

# Refuting the Day-Year Theory

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Here it is in place to examine the so-called “year-day theory” of prophetic interpretation, so prevalent among modern expositors [1890]. Upon the statement of the two passages just cited from Numbers 14:33-34 and Ezekiel 4:6, and also upon supposed necessities of apocalyptic interpretation, a large number of modern writers on prophecy have advanced the theory that the word *day*, or *days*, is to be understood in prophetic designations of time as denoting years. This theory has been applied especially to the “time, times, and dividing of a time” in Daniel 7:25, 12:7, and Revelation 12:14; the 1260 days of Revelation 11:3; 12:6; and also by many to the 2300 days of Daniel 8:14, and the 1290 and 1335 days of Daniel 12:11-12. The 42 months of Revelation 11:2 and 13:5 are, according to this theory, to be multiplied by 30 ( $42 \times 30 = 1260$ ) and then the result in days is to be understood as so many years. After the like manner, the “time, times, and a half” are first understood as three years and a half, and then the years are multiplied by 360, a round number for the days of a year, and the result (1260) is understood as designating, not so many days, but so many years.

If this is a correct theory of interpreting the designations of prophetic time, it is obvious that it is a most important one. It is necessarily so far-reaching in its practical results as fundamentally to affect one’s **whole plan and process** of exposition. Such a theory, surely, ought to be supported by the most convincing and incontrovertible reasons. And yet, upon the most careful examination, **we do not find that it has any sufficient warrant in the Scripture**, and the expositions of its advocates are not of a character likely to commend it to the critical mind. Against it [this day-year theory] we urge the five following considerations:

1. This theory derives no valid support from the passages in Numbers and Ezekiel already referred to. In Numbers 14:33, 34, Jehovah’s word to Israel simply states that they must suffer for their iniquities 40 years, “in the number of the days which you searched the land, 40 days, a day for the year, a day for the year.” There is no possibility of misunderstanding this. The spies were absent 40 days searching the land of Canaan (Numbers 13:25), and when they returned they brought back a bad report of the country, and spread disaffection, murmuring and rebellion through the whole congregation of Israel (Num. 14:2-4). Thereupon the divine sentence of judgment was pronounced upon that generation, and they were condemned to “graze (pasture, feed) in the wilderness 40 years” (Num. 14:33). Here then is certainly no ground on which to base the universal proposition that, in prophetic designations of time, a day means a year. The passage is exceptional and explicit, and the words are used in a strictly literal sense; the days evidently mean days, and the years mean years. The same is true in every particular of the days and years mentioned in Ezekiel 4:5-6. The days of his prostration were literal days, and they were typical of years, as is explicitly stated. But to derive from this symbolico-typical action of Ezekiel a hermeneutical principle or law of universal application, namely, that days in prophecy mean years, would be a most unwarrantable procedure.

2. If the two passages now noticed were expressive of a universal law, we certainly would expect to find it sustained and capable of illustration by examples of fulfilled prophecy. But examples bearing on this point are **overwhelmingly against the theory in question**. God's word to Noah was: "Yet seven days, I will cause it to rain upon the land 40 days and 40 nights" (Gen. 7:4). Did anyone ever imagine these days were symbolical of years? Or will it be pretended that the mention of nights along with days removes the prophecy from the category of those scriptures which have a mystical import? God's word to Abraham was that his seed would be afflicted in a foreign land 400 years (Gen. 15:13). Must we multiply these years by 360 to know the real time intended? Isaiah prophesied that Ephraim would be broken within 65 years (Isa. 7:8); but who ever dreamed that this must be resolved into days in order to find the period of Ephraim's fall? Was it ever sagely believed that the three years of Moab's glory, referred to in Isaiah 16:14, must be multiplied by 360 in order to find the import of what Jehovah had spoken concerning it? Was it by such mathematical calculation as this that Daniel "understood in the books the number of the years, which was a word of Jehovah to Jeremiah the prophet (comp. Jer. 25:12), to complete as to the desolations of Jerusalem: 70 years" (Dan. 9:2)? Or is it supposable that the 70 years of Jeremiah's prophecy were ever intended to be manipulated by such calculations? In short, this theory breaks down utterly when an appeal is taken to the analogy of prophetic scriptures. If the "time, times and a half" of Daniel 7:25 means three and a half years multiplied by 360, that is 1260 years, then the "seven times" of Daniel 4:16, 32 should mean 7 x 360, or 2520 years. Or if in one prophecy of the future, 1260 days must, without any accompanying qualification, or any statement to that effect in the context, be understood as denoting so many years, then the advocates of such a theory must show pertinent and valid reason why the 40 days of Jonah's prophecy against Nineveh (Jon. 3:4) are not to be also understood as denoting 40 years.

3. The year-day theory is thought to have support in Daniel's prophecy of the *seventy weeks* (Dan. 9:24-27). But that prophecy says not a word about days or years, but 70 *heptads*, or *sevens*. The position and gender of the word indicate its peculiar significance. It nowhere else occurs in the masculine except in Daniel 10:2-3, where it is expressly defined as denoting *heptads of days*. Unaccompanied by any such limiting word, and standing in such an emphatic position at the beginning of verse 24, we have reason to infer at once that it involves some mystical import. When, now, we observe that it is a Messianic oracle, granted to Daniel when his mind was full of meditations upon Jeremiah's prophecy of the 70 years of Jewish exile (v. 2), and in answer to his ardent supplications, we most naturally understand the 70 heptads as heptads of years. But this admission furnishes slender support to such a sweeping theory as would logically bring **all prophetic designations of time** to the principle that days mean years.

4. It has been argued that in such passages as Judges 17:10; 1 Samuel 2:19; 2 Chronicles 21:19, and Isaiah 32:10, the word *days* is used to denote *years*, and "if this word is sometimes thus used in Scripture in places not prophetic, why should it not thus be employed in prophetic passages?"<sup>1</sup> But a critical examination of those passages will

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<sup>1</sup> See Allen's article "On the Designations of Time in Daniel and John," in *The American Biblical Repository*, for July, 1840, p. 39.

show that the word for *days* is not really used in the sense of years. In Judges 17:10 Micah says to the Levite: "Dwell with me, and be to me a father and a priest, and I will give you ten (pieces) of silver *for the days*," that is, for the days that he would dwell with him as a priest. In 1 Samuel 2:19 it is said that Samuel's mother made him a little robe, and brought it up to him "*from days to days* in her going up along with her husband to offer the sacrifice *of the days*." Here the reference is to the particular days of going up to the tabernacle to worship and sacrifice, and the exact sense is not brought out by the common version, "year by year" or "yearly." They may have gone up several times during the year at the days of the great national feasts. And this appears from a comparison of 1 Samuel 1:3 and 7 where, in the first place, it is said that Elkanah went up *from days to days*, and in verse 7, "so he did *year by year*." That is, he went up three times a year according to the law (Exod. 23:14-17), "from days to days," as the well-known national feast days came round; and his wife generally accompanied him. 2 Chronicles 21:19 is literally: "And it came to pass at days from days (i.e. after several days), and about the time of the going out (expiration) of the end, at two days, his bowels went out," etc. Similarly, Isaiah 32:10: "Days above a year shall you be troubled," etc. That is, more than a year you shall be troubled. The most that can be said of such a use of the word *days* is that it is used indefinitely in a proverbial and idiomatic way; but such a usage by no means justifies the broad proposition that a day means a year.

5. The advocates of the year-day theory rest their strongest argument, however, upon the necessity of such a theory for what they regard as the true explanation of certain prophecies. They affirm that the three times and a half of Daniel 7:25, and the 1260 days of Revelation 12:6, and their parallels, are incapable of a literal interpretation. And so, carrying the predictions both of Daniel and John down into the history of modern Europe for explanation, most of these writers understand the 1260 year-days as designating the period of the Roman Papacy. Mr. William Miller, famous in the last generation for the sensation he produced, and the large following he had, adopted a scheme of interpreting not only the 1260 days, but also the 1290, and the 1335 (of Dan. 12:11-12), so that he ascertained and published with great assurance that the coming of Christ would take place in October, 1843. We have lived to see his theories thoroughly exploded, and yet there have not been lacking others who have adopted his hermeneutical principles, and named AD 1866 and 1870 as "the time of the end." A theory which is so destitute of scriptural analogy and support as we have seen above, and presumes to rest on such a slender showing of divine authority, is on those grounds alone to be suspected; but when it has again and again proved to be false and misleading in its application, we may safely reject it, as furnishing no valid principle or rule in a true science of hermeneutics. Those who have supposed it to be necessary for the exposition of apocalyptic prophecies, should begin to feel that their systems of interpretation are in error.