

Daniel 11 Introduction

The prophecy, which is introduced in Daniel 10 and concluded in chapter 12, culminates the prophecies of the book of Daniel, providing far more detail than the others in plain language. Chapters 2, 7, and 8 employ symbolism accompanied by some interpretation of the symbols (2:36-45; 7:16-27; 8:17-26), and 9:24-27 provides supplementary explanation of the vision in chapter 8.

The long prophecy in Dan 11:2-12:3 is different:

Rather than presenting symbols followed by their interpretation, it predicts a succession of human powers with the kind of straightforward language that characterizes the interpretations in earlier chapters.

“Here we can say with Jesus’ disciples, “Ah, now you are speaking plainly and not using figurative speech!” (John 16:29). It could be supposed that the plain language of Dan 11:2-12:3 should make it easier to understand than the earlier prophecies in the book. It is true that explicit names of some countries provide clear historical anchor points, as in the early progression of powers from Persia to Greece (11:2) and then (Ptolemaic) Egypt (v. 8). However, the prophecy predicts actions of many rulers without naming them. Therefore, the challenge is to identify the actors and events on the basis of their profiles within the context of the historical flow.

Dan 11:2-12:3, which would require a book-length exposition. Rather, it suggests application of some methodological/hermeneutical guidelines relating to features of the text, with illustrative discussion to show how these guidelines can work, to hopefully facilitate constructive progress toward a greater degree of common understanding regarding this fascinating and increasingly relevant prophecy. The concern of the present author is to freely explore and follow indications of the biblical text itself, without regard for constraints of ideological “boxes” or political correctness that are foreign to the Bible.

1. Gain Perspective from the Narrative Framework of the Prophecy

In Daniel 10-12, Daniel places the prophecy of 11:2-12:3 within a narrative framework, as is characteristic of the genre “apocalypse.” He introduces the prophecy in 10:1-11:1, where he describes the circumstances under which he received the revelation. At the beginning of his introduction, he summarizes the prophecy as concerning “a great conflict” (v. 1).

In 10:14, a resplendent heavenly being informs Daniel that he has come “to make you understand what is to happen to your people in the latter days. For the vision is for days yet to come.” So whatever else we get out of the prophecy, its overall thrust is to help Daniel and his readers comprehend a great war/controversy that affects the lives of his people, i.e., God’s special people, in time that is far future from Daniel’s perspective. This does not necessarily mean that Daniel’s (i.e., God’s) people are explicitly in the foreground throughout the prophecy. Indeed, the prophecy directly mentions them only a few times (11:14, 22, 30, 32-35; 12:1-3; cf. 11:44), but the events that are outlined here impact them and their ultimate destiny (see especially 12:1-3), as in chapters 7-9.8.

The prophecy itself in 11:2-12:3 is in the form of speech from a heavenly being, as when Daniel had received interpretations of his earlier visions (7:15-16; 8:15-19; 9:20-23). The narrative conclusion in chapter 12 emphasizes the eschatological focus of the prophecy and the effect of the predicted events on God’s people. The prophecy is shut up and sealed “until the time of the end” (v. 4; cf. v. 9), when “knowledge shall increase” (v. 4).

The “time of the end” would come after “a time, times, and half a time,” “when the shattering of the power of the holy people comes to an end” (v. 7; cf. 7:25). During this period of persecution, God’s people would be refined and separated from the wicked: “Many shall purify themselves and make themselves white and be refined, but the wicked shall act wickedly. And none of the wicked shall understand, but those who are wise shall understand” (12:10). The language here reiterates that of 11:33, 35—“And the wise among the people shall make many understand . . . and some of the wise shall stumble, so that they may be refined, purified, and made white, until the time of the end”—showing that these verses refer to the “time, times, and half a time” period.

The fact that Dan 11 is especially concerned with a “great conflict” (10:1) involving “what is to happen to your people in the latter days” (10:14) from 11:31 onward implies that the details in chapter 11 before v. 31 supply background to this conflict between the “king of the north” and God, with his true people. This parallels the way elements of the prophecy in chapter 8 referring to kingdoms before the rise of the “little horn” power provide background to the climactic conflict between God, with his people, and the “little horn,” which replaces the “regular” with “the transgression that makes desolate” and persecutes (vv. 10-13, 24-25). In chapters 8 and 11, the background facilitates identification of the historical referent of the “little horn” and “king of the north” when they appear. The fact that the profiles of their careers match indicates that they represent the same power.

2. Analyze Relationships in the Literary Structure

Analysis of literary structure to identify features such as repetition, flow of ideas, and strategic placement of key terms precedes an attempt to match the prophecy with historical events. Prematurely introducing specific historical aspects leads to distortion of interpretation by overlooking, dismissing, or de-emphasizing elements in the text. The first step in analysing literary structure is to determine the boundaries of a literary unit. As mentioned above, the unit consisting of the prophecy itself is in 11:2-12:3, preceded and followed by narrative. The prophecy unit should be considered as a whole. An interpretation that does not consider the entire unit is susceptible to distortion.

Literary structure is evident from patterns of language flow and repetition. A given passage can show more than one valid structure, depending on which patterns an interpreter emphasizes, but here we are concerned with the most prominent structure that naturally arises from the most obvious elements in the text. Following is a structural outline of 11:2-12:3 with some key words highlighted:

- 11:2-4 historical introduction: Persia > “mighty king” > breakup of his empire
- 11:5-19 kings of N. versus S. (from breakup of mighty king’s empire; includes king of N. entering “glorious land”)
- 11:20 transition of king of N.: “Then shall arise in his place. . .”
- 11:21-45 transition of king of N.: “Then shall arise in his place. . .”
- 11:21-22 “contemptible person” in place of king of N. (usurps in the midst of peace; military dominance; prince of covenant broken)
- 11:23-24 “contemptible person” changed by alliance (deceitful; strong with few people; in the midst of peace; distributing plunder)
- 11:25-30 wars with king of S. (ultimately unsuccessful; opposes holy covenant)
- 11:31 religious actions (profanes temple/fortress; removes that which is regular; sets up abomination)
- 11:32-35 religious actions regarding people (seduces covenant violators; persecutes wise ones)

11:36-39 religious actions (blasphemous self-exaltation; honours god of fortresses)
11:40-43 war with king of S. in end-time (includes entering “glorious land”; successful)
11:44-45 end of king of N. (news from E. and N.; persecutes; goes toward glorious holy mountain; comes to end)
12:1-3 end of present age (Michael arises; time of trouble; Daniel’s people delivered; resurrection)

Notice the following features:

1. Daniel 11:5-19 is a continuous section predicting details of interaction between members of two dynasties from northern and southern divisions of the empire of the “mighty king” who follows Persia (cf. vv. 2-4).

2. The words *we‘amad ‘al kannô*, “Then shall stand in his place” (my translation) at the beginnings of vv. 20 and 21 appear to mark major transitions. The term *kên* (lexical form of the noun in *kannô*, to which the 3ms pron. suffix is attached) refers to a functional place/position, status, or office. A person can be returned to the same place after having been removed from it (Gen 40:13; 41:13). Alternatively, one can “stand (up)” or arise (*qal* of the root ‘-m-d) in the place of another, thereby replacing the latter, as in Dan 11:7: “And from a branch from her roots one shall arise [*we‘amad* = *qal* perfect consecutive of ‘-m-d] in his place [*kannô*].”

In Dan 11:7 the prepositional phrase “from a branch from [or ‘of] her roots” indicates that the successor comes from the same dynasty as his predecessor. This was fulfilled when Ptolemy III Euergetes (246-221), the brother of Berenice, replaced his father, Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285-246), as the ruler of Egypt.¹¹ However, vv. 20 and 21 commence with the expression *we‘amad ‘al kannô*, “Then shall stand in his place,” without any indication of dynastic continuity. One simply occupies the place formerly held by another. Indeed, v. 21 could not refer to dynastic succession because the “contemptible person” takes over without even receiving “royal majesty.” So it seems clear that *we‘amad ‘al kannô* in v. 20 also refers to a significant change of rule. If so, following the end of the prediction regarding the northern kingdom in v. 19, v. 20 transfers the designation “king of the north” to another power, and v. 21 transfers this descriptor to yet another dynasty, which originates with a usurper. This “king of the north” dynasty continues to the end of chapter 11 (v. 45), although its nature changes in v. 23 (see below).

3. In v. 21, the usurper shall come in the midst of peace (preposition *b* + *šalwāh*) “and obtain the kingdom by flatteries.” Then he (or his dynasty) will possess overwhelming military might (v. 22). Verses 23-24 continue the career of this power, but it changes due to an alliance with another power: “And from the time that an alliance is made with him he shall act deceitfully, and he shall become strong with a small people without warning...” Just as the “contemptible person” initially had taken over without a fight, here this power changes without a fight and becomes strong again and/or in a different way with only a few people. Then he exercises powerful control and again possesses military might (vv. 24-25).

4. Daniel 11:25-43 is structured as an introversion (ABCB!A!), framed by wars of the king of the north against the king of the south, which are ultimately unsuccessful in vv. 25-30 but successful in vv. 40-43. Within that military framework is an inner arch structure (ABA!) that is unique in Dan 11 up to this point because it concerns religious actions (vv. 31-39), which are carried out by the king of the north. Verses 31 and 36-39 predict actions regarding worship, including profanation of the temple, which is also described as a

“fortress” (v. 31; mā’ôz), and honouring a god of fortresses (v. 38; pl. of mā’ôz). These religious uses of the word mā’ôz are unique in the prophecy (elsewhere of military fortresses in vv. 7, 10, 19, 39).

At the centre of the arch (B in ABA!), vv. 32-35 predict religious actions of the king of the north regarding people, including polluting (“seduce”) those who act wickedly against the covenant and persecuting the wise people who know God. The fact that the centre of the arch concerns God’s true people corresponds with the overall purpose of the prophecy: to reveal to Daniel “what is to happen to your people in the latter days” (10:14), which is reinforced by the fact that in chapter 12 the “time, times, and half a time” lasts until “the shattering of the power of the holy people” (v. 7).

5. There are three occurrences of the word c.bî, “glorious,” in Dan 11. The first two of these are in the expression “glorious land” (vv. 16, 41), which refers to the land of Israel (cf. Ezek 20:6, 15). These references to the land occur before and after the predictions regarding religious elements such as the “covenant” (vv. 22, 30, 32) and actions against the “temple” (v. 31) and God’s people (vv. 32-35). In the earlier part of the chapter, land is the concern of empires bent on expansion of their territory through military force (vv. 2-19), and the “glorious land” is just one more area for the king of the north to dominate (v. 16). In v. 41, the king of the north again enters the “glorious land” during a military campaign, but the fact that he is a religious power (vv. 36-39) raises the possibility that he regards the “glorious land” as more than just another land. This idea is strengthened in v. 45, where the last action of the king of the north is to “pitch his palatial tents between the sea and the glorious holy mountain,” apparently with the intent to enter the “glorious holy mountain.” Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, the holy mountain is Mt. Zion, the temple mount located at Jerusalem in the land of Israel (cf. Ps 48; Isa 27:13; 66:20; Ezek 43:12; Joel 2:1; 4:17 [Engl. 3:17]; Zech 8:3).

3. Take the Context of a Text Profile into Account

It is not enough to match an isolated element, such as, “He shall stand in the Glorious Land with destruction in his power” (11:16b), with a historical event that seems to fit that description. The incident must occur within the context of the flow of events profiled by the text. The prophecy of Dan 11 begins with explicit mention of “Persia” in v. 2 (cf. 8:20). The subsequent “mighty king” (11:3), whose kingdom is “broken and divided toward the four winds of heaven” (v. 4), must be Alexander the Great (cf. 8:21—“king of Greece”), whose empire was divided into four kingdoms (cf. 8:8, 22): Antigonid Macedonia, Attalid Pergamum, Seleucid Syria, and Ptolemaic Egypt. This explains the expressions “king of the south” and “king of the north” in 11:5-19. Verse 8 identifies the king of the south as a ruler of Egypt, to the south of the land of Israel, which engaged in a series of wars with Syria to the north. So in this portion of Dan 11, the kings of the south and north are successive members of the Hellenistic dynasties of Ptolemaic Egypt and Seleucid Syria, respectively. It is the king of the north who “shall stand in the Glorious Land,” i.e., the land of Israel (11:16). The Seleucid king who did this was Antiochus III the Great (ruled 222-187 B.C.). Before this during the Hellenistic period, the land of Israel was controlled by Ptolemaic Egypt.

4. Take All Internal Features of a Text Profile into Account

It is crucial to take into account all features of the profiles of people and their actions in the text of Dan 11 before attempting to match them with historical individuals or groups and the events that they cause. Overlooking or ignoring some features results in mistakes.

5. Correlate with Earlier Prophecies in Daniel to Establish the Historical Framework

There are several clear points of contact between Dan 11 and the earlier prophecy in chapters 8-9 (with 9:24-27 as supplementary interpretation of chap. 8), including use of identical Hebrew terms. Explicit mention of "Persia" in 11:2 begins the prophecy of chapter 11 in the same period as "the kings of Media and Persia" in 8:20. The "mighty king" in 11:3 whose kingdom is "broken and divided toward the four winds of heaven" (v. 4) is the first king of a Greek empire (cf. 8:21—"king of Greece") that is divided into four lesser kingdoms (v. 22). Scholars of all kinds agree that this must be Alexander the Great, whose Greek/Macedonian Empire was divided into Antigonid Macedonia, Attalid Pergamum, Seleucid Syria, and Ptolemaic Egypt. So the dynasties in 11:5-19 are Hellenistic, and the transition to the next major power that supersedes them comes between vv. 19 and 20.