

Day-for-a-Year Principle in Apocalyptic Prophecy

I. The Day-Year Principle is not used by biblical writers in classical (regular) prophecies. In those places a year equals a year; a day is a day.

- A. The 120 years preceding the flood was a literal 120 years (Genesis 6:3)
- B. The 400 years prophesied for Abraham's descendants to live in Egypt was 400 years (Genesis 15:13)
- C. The seven years of drought and famine prophesied through Joseph was seven years (Genesis 41:27)
- D. The three and one-half years of drought prophesied through Elijah was 3 ½ years (1 Kings 17:1)
- E. The 70 years of exile for the Israelites in Babylonian captivity was a literal 70 years (Jeremiah 25:11)

II. Apocalyptic prophecies, however, have their own unique set of characteristics and nuances
Apocalyptic prophecies:

- A. Focus on the ultimate eternal salvific issues in the end times
- B. Provide an overview of significant powers throughout history
- C. Use symbolism as the agent of information
- D. Use themes and symbolism from earlier prophecies
- E. Provide additional symbolic information in each repetition of a theme
- F. Use numbers that defy literal interpretation

III. Time periods in apocalyptic prophecies force reevaluation of their interpretation

- A. Classical prophecies provide realistic numbers
 - 1. Genesis 15:13 provides 400 years for the Israelite enslavement in Egypt
 - 2. Jeremiah predicts a 70 year captivity for the Israelite Babylonian captivity (Jeremiah 25:11)
- B. On the other hand, apocalyptic prophecies, if literal, have strangely brief time periods for their events
 - 1. The longest time period in apocalyptic prophecy is only six and one-half years (i.e., 2300 days, and some commentaries want to cut this time in half, Daniel 8:14)
 - 2. The shortest apocalyptic prophecy is only three and one-half days (Revelation 11:9)

Note the contrast: classical prophecies focus on short range interest and issues, while using relatively long time periods. Apocalyptic prophecies focus on long-term events, like the end of the world, and deal with relatively (ridiculously?) short time periods. It makes more sense to acknowledge that like most details of apocalyptic prophecies, time periods are symbolic

VI. Why the “day for a year” interpretation is correctly applied in apocalyptic prophecy?

- A. In biblical “days” often stood for years (Cf. Hebrew, Exodus 13:10; 1 Sam 20:6; 2:19; 27:7; Judges 11:40; 1 Kings 1:1). In each of these examples the Hebrew word translated “year/s” in the King James Version is actually the Hebrew word “days.” The translators have rightly recognized the idiomatic use of “days” for “year/s.”

English readers may struggle to understand day-for-a-year as a principle of interpretation, because the connection between days-years is often lost in translation, besides we do not have a similar idiom in English. For the Hebrew reader the connection between “days” and “years” was obvious and assumed. In English, among the many places where this use of “days” for “years” is most obvious is the genealogy of Genesis 5, where the “days” of the antediluvians are equated with his years (Genesis 5:4, 8, 11, etc.). Also consider Genesis 6:3 where we read,

Genesis 6:3 “Then the LORD said, ‘My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, because he also is flesh; nevertheless his **days** shall be one hundred and twenty years.’” (Emphasis supplied)

Thus, the use of “days” for a “years” was part of common Hebrew language practice long before apocalyptic prophecy was born

- B. In English we (traditionally) produce poetry by rhyming. Hebrew poetry is produced by putting two similar ideas in parallel. For example,

Psalm 142:1 I cry aloud with my voice to the LORD;
I make supplication with my voice to the LORD.
(Psalm 142:1)

See how “days” is paralleled with “years” in Hebrew poetry, which suggests that the writer (and obviously the reader) saw “days” and “years” as having equal value.

Psalm 77:5 I have considered the days of old,
The years of long ago. (Psalm 77:5)

“(See also Job 10:5; 15:20; 32:7; 36:11; Deuteronomy 32:7; Psalm 90:9-10)

VI. Leviticus 25 uses the weekly Sabbath as a marker for seven year periods (seven years equals 1 Sabbath). Thus, seven “Sabbaths,” times seven equals 49 years

Leviticus 25:8 “You are also to count off seven sabbaths of years for yourself, seven times seven years, so that you have the time of the seven sabbaths of years, *namely*, forty-nine years”

Thus, a “day” for a “year” is fundamental to understanding the year of Jubilee.

VII. The use of “weeks” (Heb [; WbV ') in Daniel 9 is easy to translate, since this word is translated “week” outside the book of Daniel (Cf. Genesis 29:27, 28; Exodus 34:22; Leviticus

12:5; Numbers 28:26; Deuteronomy 16:9, 10, 16; 2 Chronicles 8:13; Jeremiah 5:24). To try to make it “sevens,” as some interpreters do, misses the distinction between “week” and the Hebrew number “seven.” It also misses the connection and parallel between the 70 year prophecy of Jeremiah (Daniel 9:2), a literal prophecy, and the 70 week prophecy of Daniel 9:25 (an Apocalyptic prophecy) and both of their connections to the jubilee period (Leviticus 25:1-7), something that the biblical text clearly references (2 Chronicles 36:21)

“Thus the 70 weeks, or 490 years (on the year-day principle), may be seen as ten jubilee periods even as the 70 years were seen as ten sabbatical-year periods.”¹ Of further interest in this relationship, is that the years 457 B.C. and A.D. 27 and 34 were sabbatical years²

VIII. In conclusion, apocalyptic prophecies deal in mystery and symbolism, yet the reason for their prophecies was to warn those living in the last days of the impending doom coming to the earth. They used symbolism as their mode of conveying their message to disguise their message from those who were not of God. In each vision or dream found in the book of Daniel, the heathen were without understanding, while God’s faithful one came to an understanding of the dreams and visions through divine providence.

In apocalyptic prophecies the pattern of symbolism required the use of an alternative “time” for “years,” that is what made his prophecies apocalyptic. The use of “day/s” for a “year” was a common idiom for Hebrews but, uncommon for foreigners. A Hebrew could not have expected a more obvious association, since “day” was a common usage for “year.” Yet, as stated, a foreigner might not expect such an association. Like almost every aspect of apocalyptic prophecy, the prophecies were given for the initiated. When the prophet or future reader in the “last days” might be confused by the various beasts, God provided clear explanations.

In apocalyptic prophecies the time units are symbolic, although apparent, as to their symbolic meaning.³ The use of a day-for-a-year was a thinly veiled Hebrew idiom, which was easily interpreted. In every case, the amount of time in Daniel’s prophecies was clear but confusing. Daniel understood the time as being years, but he was mystified by the amount of time that would lapse until their fulfillment. Jeremiah had predicted that Israel would be in captivity only 70 years, while Daniel’s prophecies spoke to much longer periods of time. That is why Daniel (and everyone else) was put off by the interpretation of the Daniel 8 vision (Daniel 8:27) and why Daniel 9 clarified the issue. Daniel 9 explained that the Daniel 8 vision was not about the Israelites but about the Messiah and His realm.

¹ William H. Shea, *Selected Studies on Prophetic Interpretation*, The Review and Herald Publishing Association, Washington, D.C., 1982, p. 78.

² Ben Zion Wacholder, “The Calendar of Sabbatical Cycles During the Second Temple and the Early Rabbinic Period,” *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 44 (1973): 153-96.

³ This summary is largely dependent on William H. Shea, *Selected Studies on Prophetic Interpretation*, The Review and Herald Publishing Association, Washington, D.C. 1982. My friend and professor.