

Interpreting the three and a half years of prophecy

by Douglas E. Cox

A consistent pattern of interpretation of the three and a half years or 1,260 days of Daniel and Revelation, that persists throughout the history of the church, is evident among those scholars who interpreted the period as symbolic, representing *the whole age of the church*. It is connected to the ministry of Jesus, and completes the prophetic *week*, in which he *confirms his covenant with many*. The scholars whose conclusions are presented below understood this.

Methodius of Olympus (died c. 311)

Bishop of Olympus in Lycia, Methodius suffered martyrdom under Maximinus Daia in 311.

On the woman who flees to the wilderness for 1,260 days in Revelation 12:6, Methodius wrote: [1]

Now she who brings forth, and has brought forth, the masculine Word in the hearts of the faithful, and who passed, undefiled and uninjured by the wrath of the beast, into the wilderness, is, as we have explained, our mother the Church. And the wilderness into which she comes, and is nourished for a thousand two hundred and sixty days, which is truly waste and unfruitful of evils, and barren of corruption, and difficult of access and of transit to the multitude; but fruitful and abounding in pasture, and blooming and easy of access to the holy, and full of wisdom, and productive of life, is this most lovely, and beautifully wooded and well watered abode of Arete [virtue]. . . . For the Bride of the Word is adorned with the fruits of virtue. And the thousand two hundred and sixty days that we are staying here, O virgins, is the accurate and perfect understanding concerning the Father, and the Son, and the Spirit, in which our mother increases, and rejoices, and exults throughout this time, until the restitution of the new dispensation, when, coming into the assembly in the heavens, she will no longer contemplate the I AM through the means of [human] knowledge, but will clearly behold entering in together with Christ.

Primasius (died c. 560)

He was Augustinian bishop of Hadrumetum and primate of Byzacena, in Africa.

Edward Elliott said Primasius “explained the 42 months, 1260 days, and time times and a half a time, as specially designating the time of Antichrist’s last persecution, yet as signifying also the whole time of the duration of the Church.” [2]

Venerable Bede (672-735)

Bede was a monk at the Northumbrian monastery of Saint Peter at Monkwearmouth, in Sunderland, England.

On the 1,260 days of Revelation 12:6, he wrote: “In this number of days, which makes three years and a half, he comprehends all the times of Christianity, because Christ, Whose body the Church is, preached the same length of time in the flesh.” [3]

Alcuin (c. 735-804)

Edward Elliott reported that Alcuin concluded that the period of the ministry of the two witnesses is the whole age of the church. [4]

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

Thomas was a Sicilian priest of the Catholic Church in the Dominican Order, also known as known as Doctor Angelicus.

Thomas wrote: [5]

The thousand two hundred sixty days mentioned in the Apocalypse (12:6) denote all the time during which the Church endures, and not any definite number of years. The reason whereof is because the preaching of Christ on which the Church is built lasted three years and a half, which time contains almost an equal number of days as the aforesaid number. Again the number of days appointed by Daniel does not refer to a number of years to elapse before the end of the world or until the preaching of Antichrist, but to the time of Antichrist’s preaching and the duration of his persecution.

John Bale (1495-1563)

Bale was the first to write a commentary on Revelation in English; it was titled *The Image of Both Churches*.

Bale understood the holy city of Revelation 11:2, which is trampled by gentiles, to be the church, and the 42 months as symbolic. On this verse he said: [6]

And the holy city (of whom glorious things are spoken) they shall tread under foot for the space of 42 months. Not the earthly Jerusalem is this city, builded of men, and made holy by the outward observations and ceremonies of the Jews as many expositors have fantasied. For of that (as Christ prophesies) is not one stone standing

upon another. But this city is the sure building of God, grounded upon the strong foundation of the Apostles and prophets, even upon the hard rock stone Jesus Christ. This is the pleasant possession, the wholesome household, the sure hold, and the delectable vineyard of the Lord of Hosts. This is the living generation of them which feareth, loveth, and seeketh their Lord God in faith, spirit, and truth, and not in outward shadows. These are the children of promise, the true offspring of Abraham, the chosen of Israel, and the kingdom of the holy ghost. Pure, clean, and holy hath Christ made this city, by none other thing but the only shedding of his precious blood.

William Fulke (1538-1589)

Fulke connected the 1,260 days with 70 weeks of years in Daniel 9. He thought the 42 months and 1,260 days represent three and a half years, and signify a limited time, and that "a short space of time is permitted to the devil that he may strive with all his force to beat down the Church." Fulke wrote on Revelation 11:2-3: [7]

And the holy city they shall tread under foot two and forty months &c.

The wicked and profane gentiles shall tread under foot, that is, shall grievously oppress, persecute, and afflict the Church of God, to the full space of two and forty months, that is for that time which Christ doth grant unto Antichrist to rage in cruelty against the godly. Some do count the number of months, from the first persecutions of the Christians by the Roman conquerors, even till the time of the emperor Constantine which granted peace, unto the churches. But let them which maintain that opinion see how certain it is. But to me it seems more plain that under numbers the certain fixed, and determinate time of the persecution of Antichrist is assigned, which he cannot pass, although he fret fume and rage never so much. For the Lord hath counted the same time by months days and hours. The reason of the numbers seemeth to be of this sort, this time which sometime is called two and forty months, sometime a thousand two hundred and sixty days, sometime a time two times and half a time, maketh in all three years and an half, that is the one half of a prophetic week, which time also is called three days and an half. And this place alludes to the weeks of years in the 9 Chapter of Daniel. Whereupon we gather to the great consolation of the Church, that a short time is appointed to Antichrist to wait the same, which is also shewed twice afterward in the 12 Chapter and in the 20, that a short space of time is permitted to the devil that he may strive with all his force to beat down the Church, this interpretation as most simple and plain pleases me best; those that seek more subtler may follow their own judgment.

George Gifford (c.1548-1600)

Gifford saw that it was unwise to identify the 1,260 days or the 42 months of Revelation 11:2-3 with specific dates, but instead he argued that in this book, "a number certain is put for an uncertain." He wrote: [8]

Then next here is shewed how long the great Antichrist and his rout of profane Gentiles, possessing the outer court of the Temple, shall tread down the holy city. The time is set to be two and forty months: and that is three years and a half: for twelve months to a year, three times twelve is thirty and six, and then six months for the half year, do make up two and forty. From this place the Papists do draw one argument, by which they would prove that the Pope is not Antichrist. After this manner they reason: The Pope hath governed the Church many years: the great Antichrist shall reign but two and forty months, which is three years and a half: (for they do rightly confess that the Gentiles which possess the outer court of the temple, are the rout of Antichrist) therefore say they, it is impossible that the Pope should be Antichrist. For answer unto this: let it be demanded, doth not Saint John in this prophecy speak mystically, even as the Prophets did in old time? they cannot deny this. And then demand further, is not every day put for a year in the seventy weeks which Daniel the Prophet speaketh of? so every week is seven years. And why may not every month here then be put for thirty years? which then do amount unto 1,260 years. Which indeed is a long time in comparison of three years & an half: but compared with the eternity of Christ's kingdom, it is as nothing. And that is one cause why the Lord numbers it by days & months which quickly run out. But then here will arise another scruple: If the kingdom of Antichrist shall continue twelve hundred and sixty years, we must either say that the Bishop of Rome was Antichrist more than a thousand years past, yea above thirteen hundred, if we take his reign to be no longer than until he was disclosed by the Gospel: or else we must say he hath yet long to continue. Let not this trouble us, seeing it is most clear and out of all controversy, that in this book, a number certain is put for an uncertain. As in the seventh chapter of this book it is said, that of every tribe there was sealed twelve thousand. And because twelve times twelve amount unto one hundred forty & four, it is said chap. 14 that so many thousands stand with the Lamb upon mount Sion. Is any man so unwise, as to take it, that of every tribe there should be saved just twelve thousand neither more nor less, and so on all of the Jews in these latter days just an hundred forty & four thousands to be saved? & not rather that the Lord by a number certain doth declare that even when his Church doth seem utterly to fail, he saves a great number, of which he expresses not the just sum. So in this place when God will comfort his people, he shows that Antichrist shall tread down the holy city but for a short time, that is, two and forty months, which is but three years and an half, he meaneth not to note the just number of years that he shall continue.

Isaac Williams (1802-1865)

Williams was a poet and theologian at Oxford, and was the author of some of the Tracts for the Times associated with the Oxford Movement. In 1845 he became seriously ill, from tuberculosis, or consumption, and was expected to die, but he recovered, and afterwards lived in retirement at Stichcombe in Gloucester. During that period he wrote poetry, and commentaries on scripture. On the 42 months and the 1,260 days of Revelation 11:2-3 and 12:6 and 14, he wrote: [9]

The "forty-two months" here specified is explained, as by Aretas, Berengaudus, and others, to be the three years and a half of Antichrist; and this will be evident on a little

attention to the subject. For the forty-two months, the 1260 days, and the three years and a half, must mean the same period of time, from the manner in which they occur and mutually explain each other; but why they are thus differently expressed is full of mysterious significance. First we have it here stated that the Holy City is trodden under foot for "forty-two months;" and then we find that the continuance of Antichrist is for "forty-two months." But the whole passage evidently refers to Daniel, where we find it twice expressly stated that the power of Antichrist is for three years and a half, or "a time, times, and the dividing of a time." And therefore the forty-two months and the three years and a half must mean the same.

It is shown in the like explicit manner that both of these are the same as the 1260 days. It is here stated that the Holy City will be profaned for forty-two months; and it is added in the next verse that the Witnesses will prophesy for 1260 days, meaning this forty-two months of the Church's desolation.

Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg (1802-1869)

A German Lutheran churchman and theologian, Hengstenberg rejected the idea that the 1,260 days refer to a particular time in the history of the world, but instead he interpreted these and related numbers as symbolic, and represented the whole course of the church's history, and he said the three and a half years were a signature of the church. On Revelation 11:2, he wrote: [10]

The two and forty months contain only an apparent determination of time; as, indeed, all numbers in the Apocalypse have only an ideal signification; they belong not so properly to the chronological, as to the symbolical forum. The common signature of the dominion of the world over the church in the Revelation, resting on the prophecies of Daniel, (comp. at ch. xii. 6, xiii. 5), is the three and a half, in which we have only to think of the broken seven, the signature of the church. So that the meaning is here conveyed, that however the world may lift itself up, however it may proudly triumph, it can never attain to anything complete and lasting. These three and a half years return again in different forms: a time, two times, and an half time, ch. xii. 14, forty and two months, here and in ch. xiii. 5, 1260 days in ch. xii. 6. In the number of the beast also in ch. xiii. 18, the same thing substantially holds as in these numbers. We have here before us a representation, which does not bring into view some particular period of time in the world's history, but the whole course of it, only that towards the end every thing realizes itself in a more perfect manner. Wherever the world is found over owing the church, from that of which John himself saw the commencement, to the last in ch. xx. 7-9, of which we have now the beginning before our eyes, there the substance of the prophecy always verifies itself anew, there the obligation still remains to those who are affected by the evil, to take it as the ground of consolation and warning to their hearts. . . . The thought in this prophecy was in other respects quite correctly apprehended by the older expositors. Thus on the expression, "the holy city shall be trodden down," Bossuet remarks, "Christians shall be under the sway of the unbelievers; but though the weak shall fall, the church shall continue in strength. This is the first point which St John apprehends in the persecutions: the church continually abiding."

Christopher Wordsworth (1807-1885)

Wordsworth was an Anglican priest, and canon of Westminster, and he became Bishop of Lincoln. He was a gifted scholar. He wrote, on the 1,260 days: [11]

Now, if we examine the records of Scripture, we find that the period of three years and a half represents an idea; one of spiritual toil, pilgrimage, and persecution.

First, it may be observed, that three and a half, being the half of seven, which is the number of completeness, represents a semi-perfect state; one of transition and probation. . . . Three years and a half, or forty-two months, or 1260 days, are, as we have seen, the time of the pilgrimage of the Woman in the Wilderness, that is, of the Church in her trials.

In a note, Wordsworth quoted Lightfoot: "The 'forty-two months,' '1260 days,' and a 'time, times, and a half time;' are but borrowed phrases from Daniel, who so expresses the three and a half years of Antiochus' persecution (Dan. xii. 7;) and they mean times of trouble, and are used to express that, and not any fixed time. . . . And perhaps it had been much for the reputation of the Commentators upon the Book of Revelation, if they had looked upon that number and the forty and two months, and the thousand two hundred and sixty days as spoken allusively, and not applied it to any precise or determinate time."

William Milligan (1821-1892)

William Milligan was a Scottish theologian, and a professor of biblical criticism at the University of Aberdeen, who is known for his writings on Revelation. He found similarities in structure in the fourth gospel and the book of Revelation. John's gospel, he suggests, omits the Olivet Discourse of Jesus which is present in the other gospels, because the book of Revelation serves as an expanded account of the things contained in Christ's prophecy. The 42 months and the 1,260 days in Revelation 11, 12, and 13 are symbols of the church age; the three and a half years corresponds to the duration of the ministry of Jesus. He said the 1,260 days "denote the Christian era from its beginning to its close." He wrote: [12]

One question still remains: What is the meaning of the forty and two months during which the holy city is to be trodden under foot of the nations? The same expression meets us in chap. xiii. 5, where it is said that "there was given to the beast authority to continue forty and two months." But forty and two months is also three and a half years, the Jewish year having consisted of twelve months, except when an intercalary month was inserted among the twelve in order to preserve harmony between the seasons and the rotation of time. The same period is therefore again alluded to in chap. xii. 14, when it is said of the woman who fled into the wilderness that she is there nourished for "a time, and times, and half a time." Once more, we read in chap. xi. 3 and in chap. xii. 6 of a period denoted by "a thousand two hundred and threescore days;" and a comparison of this last passage with ver. 14 of the same chapter distinctly shows that it is equivalent to the three and a half times or years. Three and a half multiplied by three hundred and sixty, the number of days in the Jewish year, gives us exactly the

twelve hundred and sixty days. These three periods, therefore, are the same. Why the different designations should be adopted is another question, to which, so far as we are aware, no satisfactory reply has yet been given, although it may be that, for some occult reason, the Seer beholds in "months" a suitable expression for the dominion of evil, in "days" one appropriate to the sufferings of the good.

The ground of this method of looking at the Church's history is found in the book of Daniel, where we read of the fourth beast, or the fourth kingdom, "And he shall speak great words against the Most High, and shall wear out the saints of the Most High, and think to change times and laws: and they shall be given into his hand until a time and times and the dividing of time." [Dan. vii. 25.] The same book helps us also to answer the question as to the particular period of the Church's history denoted by the days, or months, or years referred to, for in another passage the prophet says, "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." [Dan. ix. 27.] The three and a half years therefore, or the half of seven years, denote the whole period extending from the cessation of the sacrifice and oblation. In other words, they denote the Christian era from its beginning to its close, and that more especially on the side of its disturbed and broken character, of the power exercised in it by what is evil, of the troubles and sufferings of the good. During it the disciples of the Saviour do not reach the completeness of their rest; their victory is not won. Ideally it is so; it always has been so since Jesus overcame: but it is not yet won in the actual realities of the case; and, though in one sense every heavenly privilege is theirs, their difficulties are so great, and their opponents so numerous and powerful, that the true expression for their state is a broken seven years, or three years and a half. During this time, accordingly, the holy city is represented as trodden under foot by the nations. They who are at ease in Zion may not feel it; but to the true disciples of Jesus their Master's prophecy is fulfilled, "In the world ye shall have tribulation." [John xvi. 33.]

William Hendriksen (1900-1982)

Hendriksen was pastor to several Christian Reformed churches, and professor of New Testament literature at Calvin Theological Seminary. In his commentary of Revelation, he said the two witnesses represent the Church, and the 1,260 days in which they prophesy represents the entire dispensation of the Church. He wrote: [13]

The true Church is now represented under the symbolism of two witnesses. These witnesses symbolize the Church militant bearing testimony through its ministers and missionaries throughout the present dispensation. The fact that there are two witnesses emphasizes the missionary task of the Church (cf. Lk. 10:1). The Lord sends his missionaries two by two; what the one lacks the other supplies. Now the Church as an organization, functioning through its ministers and missionaries, will carry on this work for twelve hundred and sixty days. This is the period that extends from the moment of Christ's ascension almost until the judgment day (cf. Rev. 12:5, 6, 14). It is, of course, exactly the equal of forty-two months, for forty-two times thirty is twelve hundred and sixty; and of 'a time, and times, and half a time,' which is three years and

a half (Rev. 12:14). It is the period of affliction; the present gospel age. The question may arise, why is that period expressed now in terms of months (verse 2) then in terms of days (verse 3)? Here our answer is a mere guess: in verse 2 we have the picture of a city that is being besieged and finally taken and trampled upon. Now, the duration of the siege of a city is very often expressed in terms of months. In verse 3, however, the two witnesses are described as prophesying; this is a day-by-day activity. Every day they bear witness, throughout the entire dispensation. They preach repentance and for this reason they are clothed in sackcloth.

James Burton Coffman (1905-2006)

James Burton Coffman was a preacher, teacher, and scholar, and an influential minister of the Manhattan Church of Christ in New York City; he was previously the minister of the Central Church of Christ in Houston. In 1992 he finished a 37-volume commentary of the entire Bible which was published by ACU Press.

Coffman identified the "time, times and a half" with "the whole Christian dispensation" in his commentary on Daniel. In his commentary on Revelation he said, on the 1,260 days of Revelation 12:6: [14]

A thousand two hundred and threescore days . . .

What can this mean? Is there a certain time-period only when Christ will be with his church? No indeed! This time-period represents every minute of the whole Christian dispensation. This is given in exactly the same form as in Rev. 11:3; and there it was understood as all of the time between the two Advents of Christ, and so it must be understood here. "It describes the period of this world's existence during the whole of which the devil persecutes the church." It is also called forty-two months; and someone has suggested that this was the number of the forty-two stations of the Israelites in the wilderness. Hendriksen called this time-period "the millennium of Rev. 20;" and we believe this understanding of it to be correct, despite the description of it there by use of a different figure. The saints of Christ are reigning with him now in his kingdom; and Christ already has the authority in heaven and upon earth (Matthew 28:18-20). His rule is not accepted by many, due to the freedom of the will of man; but that does not contradict the higher truth that Christ is truly reigning today in the hearts of those who love and serve him.

Gregory K. Beale (1949-)

Beale is professor of New Testament and Biblical Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary. He considers the time, times and a half of Daniel and the related numbers as representing the inter-advent age beginning from Christ's resurrection and leading up to the final judgment. He wrote: [15]

John views the 'time, times and half a time' of Dan. 12:7 as the interadvent age beginning from the time of Christ's resurrection and leading up to the final judgment.

The identification of the threefold time formula from Daniel is deducible especially from 12:4-6, where the period begins from the time of Christ's ascension and refers to the church's time of suffering (so also 12:14). The same meaning is apparent for the equivalent phrase 'forty-two months' in 13:5, which describes the time of the beast's blasphemous and persecuting activities.

In his Revelation commentary Beale wrote: [16]

The two witnesses prophesy for three and a half years, the same length of time that "the holy city," "the woman," and "those that tabernacle in heaven" are to be oppressed (11:2; 12:6, 14; 13:6). If these texts speak of the persecution of a community, then it is plausible to identify the witnesses likewise. If the image of an individual woman signifies the community of faith existing during the three and a half years, then the image of two individual prophets might also represent the same reality during the same time period (similarly an individual harlot represents the ungodly community in ch. 17). If it is correct to see 11:3 continuing what is in the preceding two verses, then the two witnesses are another depiction of the true Israel, "the holy city," during its time of distress. As already noted, the period of three and a half years is based on Dan. 7:25; 12:7, 11 (and perhaps Dan. 9:27), which prophesies a time of tribulation for Israel as a community. The number represents a concept rather than a literal enumeration, as with other numbers throughout the Apocalypse (see the comments on, e.g., 1:4, 12, 16, 20; 2:10; 3:10; 4:4-7; 5:1, 6; 6:1-8; 7:1-9; 9:5, 10, 14-15). Here the figurative emphasis is on the true covenant community experiencing tribulation, irrespective of how long the tribulation lasts in literal time.

In Beale's view, the prophetic three and a half year period commenced at Christ's ascension and continues until his return. [17]

The "three and a half years" have been established as the time of tribulation predicted by Daniel 7, 9 and 12, which commences at Christ's ascension and continues until his return. Of all John's references to this time period, Rev. 12:6 is the clearest in identifying the temporal boundaries of the period (cf. 11:2-3; 13:5). Undoubtedly, here the limited age extends from the resurrection of Christ (v 5) until his final appearance (14:14-20). This is a conclusion similar to that of Rissi, who also argues that Christ's death, cited in 11:8, is the beginning point of the period in 11:2 (for Christ's death as commencing the same period in 13:5 see on 13:3). We have also seen that this period is a time of harm to believers in the earthly sphere but protection for them in the invisible realm of the divine sanctuary.

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