance regarding the Promised Land. (Moses also forfeited the bringing of all Israel into the physical inheritance of the Promised Land because of his actions at Meribah (Num. 20:10-13).)

Bringing us then to a counterpart example of the “day for a year” concept found in the book of Ezekiel.  **(Continued in part two of this series.)**