

## History and Eschatology in Tension: A Literary Response to Daniel 11:40-45 as Test Case

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**Abstract:** Dan 11:40-45 has long been a *crux interpretum* in the exposition of the visions of Daniel. This is principally due to disagreement over whether to interpret the verses historically with respect to the Hellenist kingdoms of the second century BCE, or eschatologically. My proposal is Daniel 11:40-45 and of the account of the final vision in chapters 10-12 as a whole provide us with clues that enable us to unite the temporal and the eschatological in our appreciation of these verses.

A PASSAGE TOWARDS THE CLOSE of the apocalyptic visions in the latter half of Daniel has long puzzled interpreters. Dan 11:40-45 reads as follows:

40 At the time of the end the king of the south shall attack him. But the king of the north shall rush upon him like a whirlwind, with chariots and horsemen, and with many ships. He shall advance against countries and pass through like a flood.

41 He shall come into the beautiful land, and tens of thousands shall fall victim, but Edom and Moab and the main part of the Ammonites shall escape from his power.

42 He shall stretch out his hand against the countries, and the land of Egypt shall not escape.

43 He shall become ruler of the treasures of gold and of silver, and all the riches of Egypt; and the Libyans and the Ethiopians shall follow in his train.

44 But reports from the east and the north shall alarm him, and he shall go out with great fury to bring ruin and complete destruction to many.

45 He shall pitch his palatial tents between the sea and the beautiful holy mountain. Yet he shall come to his end, with no one to help him (NRSV).

Commentators tend to divide along the lines of whether their interpretation should be principally a temporal/historical one or an eschatological one. Not only is there an impasse between these two positions, at least with respect to these particular verses, but within each position itself there is also an impasse requiring significant exegetical gymnastics. The proposal of this paper is that the difficulties of these verses may be by-passed to some extent by focusing on the literary unity of chapter 11 and considering 11:40-45 in literary terms. My hope is that this will result in more than a detour around the impasse – that it may in fact help to make sense of the verses in question. At the same time, a literary focus can contribute further to our appreciation of the interaction of the historical and the eschatological in the apocalyptic visions of the book of Daniel.

I begin with several riders. First, my work is done mindful of Tremper Longman's call for humility in the interpretation of Daniel generally, including his warning that "not to acknowledge the difficulty and not to allow for tolerance for the other view is simply bad faith".<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, in line with what has become an increasingly accepted practice at least in the English speaking academy, I am using the word "literary" to refer to matters normally treated under the rubric "literary criticism" in disciplines other than biblical studies. Hence I will be dealing with the text as a piece of literature and considering matters such as thematic and lexical connections, rhetorical effect and narratology. I will not be primarily concerned with questions of source, form, and redaction, which in the past have often been described by biblical scholars as "literary" matters.

Finally, there is also an issue as to the temporal application of vv. 36-39 although that must remain just outside the scope of this paper. The assumption I adopt for the purposes of this essay is that there is a surface reference to events in the 160's BCE ongoing in those verses, but that there are also elements that point beyond them.<sup>2</sup>

#### THE PROBLEM

Let us now consider the problem, noting that my comments are broad brush and are not able to take into account all of the nuances of the various positions that I describe. Generally speaking, those who bring a temporal interpretation to vv. 40-45 are likely to assume a late date at least for the visions of Daniel, probably during the Antiochene crisis of the 160's BCE. Those who focus more on the eschatological are

1. T. Longman III, *Daniel* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999) 280.

2. Longman, *Daniel*, 281, refers to this as the "broader intention" of vv. 36-39. See further the discussion of these verses in T. Meadowcroft and N. Irwin, *The Book of Daniel* (Singapore: Asia Theological Association, 2004) 213-16.

likely to hold to the sixth century unity of the book of Daniel, and so regard these verses as predictive prophecy.<sup>3</sup>

In either case there are some significant puzzles. For those who hold to an early date of the entire book of Daniel (sixth century BCE), there is a problem with what to do with the evident shift in temporal focus at v. 40. Even the most conservative commentators are compelled to the view that the previous 39 verses, with some debate over vv. 36-39 as indicated, reflect events in the Hellenist kingdoms of the Seleucids and Ptolemies leading up to the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes.<sup>4</sup> They are then required to explain why the predictions contained in vv. 40-45 break down the close correspondence with the fortunes of the Ptolemies and Seleucids. History does not record a further expedition against Egypt for Antiochus IV, as implied by the vision. Rather he met his death on one of a series of campaigns in the eastern parts of his empire, presumably trying to consolidate his power without interference from the growing imperial ambitions of Rome. The normal hermeneutical move at this point is to shift into eschatological mode and to incorporate these verses into a package of eschatological interpretation of the fourth kingdom and other futurist themes within the visions of the book of Daniel.<sup>5</sup> Without denying the general legitimacy of discerning an eschatological component to the book as a whole, there are a couple of problems with doing so just here. The first is that the interpreter is obliged to argue, somewhat against the grain of the rhetorical evidence, that textual clues indicate this shift in focus.<sup>6</sup> The second is that a way then needs to be found to take seriously the evident connections with events of the second century BCE while retaining a strong eschatological thrust.<sup>7</sup> This is not impossible but nor is it easily achieved.<sup>8</sup>

The issues are a little different and only a little less difficult for those who adopt a second century dating for these chapters of Daniel. Such interpreters rightly note the second century BCE provenance of the chapter and the close correspondence of events recorded therein with

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3. Of recent commentators, note Longman, *Daniel*, 22-23, in support of a sixth century BCE date for the visions, in conversation with J. E. Goldingay, *Daniel* (WBC 30; Dallas: Word, 1989) xxxviii-xl, who argues for a second century date. Their conversation is of particular hermeneutical interest as they come from similar theological positions with respect to the nature of canonical material and its applicability.

4. For example the dispensationalist treatment by C. Larkin, *The Book of Daniel* (Glenside, PA: Larkin Estate, 1929) 228-43.

5. See for instance the package presented by the adventist commentator D. Ford, *Daniel* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1978) 252-59.

6. For example, Longman, *Daniel*, 280-83.

7. Note for example E. J. Young, *Daniel* (London: Banner of Truth, 1972) 250-53, whose argument that the final paragraph of chapter 11 refers to the "Antichrist" has been influential.

8. Two relatively successful attempts are those of J. G. Baldwin, *Daniel* (TOTC; Leicester: IVP, 1978) 199-203, and, from a more devotional perspective, R. Fyall, *Daniel* (Focus on the Bible; Fearn: Christian Focus, 1998) 182-84.

the tussle between the Ptolemaic and Seleucid empires. The material is generally assumed to be in the nature of *vaticanium ex eventu* up until v. 40 at which point it attempts to be genuinely predictive and gets the predictions wrong.<sup>9</sup> This is a tidy solution and there is both a historical and a literary integrity about it. It is a realistic assessment of the historical issues and it respects the literary form of the text with the complete absence of rhetorical clues as to a shift in time perspective. This approach, however, is not immune from assumption about a rhetorical shift at v. 40 despite the lack of literary evidence. The comments of Norman Porteous exemplify this. He writes, "At v. 40 the writer passes from pseudo-prophecy to genuine prediction as is shown by the fact that he is speaking of the eschatological event or at least of events immediately preceding it."<sup>10</sup> By way of a more nuanced contrast, Adam van der Woude argues that, in terms of the thought world of the day, it could never have been the author's intention to signal such a shift.<sup>11</sup>

If one's approach to the text of Scripture is primarily what we might term a "history of religion" or phenomenological approach, there is no problem with the latter approach. The description that I have just given suffices. The conundrum comes for somebody who acknowledges the likely second century date of the vision material, but is also convinced that, as part of the canonical text acknowledged by the church, the entire text of Daniel 11 is part of the locus of divine discourse. Such an interpreter is less likely to be content with the assertion that vv. 40-45 simply shifts into imaginative mode, as Hartman and DiLella would have it, for that seems to entail the treatment of the verses as in physiological terms a kind of appendix, an expendable appendage which can cause great trouble if it is not excised. Admittedly, when one recalls the speculative nature of some of the history of interpretation of apocalyptic material, it is tempting to regret that this section of scripture was not excised at some early stage like a grumbling appendix. Even when the verses are explained in a convincing way, as Adam van der Woude is able to do, the question remains.<sup>12</sup> The conundrum that I have just described is one that I share.

The problems of the latter scenario, of a late date *vaticanium ex eventu* prophecy, are essentially hermeneutical in nature. In contrast the

9. L. F. Hartman and A. A. DiLella, *The Book of Daniel* (AB 23; New York: Doubleday, 1978) 303, call it, somewhat condescendingly, "an imaginative prediction of Antiochus' death".

10. N. Porteous, *Daniel, A Commentary* (OTL; London: SCM, 1965) 169.

11. A. S. van der Woude, "Prophetic Prediction, Political Prognostication, and Firm Belief", in C. A. Evans and J. J. Collins (eds.), *The Quest for Context and Meaning, Studies in Biblical Interpretation in Honor of James A. Sanders* (Leiden: Brill, 1997) 63-73, 63.

12. Van der Woude, "Prophetic Prediction, Political Prognostication, and Firm Belief", 63-73, posits a background to these verses of political expectation shared by a mid second century author, alongside reflection on the prophetic hopes for the fate of Assyria.

former scenario, dating material in the sixth century, presents problems that are more textual or rhetorical in nature, although not exclusively so. But in either case there is an interpretive impasse.

#### THE HISTORICAL AND ESCHATOLOGICAL IN CONVERSATION

However it is an impasse that may be negotiated. The starting point is an appreciation of the conversation between history and eschatology that is at the heart of these vision chapters of Daniel. In this respect there is a significant difference between chapter 11 and the earlier visions. Despite the continuation in chapter 11 of what R. H. Charles has called the “reticence” of the narrative vision,<sup>13</sup> this vision is more firmly and obviously rooted in human history than any of the others.<sup>14</sup> This is reinforced by the date in 11:1, which itself constitutes further evidence of the interplay between the terrestrial and the celestial in this particular vision narrative.<sup>15</sup> Ironically, this rootedness in history is highlighted by the oblique interpretation given to Daniel in chapter 12. Earlier visions have been less historically explicit but their interpretation has been more explicit; this vision is explicitly historical, yet the answer to Daniel’s question, “what shall be the outcome of these things?” (12:8), is strangely truncated. Daniel is left simply with the instruction to seal them up and await the reward coming to him and his people. This forces the reader both to take the temporal aspect of chapter 11 seriously and to await an outcome that apparently transcends temporal experience. The reader must take the temporal or historical aspect seriously because the interpretation in chapter 12, unlike the interpretation of earlier visions, gives us no other basis on which to understand the events described in chapter 11. At the same time, the linking of events with the “time of the end” and the instruction to seal them up requires us to recognise that they have an eschatological significance. As J. J. Collins expresses it, “Although the Book of Daniel addressed a specific historical situation, its relevance was not exhausted by that situation.”<sup>16</sup> This effect is reinforced by the abruptness of the

13. R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1929) 282.

14. D. E. Gowan, *Daniel* (AOTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 2001) 141-42, draws this feature out further. Any of the recent commentators give an account of the historical details behind chapter 11.

15. I acknowledge the debate over the problematical placement of the date in 11.1, which is more usually designated a late gloss. However I am persuaded by the argument for its authenticity by P. David, “Daniel 11.1: A Late Gloss”, in A. S. van der Woude (ed.), *The Book of Daniel in the Light of New Findings* (Leuven: University Press, 1993) 505-14.

16. J. J. Collins, *Daniel* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 61.

ending of the book of Daniel itself.<sup>17</sup> In some inescapable sense history and eschatology have to do with one another.

In such a context it is a defiance of that fact to maintain an excessive focus either on historical matters or on eschatological concerns. When the two can talk to each other, as the narratology of the visions demands that they should, then progress may be made. Even the type of agenda expressed by van der Woude does not quite do that.

#### A LITERARY RESPONSE

One way to make progress is to read the material primarily in literary terms. When that is done, we find a number of interesting thematic links between vv. 40-45 and the earlier trends evident in the account of the rest of Daniel 11. Cumulatively these reflect an expectation that all that has so far been discerned will continue into the future. The terms in which the conflict has been cast, as a struggle between the North and the South, recalls not just the politics of the second century BCE but also the ancient enmities that made the life of Israel such a fraught one.<sup>18</sup> Although the enemies using Palestine as their battlefield are now the Ptolemies and Seleucids, the North/South terminology recalls the Assyrians and Babylonians from the north and the Egyptians from the south.<sup>19</sup> The final verses of the chapter anticipate the defeat of Egypt (v. 43), but also anticipate ongoing trouble from the ancient enemies of Israel, typified as Edom, Moab and the Ammonites (v. 41).

The earlier parts of the vision have charted the steady progress of the king of the North in the face of opposition from the South. The culmination of that process is now anticipated in the fact that "the land of Egypt shall not escape" (v. 42), the land of Egypt being a key bastion of Ptolemaic power and the longstanding envy of the Seleucid monarchs. Moreover the Libyans and the Ethiopians will be thrown into the victory procession along the way (v. 43), as the influence of the North continues its progress south. The expansion will continue. At the same time the plundering of temples to support the military campaigns of the Ptolemies (v. 24) will be a feature of the time anticipated by vv. 40-45. Indeed the plundering will become even more successful and

17. This contrast deserves further reflection, but is beyond the scope of this study. For further on this, see the comments by D. Nolan Fewell, *Circle of Sovereignty, Plotting Politics in the Book of Daniel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991) 135, on what she calls "the ultimate irony in the book of Daniel", that the final kingdoms remain envisioned but not yet manifest.

18. In this respect, E. C. Lucas, *Daniel* (AOTC 20; Leicester: Apollos) 293, comments, "the use of biblical phrases and the pattern [the author] has constructed in the course of the historical survey suggest that he is doing no more than expressing in general terms the belief that, like other rulers before him who have given way to arrogance, Antiochus will meet an untimely end. Because of Antiochus' greater hubris, his end is expressed in somewhat hyperbolic terms."

19. This reverberation is dissipated by the LXX's interpretive translation of south throughout the chapter as "Egypt".

intrusive as the king “shall become ruler of the treasures of gold and of silver, and all the riches of Egypt” (v. 43).

Apart from the details implied by these anticipations, the verses that are the subject of this paper also recall the general tenor of “fury” and “destruction” and arrogance which has thus far marked the work of the king of the North, and indeed of the king of the South when he has the upperhand (vv. 21-24, 36). The sense of alarm and revenge and destructive ambition in those verses are captured in the reference to “fury” and “complete destruction” in v. 44. In short, the general unpleasantness that has characterised the reign of Antiochus and his predecessors is set to continue and get worse.

Perhaps most significantly for the visionary, the vision narrative of chapter 11 has thrown up a number of hints that the tussle between the kings of the North and the South spells ongoing trouble for the people of the covenant (vv. 14, 16, 22, 28). These hints become increasingly explicit as the focus narrows onto the career of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (vv. 31-35). The prophetic visionary anticipates that this state of affairs will continue. The culmination will be that the king of the North establishes himself on the “beautiful land” itself (v. 16) “between the sea and the beautiful holy mountain” (v. 45).<sup>20</sup> In this way, the impact of events on the faithful ones and their land will be increasingly sharply felt.

Furthermore, given that the king of the North is a composite identification of the Seleucid emperors throughout chapter 11, there is nothing in these final verses of the chapter that requires the interpreter to read the king of the North as Antiochus IV. True, the balance of the external historical evidence, at least as marshalled by late date proponents, points to a likely expectation on the part of the compilers of the danielic visions that the “end” anticipated (on which more below) would be that of Antiochus IV. However, that is entirely on the basis of external data and is not resident in the vision itself in the Masoretic Text, which as we have noted above is determinedly elusive on historical identification. There is a sense then in which it is perverse of the later reader to require a particular identification at this point and then struggle with the text for failing correctly to prophecy the end of a ruler to which that text itself does not explicitly commit itself. In other words, the maintenance of the kings of the North/South terminology permits a degree of multivalence at this point, which is best appreciated in literary terms.

In those literary terms there is a clear continuation of events into the anticipated future. They reflect the trends that are seen in the ongoing tussle between the Hellenist kingdoms while pointing towards a larger significance and culmination in a future that may be glimpsed in only

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20. See also the term at Dan 8:9.

the broadest outlines. As a result, these verses stand between the historical present and the culmination of history.

#### THE "END"

This dynamic is further reflected in the term "end" (*qets*) which opens v. 40 and is woven through these verses. The final occurrence of the word in v. 45 refers to "his end" (my emphasis), that is, the ignominious end of the king of the North. This expression has been foreshadowed by a reference in v. 40 to "the end" (my emphasis), implying that an eschatological culmination is also in mind. This variegated usage of the term *qets*, I suggest, indicates that the anticipated end of the Seleucid king of the North is a temporal end, but that his end foreshadows a greater end, the culmination of all earthly kingdoms and the establishment of the eternal kingdom.<sup>21</sup> It points to a future that looks like the past but is something quite different from the past. It is a vision built on the earthly and temporal events of Dan 11:1-39 but looking towards a time described as "the end of the days" (*qets hayamin*, 12:13). In that respect also Dan 11:40-45 reflects the steady interaction between history and the eschatological vision that is such a central feature of the entire book of Daniel, and of this vision in particular.<sup>22</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

The literary reading that I am proposing achieves several things. It respects the integrity of the text as we have it, in its desire to link the concluding verses with what has gone before, and so is in fellowship with those who see a unity to these chapters. It is able at the same time to respect the eschatological possibilities of vv. 40-45 while taking into account the historical nature of much that precedes them. Thus it also remains in substantial fellowship with those who favour a historical interpretation of the entire chapter. It does however part company with such interpreters in its desire to understand the material in vv. 40-45 not purely in temporal or historical terms, and hence to avoid labelling these verses as erroneous or failed or imaginative prophecy. For these verses are instrumental in conveying an interaction between the eschatological and the temporal that is at the heart of the danielic vision, and that is crucial to an appreciation of the world of apocalyptic.

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21. Baldwin, *Daniel*, 192, comments that "Antiochus is the prototype of many who will come after him."

22. See also T. J. Meadowcroft, "Who are the Princes of Persia and Greece (Daniel 10)? Pointers towards the Danielic Vision of Earth and Heaven", forthcoming in *JSOT* (2004).