

Daniel's "Seventy Weeks" Prophecy

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DANIEL'S "SEVENTY WEEKS" PROPHECY DID THE "PROPHETIC CLOCK" STOP TICKING?

by Vance Stinson

Since the publication of Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* in the early '70s, dispensationalists have written volumes on such subjects as the "secret rapture," the coming of the "Antichrist," the significance of the establishment of the State of Israel, the "covenant" the Antichrist will supposedly make with Israel, and a "prophetic clock" that supposedly stopped ticking in the time of Christ but will resume ticking once the Antichrist appears and the church is "snatched out." All these events, dispensationalists claim, fit within the framework of Daniel's "seventy weeks" prophecy. But is this true? Did Daniel foresee the coming of an end-time Antichrist, who would make a covenant of peace with the Israelis, only to betray them, desecrate their temple, and wreak havoc in their nation? Are we now living in a "gap" between the sixty-ninth and seventieth "weeks" of Daniel's prophecy? Will Antichrist's appearance restart the "prophetic clock" and begin a seven-year "countdown to Armageddon"?

According to dispensationalism, God pushed the “stop” button on His “prophetic clock” at the end of Christ’s earthly ministry. From that time to the present, Israel (confined to “the Jews” in dispensationalist thinking) has had no prophetic significance, and God is not involved with the “chosen people” as He was during the Old Testament period.

However, the time will come, dispensationalists claim, when God will press the “start” button on the prophetic clock, and will again turn His attention to Israel. The intermittent period—that is, the period between the stopping and starting of the prophetic clock—is known as the “gap,” or the “great parenthesis.” This period is the “church age,” or “age of grace,” and (according to dispensationalists) was *unforeseen* by the prophets of Israel.

But the time will come, they say, when the church will be “snatched out” in the “rapture,” thus ending the church age and beginning the seven-year “countdown to Armageddon.” As soon as the church is whisked away, Israel’s prophetic clock will resume ticking. At that time, the “Antichrist” will appear on the scene. At first, he will be hailed as the great leader who finally brought peace to the Middle East. With the church no longer in the world, the Antichrist will stand unopposed.

The Antichrist will make a “peace agreement” with the Israelis. The Temple sacrifices will resume, as in ancient times, and everyone will rejoice in the new era of peace, prosperity, and reform—or so the dispensationalists claim.

But all will not be as well as supposed. After three and one-half years, the Antichrist will break the peace agreement, enter the holy place, and proclaim himself to be God. The man hailed as the Jews’ greatest ally will suddenly become their worst nightmare. He will wreak havoc in the city, destroy the Temple, and usher in the most violent period of all time.

These events, beginning with the appearance of the Antichrist, will take place during the prophetic period known as the “seventieth week” of Daniel’s seventy weeks prophecy (Daniel 9:24-27), according to dispensationalist reckoning.

But does God expect us to understand the seventy weeks prophecy in such a way? Does He expect us to insert a “gap” of nineteen-hundred-plus years between the sixty-ninth and seventieth “weeks” of Daniel’s prophecy?

And what of the stopping/starting “prophetic clock,” the radical discontinuity between Israel and the church, and the belief that the church age was not foreseen by the prophets of Israel? Does God’s Word support these ideas?

The dispensationalists’ view of Daniel’s seventy weeks prophecy profoundly affects the way they interpret the New Testament. Christ’s statements regarding the permanency of God’s Law (Matthew 5:17-19) are “dispensationalized” and thus assigned to the Old Covenant, which ended with Christ’s death. Therefore, the “Old Testament” Law, said to be for “Israel only,” is not a standard of conduct and behavior for New Testament believers.

We see, then, that dispensationalism involves more than merely a difference of opinion on the interpretation of prophecy; *it profoundly affects one's perception of God's Law as it relates to Christian responsibility!*

The dispensationalists' scheme stands or falls on the basis of Daniel's seventy weeks prophecy. If their interpretation is correct, then there may be cause to "dispensationalize" Christ's teachings. But if it is incorrect, the entire scenario—a stopping/starting "prophetic clock," the centuries-long "gap," the "secret rapture," and the radical distinction between Israel and the church—stands as a faulty structure on an extremely shaky foundation.

Let's now examine the prophecy, and see whether the dispensationalist scheme stands or falls.

The Seventy "Sevens"

The prophet Daniel, realizing that the prophesied seventy years of captivity (Jeremiah 29:10) was nearing its end, sought God's mercy and guidance for the people of Judah as they prepared to reestablish themselves in the promised land (Daniel 9:1-19).

While the prophet was praying, the angel Gabriel appeared to him and gave him understanding regarding the things that were to transpire in the centuries ahead (verses 20-23).

Daniel had been praying for God's forgiveness and for the full restoration of the nation. Gabriel assured Daniel that God's forgiveness was forthcoming, but informed him that the accomplishment of all that Daniel had prayed for would involve a definite number of years.

Gabriel said: "Seventy weeks are determined upon thy people and upon the holy city, to finish the transgression, and to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up the vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most Holy" (verse 24).

The word *weeks* literally means "sevens." The "sevens" are not literal weeks, but are "weeks of years." Thus, the prophecy concerns seventy "weeks of years," or four-hundred and ninety years.

Notice what was to be accomplished in this four-hundred and ninety year period:

1) *...to finish the transgression.* To "finish" literally means to *abolish, shut-up, or remove.* The prophecy concerns the abolishment, or removal, of transgressions.

- 2) ...*to make an end of sins*. The phrase “make an end of” suggests “hide,” or “remove from sight.” This carries essentially the same meaning as the previous phrase.
- 3) ...*to make reconciliation for iniquity*. To “make reconciliation” means to *cover*, to *overlay*. The Hebrew word for “reconciliation” is elsewhere translated “atonement.” The same thought—the removal of sins—is conveyed in this phrase.
- 4) ...*to bring in everlasting righteousness*. This refers to the restoration of full fellowship with God, which is possible only through the removal of sins.
- 5) ...*to seal up the vision and prophecy*. This means that the vision and prophecy would be given the seal of confirmation. It suggests that the things prophesied would come to pass, thus confirming the vision and prophecy.
- 6) ...*and to anoint the most Holy*. Typologically, this may refer to the sanctification (setting apart) of the “holy place” of the Temple. However, in view of the preceding statements, it is clear that it ultimately refers to the Messiah, for only He can truly remove transgressions, make reconciliation between man and God, and give the final seal of confirmation to all prophecy.

Remember, Daniel had been confessing his sins and the sins of his people, and had been asking for God’s mercy and guidance in the restoration of the people He had chosen. This prophecy deals precisely with that. It points to the Messiah, the Messenger of the Covenant, the One through whom all these things could be accomplished in the fullest sense.

The remainder of the prophecy shows that the seventy “weeks” are composed of three segments. The first consists of “seven weeks” (forty-nine years); the second consists of “threescore and two weeks” (four-hundred and thirty-four years); the third consists of “one week” (seven years). It is here that dispensationalists find justification for inserting an intermittent “gap” between the last two segments, thus placing the first two segments in the distant past, while claiming that the final segment (seven years) lies yet in the future.

As we shall see, however, the insertion of the “gap” between the second and third segments of the seventy weeks is largely based upon the dispensationalists’ belief in a radical discontinuity between Israel and the church. This prophecy, they claim, does not foresee the existence of the New Testament church, but pertains to Israel only.

It is true that the prophecy does not give a detailed description of the church, but keep in mind that the redemptive work of the Messiah *is* described, as we saw in our examination of verse 24. Therefore, any interpretation that disconnects this prophecy from the inauguration of the New Covenant assembly (or New Testament church) is doubtful, to say the least.

The next verse gives an overview of the events of the first two segments of the seventy weeks, and leads us directly to the coming of the Messiah.

The Rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Coming of the Messiah

The prophecy continues: “Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the Messiah the Prince shall be seven weeks, and threescore and two weeks: the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublous times” (verse 25).

Scholars disagree over the date of the “commandment [or decree] to restore and to build Jerusalem,” and over which of the decrees (since several were given) is referred to here. For our purposes, it is not important to pinpoint the precise date the seventy weeks began. It is only important that we know that the first sixty-nine weeks (“seven weeks, and threescore and two weeks,” totaling sixty-nine “weeks of years,” or four-hundred and eighty-three years) takes us to the time of the Messiah.

The first segment, the “seven weeks” (forty-nine years), undoubtedly takes in the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah as they directed the revival of worship and the rebuilding of the desolate city. Malachi probably prophesied during the latter portion of this period.

The second segment, the “threescore and two weeks” (four-hundred and thirty-four years) covers the remainder of the Persian period, the entire Creek period, and the first portion of the Roman period. The ungodly rule of Antiochus Epiphanes (the “little horn” of Daniel 8:9-12) and the Jewish revolt, led by Judas Maccabees, falls within this segment.

The most important event of history—the coming of the Messiah—occurred in the end of this segment. Notice that the sixty-nine “weeks of years” takes us “*unto* the Messiah the Prince.” This is important, for it suggests that the Messiah’s ministry *began* at the *end* of the sixty-nine “weeks of years.” If this is so, then it stands to reason that *the Messiah’s ministry continued into the seventieth and final “week”!*

If this is correct, then the dispensational “gap” theory, which places the final seven-year period (the seventieth week) in the future, cannot be true!

Dispensationalists argue that “unto the Messiah the Prince” refers to Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem on “Palm Sunday” and His declaring Himself to be the Messiah. Apparently, they think that there is no good reason to believe that the phrase refers to the beginning of the Messiah’s three-and-one-half-year ministry.

The truth is, there is a *very good* reason to believe that the phrase refers to the beginning of the Messiah’s ministry.

The word “Messiah” means “Anointed One.” While Jesus was the prophesied Messiah from the beginning of His human life, His *public anointing* marked the beginning of His ministry!

We read of His public anointing in Matthew 3:16,17:

“And Jesus, when He was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon Him: And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”

This event marked the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. The kings of Israel and Judah were anointed with oil, but this King was anointed with the Holy Spirit. (“Messiah the Prince” literally means “Anointed Ruler.”) Thus, with the anointing of the Holy Spirit, His ministry began—and the sixty-nine “weeks” came to a close.

Further proof that the Messiah’s public anointing marked the end of the sixty-ninth “week” and beginning of the seventieth “week” is seen in the remaining two verses of the seventy weeks prophecy.

Let’s now turn our attention to the next verse.

The Great “Gap”

In order to move the final “week” (seven years) of the prophecy to the end of the age, dispensationalists place the end of the sixty-nine “weeks” at the end of Christ’s ministry, and insert their “gap” into verse 26. Notice how this is accomplished:

“And after [the] threescore and two weeks [the word “the” is properly inserted between “after” and “threescore.” This refers to the *end* of the second segment of the seventy weeks] shall Messiah be cut off, but not for Himself [at this point, dispensationalists insert their “gap,” claiming that the latter part of the verse and verse 27 speak of the final “week,” which will occur at the end of the age]: and the people of the prince that shall come [the Antichrist, according to dispensationalists] shall destroy the city and the sanctuary; and the end thereof shall be with a flood, and unto the end of the war desolations are determined.”

Many dispensationalists claim that Christ was “cut off” when He was rejected by the Pharisees on “Palm Sunday,” just days before His death. Of course, this is a forced interpretation. The words “cut off” indicate an abrupt end, a *death!* And the phrase that follows (“but not for Himself”; better rendered, “and shall have nothing”) refers to the fact that He had no progeny to carry on after Him. This is clearly speaking of His death!

But notice that His death was prophesied to occur at some point *after* the second segment (“the threescore and two weeks”) of the seventy weeks prophecy. In order to move the final seven years to the end time, dispensationalists must place Christ’s death (or His being “cut off”) within days of the end of the sixty-ninth “week.” They must realize that if Christ’s ministry extends too far beyond the sixty-ninth “week,” their “gap” theory stands in jeopardy, and they might have to rethink their interpretation of the remainder of the prophecy.

Before assuming that the “prince that shall come” is a future “Antichrist,” let’s consider some scriptural as well as historical facts.

First, during the last days of His ministry, Christ prophesied the desolation of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple (Matthew 23:37,38; 24:1,2).

Second, true to Christ’s prophecy, the Temple was destroyed and Jerusalem was laid to ruins. This happened in A.D. 70, less than forty years from the time Christ prophesied these events, when [he armies of General Titus besieged the city.

Now, with these facts in mind, let’s examine the latter portion of Daniel 9:26 (quoted above).

First, the prophecy about the “people of the prince that shall come” need not fall within the seventy weeks. The wording suggests that this prince (or ruler) “shall come” at some point after the Messiah is “cut off.” This section of the verse appears to be parenthetical.

Second, the description of the destruction of “the city and the sanctuary” perfectly describes the horrible events of A.D. 70.

Third, the seventy weeks is all about the resettlement of the land, the rebuilding of Jerusalem, and the coming of Messiah. It makes sense, then, that the latter part of verse 26 would point to the destruction of that same city, and that its destruction would in some way be associated with the first coming of the Messiah. (Keep in mind that the Messiah *did* pronounce judgment upon the city, and that He did so within days of His being “cut off.”)

When we consider all the facts, there can be no doubt that the latter portion of Daniel 9:26 refers to the events of A.D. 70. Of course, the prophetic *pattern* will be repeated in the end-time, but it makes no sense to claim that this portion of the prophecy found no fulfillment in A.D. 70.

Now, let’s consider the final verse of this prophecy.

Who Will “Confirm the Covenant”?

The prophecy continues: “And he shall confirm the covenant with many for one week: and in the midst of the week he shall cause the sacrifice and the oblation to cease, and for the overspreading of abominations he shall make it desolate, even unto the consumation, and that determined shall be poured upon the desolate” (verse 27).

Dispensationalists say that the “he” referred to here is the “prince that shall come” of verse 26—that is, he is the Antichrist.

The Antichrist, they claim, will make a “peace agreement,” or “covenant,” with the Israelis for “one week,” which is the remaining “week” (seven years) of the seventy weeks (four-hundred and ninety years). But “in the midst of the week”—after three and one-half years—the Antichrist will break the covenant and “shall cause the sacrifice and the oblation to cease.” That is, he will desecrate the holy place and “make it desolate.” The one who was hailed as the great leader who brought “peace” to the Middle East will betray the Jews and become their worst enemy.

Dispensationalists align this prophecy with many New Testament prophecies. For instance, the three-and-one-half-year periods mentioned in the book of Revelation are made to fit the first and second halves of the final “week” of the seventy weeks prophecy. The entire seven-years is said to be the prophesied “tribulation” period, with the last half designated the “*great tribulation*.”

According to traditional dispensationalism, the “prophetic clock” stopped when Messiah was “cut off,” and will not start again until the church is taken away in the “secret rapture.” During the intermittent period (called “the gap,” or “the parenthesis”), *Israel has no prophetic significance!* This period is the “church age,” or “age of grace,” and was not foreseen by the prophets of Israel. But once the “church age” ends, the “prophetic clock” will resume ticking, and Israel will once again have prophetic significance.

Many do not realize that Hal Lindsey departed somewhat from traditional dispensationalism with the publication of his book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Lindsey claims that the reestablishment of Israel as a nation in 1948 is a fulfillment of prophecy, but this notion contradicts the older school of dispensationalism, which teaches that, until the “rapture,” Israel has *no* prophetic significance.

Moreover, traditional dispensationalism has from its earliest days taught that the “secret rapture” would not be preceded by signs that it would soon occur. Only the visible Second Coming, which would occur after the seven-year tribulation, would be preceded by signs. Lindsey and other modern dispensationalists introduced a “new” dispensationalism by claiming that the 1948 event was a sign that the rapture would soon occur.

While thousands excitedly embrace the dispensational scheme, the truth of the matter is that the stopping and starting of a “prophetic clock,” the intermittent “gap,” the “secret rapture,” and the radical discontinuity between Israel and the church *are not scriptural teachings!*

The dispensationalists' interpretation of Daniel 9:27 (first portion) is a case of mistaken identity! The passage does not prophesy the abominable work of Antichrist; it speaks of the redemptive work of *Christ!*

Notice that "He shall confirm the covenant with many for one week...." The book of Malachi, which was written during the early part of the seventy weeks period and speaks of the same events the seventy weeks prophecy speaks of, refers to the Messiah as "the Messenger of *the Covenant*" (Malachi 3:1). In the New Testament, Christ's blood is called the "blood of the New Covenant" (Matthew 26:27), and Christ is called "the Mediator of a better Covenant" (Hebrews 8:6).

It is highly unlikely, then, that "the covenant" refers to some phony "peace agreement" inaugurated by Antichrist, especially since the same term commonly refers to the covenant between God and His people.

Once we understand that the latter portion of Daniel 9:26 (which speaks of the "prince that shall come" and the destruction of Jerusalem) is parenthetical, it becomes clear that the "he" of verse 27 refers back to the Messiah, the Messenger of the Covenant.

Notice how it reads when we omit the parenthetical part of verse 26: "And after the threescore and two weeks shall Messiah be cut off, but not for Himself.... And He [i.e., Messiah] shall confirm the covenant with many for one week...."

But what about the next part of the verse? Dispensationalists claim that the Antichrist will "cause the sacrifice and the oblation to cease" by desecrating and destroying the Temple, just as Antiochus Epiphanes did during the pre-Christian era. Is there any way Christ could have fulfilled this prophecy?

Indeed, there is. The book of Hebrews tells us that the Temple sacrifices could never take away sins. They foreshadowed the one sacrifice—the sacrifice of Christ—that could accomplish that. Once the sacrifice of Jesus Christ had taken place, the sacrifices and oblations ceased—that is, they "ceased" in the sense that their purpose had been accomplished. The writer of the book of Hebrews explains, "Now where remission of [sins] is, there is *no more offering for sins*" (Hebrews 10:18).

There is a possible secondary meaning of Daniel 9:27. Some have speculated that the period of darkness, the earthquake, and the rending of the Temple veil (all of which took place during Christ's crucifixion [Matthew 27:45-53], which occurred on the day the Passover lambs were offered) *literally* caused the sacrifices to cease, though not permanently.

According to some commentators, when the earthquake occurred, the Temple veil was rent and the huge brass doors that concealed the most holy place swung open, thus exposing and defiling the most holy place (see Alfred Edersheim's *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, pp. 610,611). The sacrifices had to cease until the damages could be repaired and the Temple could be sanctified.

A third possible way the prophecy was fulfilled lies in the fact that Christ's death sealed the judgment He had pronounced upon Jerusalem. The sacrifices did not cease immediately, but Jerusalem's fate was sealed; she had proven herself a "wicked and perverse generation." She met her fate when the armies of Titus besieged the city and destroyed the Temple.

The third explanation ties in well with the last portion of the verse. The NASB renders this part of the verse as follows: "and on the wing of abominations will come one who makes desolate, even until a complete destruction, one that is decreed, is poured out on the one who makes desolate." This no doubt refers to the desolation of Jerusalem by the armies of General Titus. This event occurred long after the completion of the seventy "weeks," and serves as a type, or pattern, of a future event (see Matthew 24: 15).

All three explanations are plausible. Whether we accept any one or all three, one thing is clear: It was Christ who caused "the sacrifice and the oblation to cease."

Notice that the ceasing of the sacrifices and oblations occurs "in the midst of the week"—that is, after three and one-half years. Christ's death occurred three and one-half years after the beginning of His ministry. The "midst of the week" corresponds to the time Messiah was to be "cut off." Interestingly, not only did Christ's death occur in the midst of the prophetic "week," it occurred on a Wednesday—in the midst of the *literal* week.

Thus, Christ's death brings us to the middle of the seventieth "week of years." What about the remaining three and one-half years? Remember, *seventy weeks* were determined for the end of sins, the making of reconciliation for iniquity, and so forth. It follows, then, that the remaining three and one-half years are prophetically significant.

Does the Bible give any clue as to how the latter half of the seventieth "week" might have been fulfilled?

The Remaining Three and One-half Years

At the very beginning of the prophecy, Gabriel informed Daniel that "Seventy weeks are determined *upon thy people...*" (Daniel 9:24). Notice: *upon thy people!* Daniel's people were the *Jews*—the people who were about to reestablish themselves in the land. These were the same people (i.e., their descendants) to whom Messiah would come.

Notice also that Messiah was to "confirm the covenant [the New Covenant] with many [i.e., many of the *same people*] for *one week*" (verse 27).

As we have seen, Christ did "confirm the covenant" during His earthly ministry, but His ministry ended "in the midst of the [seventieth] week." How did He continue "confirming the covenant" with the Jewish people for the remaining half of the prophetic week?

The casual reader may not notice that this prophecy alludes to the resurrection and ascension of Christ. In order to continue His work of confirming the covenant with the Jews, it was necessary that He be raised from the dead, ascend to the Father, and continue His work *through the church!*

Those who claim that this prophecy has nothing to do with the inauguration of the New Covenant assembly (the church), are sadly mistaken! Indeed, it does.

Christ said, “I will build my church; and the gates of hell [Greek: *hades*] shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16: 18). He promised His disciples, “I am with you always, even unto the end of the world [age]” (Matthew 28:20).

On the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples, and the New Testament church began (Acts 2). Through His disciples, who were filled with the Holy Spirit, Christ continued His work of “confirming the covenant” with *many* of the very same people—the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

On the Day of Pentecost, and during the subsequent days and years, *thousands* of Jews were converted, thus taking part in the New Covenant God had promised to make “with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah” (Jeremiah 31:31).

Peter, speaking to the Jews, declared: “Ye are the children of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers.... Unto *you first* God, having raised up His Son Jesus, sent Him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities” (Acts 3:25,26).

Notice: “Unto *you first*....” At first, the gospel went to the Jews; but later, God revealed to Peter that the time had come for the doors of salvation to open unto the Gentiles (Acts 10). Apparently, the later half of the seventieth “week” was fulfilled in the powerful witness of Christ’s ministry through the apostles and disciples. But once that powerful witness had been accomplished—once God had separated the “remnant of Israel” from the unbelieving masses through the preaching of the apostles—the gospel of salvation went to the Gentiles.

While Daniel’s seventy weeks prophecy does not concern the conversion of the Gentiles, it most certainly *does* point to the inauguration of the New Testament church.

Do you see the enormous flaws of dispensationalist eschatology? Do you see how dispensationalism—with its stopping/starting “prophetic clock,” its confusion of identities, its intermittent “gap,” and its radical distinction between Israel and the church—has a profound effect upon the question of whether God’s Law (the so-called “Old Testament Law”) is in force for Christians?

The adoption of dispensationalism often leads to the “dispensing” of the “Law of Moses” as a standard of conduct and behavior for Christians. Many modern dispensationalists

even claim that the Law of Moses had to be abolished before the New Testament church could exist!

Let's now turn our attention to the dispensationalists' claim that the Law of Moses was a barrier that separated Jews from Gentiles.

Did the Law of Moses Separate Jews From Gentiles?

The apostle Paul wrote: "That at that time ye [Gentile Christians, before conversion] were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ.

"For He is our peace, who hath made both [Jew and Gentile] one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us [i.e., between Jew and Gentile]; Having *abolished* in His flesh the enmity, even the *law of commandments contained in ordinances*; for to make in Himself one new man, so making peace; And that He might reconcile both [Jew and Gentile] unto God in one body [the church] by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby" (Ephesians 2:12-16).

Commenting on this passage, dispensationalist Hal Lindsey writes: "If the Law of Moses were still in force today, there could be no Church, since racial segregation of Israelites from the Gentiles was an essential part of that covenant.... Some try to say that only part of it is still applicable, but...the law is a unit that cannot be divided. You either put yourself under the whole law, or not at all" (*The Road To Holocaust*, Bantam Books, 1989, p. 265).

Notice that Lindsey says that "*racial* segregation of Israelites from the Gentiles was an *essential part* of that covenant" (emphasis added). Note also that he views "Law of Moses" and "that covenant" (meaning the Old Covenant) as synonymous terms.

But is that what Paul had in mind when he wrote the above passage? If the apostle were here today, would he give the nod of approval to Lindsey's interpretation of his words?

Lindsey's comments are a fair representation of popular dispensationalist thought. As we have seen, dispensationalists claim that God's "prophetic clock" for Israel stopped ticking at the end of Christ's ministry, and will resume ticking when the church is "raptured" to heaven and the Antichrist makes a phony "covenant of peace" with the State of Israel. The intermittent "gap" is the "church age," or "age of grace." Thus, dispensationalists see a radical discontinuity between Israel and the church.

With such a foundation, it is fairly easy to find scriptures (such as the one quoted above) that *seem* to fit the dispensational scheme with its notion that since the Law of Moses was given to Israel, it should not serve as a standard of conduct and behavior in the “Christian dispensation.”

But did Paul have “dispensations” in mind when he wrote to the Ephesian church? Was he speaking of the Law of Moses when he said that Christ abolished the “law of commandments contained in ordinances”?

Before examining this question further, let’s consider the background against which *all* New Testament references to laws and commandments must be understood. Remember, one of the first rules of sound scriptural interpretation is that we understand any given passage in its proper *context*. The immediate context is always important, but equally important is the *larger* context.

In this case, understanding the larger context involves going back to the Old Testament and seeing what it says about God’s Law and about the future establishment of the New Covenant.

The Law God Gave to Israel

The book of Exodus tells us of how the people of Israel were delivered from Egyptian bondage, of the trials and tests they encountered in the wilderness, and of how they came to Mount Sinai, where God gave them His Law and established His Covenant with them.

When God audibly gave them His Ten Commandments, “all the people saw the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking: and when the people saw it, they removed, and stood afar off. And they said unto Moses, Speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die” (Exodus 20:18,19).

Apparently, had the people not been so fearful, had they not “removed, and stood afar off,” God would have continued speaking until He had given them all His laws and commandments. But instead, because of the people’s *lack of faith* (expressed in their fear), Moses served as mediator through which the rest of the God’s Law was given—hence, the “Law of Moses.”

What was God’s response to Israel’s lack of faith? Notice:

“[God said] I have heard the voice of the words of this people, which they have spoken unto thee [Moses]: they have well said all that they have spoken” (Deuteronomy 5:28).

God was referring to the words the people of Israel spoke to Moses when they heard His voice and saw the awesome spectacle at Mount Sinai. God said He heard them when they

asked Moses to speak on His behalf, and that “they have well said all that they have spoken.”

What did God mean when He said that the people had “well said all that they have spoken”? Notice the next verse:

“O that there were such an heart in them, that they would fear me, and *keep all my commandments always*, that it might be well with them, and with their children for ever!” (verse 29).

The people did “fear” God, but not with the kind of fear (deep respect, reverence) God wanted. Their fearfulness reflected their *lack of faith* (lack of trust and confidence in the God who lovingly delivered them and provided for their needs), which God equated with a *heart of disobedience!*

Note that well! These accounts prove conclusively that *obedience to God’s Law is not at odds with faith!* On the contrary, the two are inseparable. True obedience—the kind of obedience God seeks—derives from “faith which worketh by love” (Galatians 5:6). But “such an heart” was not to be found in Israel.

The heart of disobedience God saw in the people at Mount Sinai found expression throughout Israel’s history. The brief periods of Israel’s repentance and return to God soon gave way to abandonment of God’s commandments. The writings of the prophets are replete with warnings of impending destruction and pleas to repent and return to God. But, except for brief periods, the heart of disobedience continued to evoke God’s displeasure.

Through the prophets, God told the people of Israel that He would destroy them as a nation, that they would no longer be His people, for they had broken the Covenant and despised God’s Law. Yet, in virtually the same breath, God promised restoration to His people. Through the prophet Hosea, He said, “...in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people, there it shall be said unto them, Ye are the sons of the living God” (Hosea 1:10).

But through what means would God restore His people? They had repeatedly displayed their disobedience in the past. Why should things be different in the future?

Promise of a New Covenant

As we have seen, even before the Covenant was ratified, God saw that Israel did not have “such an heart” as to obey Him and keep His commandments. And even though the people agreed to the terms of the Covenant, the heart of disobedience remained the same throughout their history. Their covenant breaking brought the curses God warned of

through Moses. The nation split into two kingdoms, the house of Israel and the house of Judah, and both kingdoms eventually suffered the consequences of covenant breaking.

Yet, God promised to restore them, to make of them one nation, and to renew His relationship with them. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God reveals how He intends to accomplish His will for Israel:

“Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a *new covenant* with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the Lord:

“But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; [notice carefully: God is about to explain how this covenant differs from the previous one] After those days, saith the Lord, *I will put my LAW in their inward parts, and write it IN THEIR HEARTS* [read it again: does this sound like an *abolishment* of the Law?]; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.

“And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord: *for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more*” (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Notice several points:

1) The New Covenant would be made with “the house of Israel and the house of Judah.” Dispensationalists argue that the Law was never given to the Gentiles, but to Israel (and Judah) only. By the same token, we could argue that the New Covenant is for Israel (and Judah) only, since this prophecy says nothing about making a New Covenant with the Gentiles. Further, since the Old Covenant was made with Israel, it would seem logical that the *New* Covenant would be made with Israel. One could apply the dispensationalists’ line of reasoning to this passage and conclude that since the Law and the first Covenant did not apply to Gentiles, the New Covenant God promised to make with Israel would not apply to Gentiles. (Of course, such reasoning is flawed, as we shall later see.)

2) The problem with the first Covenant was not with the terms of the Covenant, but with the people. As we have seen, they did not have “such an heart” as to obey God. The New Covenant differs in that the people *will* have a heart of obedience (“I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts”).

3) Throughout the Old Testament, God speaks of His Law—the same Law He gave to Israel at Mount Sinai. There is no reason to believe that the Law spoken of here is a different law. Those who argue that a new administration (the New Covenant) demands a new law (and abrogation of the old Law) are in error.

Proof that the Law of Moses was not to be abolished with the advent of the New Covenant is seen in the clear declaration of the “Messenger of the Covenant” Himself, Jesus Christ.

The Messenger of the Covenant

God, through the prophet Malachi, foretold the coming of the Messenger of the Covenant (i.e., the New Covenant). The prophecy came during the first portion of the “seventy weeks” period (Daniel 9). As we have noted, the “seventy weeks” were seventy *sevens*, or seventy “weeks of years,” totaling four-hundred and ninety years, which were to begin with “the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem” (verse 25). The Messiah was to be “cut off” (crucified) after sixty-nine “weeks” (verse 26).

Notice God’s description of the coming of Christ:

“Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord [the Messiah, the Messenger of the New Covenant], whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to His temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, He shall come, saith the Lord of hosts” (Malachi 3:1).

In chapter 4, God continues to tell of the coming of the Messiah. Notice the admonition couched within this prophecy:

“Remember ye the law of Moses my servant, which I commanded unto him in Horeb for all Israel, with the statutes and judgments” (verse 4).

If the Messenger of the Covenant was to *abolish* the Law of Moses, why does God admonish the people to “Remember ye the Law of Moses”? Do you see why dispensationalists keep their collective thumb on the stop/start switch of the “prophetic clock”? In order to dispense of the Law of Moses (for Christians), they must stop Israel’s prophetic clock just before the church comes on the scene, and start it again as soon as the church is snatched away in the “secret rapture.” An ingenious invention—but an invention nonetheless!

The truth is, the Old Testament revelation is one-hundred percent consistent from beginning to end. From Israel’s receiving the Law at Mount Sinai to the prophecies about the inauguration of the New Covenant, we find consistency regarding the perpetual nature of God’s Law. And when we make the transition into the New Testament, we find no break in continuity, no inconsistency, no radical departure from previous revelation.

Early in His ministry, the Messenger of the Covenant Himself confirmed the inspired writings of the prophets.

Jesus said: “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, *Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.*”

“Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so [dispensationalists should take note!], he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:17-19).

Do you see the consistency, the smooth-flowing continuity, from the giving of the Law (and God’s displeasure with Israel’s disobedient heart) to the promise of a New Covenant (which would involve a heart of obedience) to the prophecy of Malachi (which admonishes the people to remember the Law of Moses as they look forward to the advent of the Messenger of the Covenant) to the coming of the Messenger of the Covenant (who confirmed the inspired writings of the prophets)?

Some may argue that the “New Covenant” God spoke of in Jeremiah 31 refers to the covenant He will make with Israel in the future, when Israel’s “prophetic clock” starts ticking again. True, God will set forth the terms of the New Covenant when He gathers the scattered remnant of Israel into the land of promise, but Scripture declares that the New Covenant described in Jeremiah 31 is the identical same covenant that true Christians have *already* entered (see Hebrews 8). And, as we have seen, that covenant involves the writing of God’s Law in the hearts of the people who enter it.

But who are the people of the New Covenant? God said that the New Covenant would be made with the “house of Israel and the house of Judah.” How do Gentiles fit into the picture?

Israel and the New Covenant

As we have seen, the New Covenant was to be made with Israelites (the “seed of Abraham”), the same people with whom the Old Covenant was made. This may seem strange in view of the fact that a large portion of the New Testament was written by Paul, the “apostle of the *Gentiles*.” But the mystery is solved once we see how, and with whom, the New Covenant was inaugurated.

The New Testament church (or “New Covenant assembly”) began with the arrival of the Holy Spirit on the first Pentecost (Acts 2) following Christ’s death, resurrection, and ascension. Peter recognized that the “pouring out of the Holy Spirit” was a fulfillment of a prophecy given through Joel (verses 16-21). Interestingly, Joel’s prophecy (found in Joel 2) is a prophecy about the *restoration of Israel*.

Like many other prophecies, Joel's prophecy is *dual* in nature. It pertains to the years yet ahead, but it also found a certain fulfillment in the time of the apostles. It pertains particularly to "the *remnant* [of Israel] whom the Lord shall call" (Joel 2:32).

On the Day of Pentecost, the New Testament church began. It began with the *remnant* of Israel, the vast majority of whom were descendants of the southern kingdom of Judah. Peter understood that the New Covenant was to be established with "the house of Israel and with the house of Judah" (Jeremiah 31:31). Notice some of his statements:

Acts 2:36: "Therefore let *all the house of Israel* know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ."

Acts 2:39: "For the promise is unto *you* [Israelites], and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call."

Acts 3:25,26: "Ye [Israelites] are the children of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers.... Unto *you first* God, having raised up His Son Jesus, sent Him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities [from his LAW-breaking]."

Dispensationalists claim that the prophets did not foresee the church age, but this was not Peter's view at all. The inspired apostle said, "Yea, and *all the prophets* from Samuel and those that follow after, as many as have spoken, have likewise *foretold of these days*" (Acts 3:24). Peter was clearly speaking of the establishment of the New Covenant assembly.

Within the first few days of the inauguration of the New Covenant, *thousands* of Jews were converted (Acts 2:41; 4:4). True to God's promise through the prophets, a New Covenant was being made "with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah." (Note: While most of the Israelites dwelling in and about Judea were descendants of the house of Judah, some few [a "remnant"] from the house of Israel had trickled back into the land. By that time, the phrase "house of Israel" referred to the descendants of Abraham, irrespective of tribal designations.)

But did the "remnant of Israel"—the early converts of the New Covenant—think for a moment that the Law God had given to their forebears would be abolished, or radically changed?

Absolutely not! They knew what God had said through the prophets. They knew that God, through the Holy Spirit, had written His Law upon their hearts, and that He had forgiven their sins—just as Jeremiah 31 plainly says.

They also knew that Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension coincided with the Passover/Unleavened Bread festival, and that the Holy Spirit was given on the Day of Pentecost—thus, for them, making these festivals far more meaningful than ever before.

But what of the Gentiles who came to a knowledge of the truth later? Was there a radical break with the Law at that time? Did the church come to realize that Christ had broken down the wall of separation between Jew and Gentile by abolishing the Law of Moses?

The Gentiles and the New Covenant

Long before the inauguration of the New Covenant, it was prophesied that the Gentiles (non-Israelite peoples) would join Israel in the New Covenant.

Isaiah wrote: “And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and *all nations shall flow unto it*. And many people [non-Israelites] shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and He will teach us of His ways, and we will walk in His paths: *for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem*” (Isaiah 2:3).

The same prophecy is found in Micah 4:2. And while it refers to the Millennium, when Israel will become the model nation it was intended to be, the prophecy had a certain fulfillment in the establishment of the New Testament church during the first century. That “last days” prophecies are dual in nature is seen in Peter’s use of Joel’s prophecy (Acts 2), in James’ use of Isaiah 54:1-5 and Amos 9:11 (Acts 15:15-18), and in Paul’s references to the “remnant” (Romans 9:27; 11:5).

Thus, the New Covenant assembly began with the “remnant of Israel”; and in time, God began *adding* Gentiles to the remnant. That’s why the gospel was to go to the Jew first, and then to the Gentiles (Romans 1:16; 2:9,10; Acts 3:26; Luke 24:47). The pattern of fulfillment is expressed perfectly in Isaiah 2:3 (quoted above).

Notice that the manner in which the Great Commission is to be fulfilled follows the prophetic pattern of Isaiah 23. Jesus said, “And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His [Christ’s] name among *all nations, beginning at Jerusalem*” (Luke 24:47). It did begin at Jerusalem, and resulted in the conversion of thousands of Jews, who comprised the “remnant.” Then, after a certain period (perhaps three and one-half years), God revealed that the message of repentance and remission of sins would now go to the Gentiles (Acts 10).

Paul later wrote, “And if ye be Christ’s [regardless of race], then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:29). In Romans 11, Paul’s “olive tree” analogy pictures believing Gentiles being “grafted in” among the believing Israelites. The tree represents Israel; the severed branches represent unbelieving Israelites who are no longer joined to the tree (God says they are “not my people”—Hosea 1:9); and the wild olive branches grafted in among the believing Israelites represent believing Gentiles.

Thus, Paul saw a smoothly-flowing continuity between Israel and the church. When the unbelieving Israelites come to repentance and conversion, God will “graft them in again” (Romans 11:23), and they will become part of the true “Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16). No longer will God say of them, “Ye are not my people.” Rather, “in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people, there it shall be said unto them, Ye are the sons of the living God” (Hosea 1:10).

Do you see how the conversion of Israel and the Gentiles follows the prophetic pattern of Isaiah 2:3? The message of repentance and remission of sins began at Jerusalem and spread to the Gentile nations (“for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem”).

The pattern will be repeated in the time of the end with the conversion of 144,000 Israelites (a “remnant of Israel”) and the addition of “a great multitude” of Gentiles (Revelation 7). And then, in the Millennium, the pattern (and ultimate fulfillment of Isaiah 2:3) will be repeated again. In time, the nations will see the glowing example of God’s model nation, and then they will say, “Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and He will teach us of His ways, and we will walk in His paths.” Of that time, God says, “And it shall come to pass, that from one new moon to another, and from one *Sabbath* to another, shall *all flesh* come to worship before me...” (Isaiah 66:23). “And it shall come to pass that every one that is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall even go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to *keep the Feast of Tabernacles*” (Zechariah 14: 16).

Thus, the unfolding of God’s plan for Israel and the nations leaves no room for dispensationalism’s “gap” theory with its radical discontinuity between Israel and the church. Nor does it leave room for the idea that the Law of Moses has been, or shall be, abolished. If the Law had to be abolished before the church could be established, then it’s strange that God speaks of Gentiles learning of His Law and keeping His Sabbaths and festivals.

What, then, did Paul mean when he spoke of a certain “law of commandments contained in ordinances” being “abolished”? In view of what we have seen, he could not have possibly been speaking of the Ten Commandments, the Sabbath, or the festivals. What, then, did the apostle have in mind?

Destruction of the “Dividing Wall”

Read again Ephesians 2:12-19 (quoted on page 15), and note the following points:

1) The “middle wall of partition” (or “dividing wall”—NRSV) separated Gentiles from Jews.

2) The breaking down of the dividing wall is associated with the abolition of a certain “law of commandments contained [or *consisting*] in ordinances [or *decrees*].”

3) The destruction of the dividing wall enables Gentiles to become “fellowcitizens” with believing Jews. With the removal of the wall, “both [Jew and Gentile] have access by one Spirit unto the Father.”

Without the benefit of history, we may have difficulty in understanding precisely what Paul had in mind. But, fortunately, the facts of history have been preserved, and we need not have any doubt as to what the apostle had in view as he described the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile unto God in one body.

The “dividing wall” stood in the Temple, separating the court of the Gentiles from the holy place. Upon this wall was a certain “law of commandments” (*not* the Law of Moses) forbidding Gentiles passage beyond a certain point, on penalty of death. Thus, the dividing wall with its decrees was a fitting symbol of the separation that existed between Jews and Gentiles.

Of course, Paul was speaking metaphorically. He was using the symbol of the dividing wall and its destruction as a means of describing how God, through Christ, broke down all barriers between Jews and Gentiles, thus giving both equal access to Him.

Hal Lindsey’s belief that if “the Law of Moses were still in force, there could be no Church” is completely false! His belief that “racial segregation of Israelites from Gentiles was an essential part” of the Old Covenant is equally false!

The truth is, Gentiles who lived among the Israelites (in the time of Moses) could worship God as fully and freely as any home-born citizen. While no uncircumcised male was permitted to eat the Passover, the “strangers” (aliens, or Gentiles) living among the natural citizens of Israel were to keep the Sabbath (Exodus 20:10), observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Exodus 12:19), rejoice in the Feast of Tabernacles (Deuteronomy 16:14), bring the appropriate sacrifice for sins of ignorance (Numbers 15:27-29), observe the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29), and obey all the commandments, statutes, and judgments of God’s Law (Exodus 12:49). Like the home-born, the sojourner could offer sacrifices and take part in the red heifer ceremony (Numbers 15:14- 16; 19:10; Leviticus 17:8,9).

The “stranger” sojourning among the Israelites could experience all the blessings afforded by obedience to God’s Law. Home-born citizens were forbidden to vex the aliens among them, and were reminded that they had been “strangers” in the land of Egypt. They were therefore to show compassion to the aliens, and were to treat them as they would treat any other citizen. The primary differences between natural citizens and uncircumcised “strangers” were that the latter could not eat the Passover and were not released (if they were bondservants) in the Year of Jubilee (Exodus 12:43,45; Leviticus 25:45,46).

Interestingly, though uncircumcised aliens were not permitted to eat the Passover, they were expected to obey God's Law and were subject to the same penalties for disobedience as home-born citizens. Even though uncircumcised, they could have a positive relationship with God, and could enjoy the benefits of obedience to His Law. The apostles and elders of the Jerusalem conference (Acts 15) recognized this truth, and placed no greater responsibility upon the Gentiles than that expressed in the Law of Moses. For whatever reason, they found it necessary to name four specific obligations (verse 20), but beyond that, they knew that any other instructions were unnecessary: "For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath day" (verse 21).

The nation of Israel would have been (had she been faithful to God) the means through which wisdom and understanding and "all these statutes" would have been conveyed to the nations (Deuteronomy 4:5,6). In the future, once Christ regathers the children of Israel and establishes His Kingdom on this earth, the nation will fulfill its God-appointed destiny of becoming a model nation for the nations of the world. At that time, the nations will see that brightly-glowing beacon, and will seek to learn of God's ways, "for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem" (Isaiah 3:2). In that day, "all flesh" will keep the Sabbath (Isaiah 66:23), and the nations will "go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the feast of tabernacles" (Zechariah 14:16).

The apostle Paul understood that the Law was not to be confined to the boundaries imposed by some dispensational scheme. He said that the Law is the means through which "the *whole world* may be held accountable to God" (Romans 3:19, NRSV, and that "through the law comes the knowledge of sin" (verse 20). Had Paul believed that the Law has no relationship to the New Covenant, he would have never declared that "the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good" (Romans 7:12); he would have never said that "the law is *spiritual*" (verse 14).

So much for the idea that the Law had to be abolished before the church could exist! So much for the idea that the Law was a barrier that separated Jews from Gentiles! And so much for the dispensationalists' radical discontinuity between Israel and the church and forced interpretation of Daniel's seventy weeks prophecy, with its stopping/starting "prophetic clock" and intermittent "gap," into which they can neatly fit the "age of grace," or "church age."

Those expecting to be "snatched out" in a "secret rapture" should recheck the time on God's prophetic clock. Perhaps they would then realize that the only "gap" is in their own thinking.