

The Sealed Book

1. Introduction

The injunction to Daniel to “shut up the words and seal the book” (Dan12:4) constitutes the conclusion to the last of the outlined prophecies recorded in the book of Daniel. Owing to its enigmatic nature, this verse has received several differing interpretations. Critical scholars consider the verse as supportive of the supposition that the book was written pseudonymously. According to Alexander A. Di Lella, to “shut up the words and seal the book” implies that the message of the prophecy, which to him is a fiction, was to be kept secret, indicating, therefore, that this account was written “vaticinia ex eventu.”

To other scholars, to “shut up the words” denotes the preservation of the book rather than its concealment, and that to “seal the book” means to keep it secure for purposes of authentication. Some scholars, however, see the injunction as having to do with the difficulty in understanding the prophecies of Daniel.

Most scholars take the phrase, “time of the end,” as referring to the time of persecution during the days of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. However, some conservative scholars argue that the phrase is apocalyptic and refers to the time period leading to the end of the world. The phrase “rove around” may imply physical movement up and down. It may also imply diligent search into the prophecies of Daniel at the time of end.

To Di Lella, “rove around” does not make sense in the context, hence the emendation, “many will apostatize.” Some scholars take “knowledge” to be scientific knowledge in the light of modern inventions. Others see it as knowledge of the prophecies of the book of Daniel, and especially of those pertaining to the time of the end.

To others, the phrase “knowledge shall increase” is corrupt, hence they read “evil will increase.” Norman W. Porteous reads “disasters” instead of “knowledge.”

As it can be seen from foregoing review, scholars are divided in their interpretation of Dan 12:4. Some even question the textual integrity of this verse and, by extension, the book as a whole. The current study seeks to determine the contextual meaning of the verse through exegesis. After establishing the text and its context, the study undertakes lexical semantic study of the relevant phrases in Dan 12:4. The meanings and relationships of these words and how they contribute to the flow of thought of Dan 12 are then indicated. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the understanding of Dan 12:4 and some portions of the book of Daniel as a whole.

2. Translation and Context of Dan 12:4

Dan 12:4 may be translated from the MT as follows: But you, O Daniel, shut up the words and seal the book until/to a time of end. Many shall rove around and the knowledge shall increase. Dan 12:4 forms part of the last vision of the book of Daniel, which, introduced in chap. 10, runs through chap. 11 and concludes in chap. 12. Like other portions of the book of Daniel, the genre of Dan 10-12 is apocalypse, and 12:4 marks the prose ending of this apocalypse.

This is to say that Dan 10-12 forms a single literary unit. The angel tells Daniel that the vision concerns “many days” (10:14). Thus, starting from the days of the Persian kings (11:2), it extends all the way to the resurrection of the saints at Christ’s second coming (12:2). Having done with the revelation, the angel bids Daniel to “shut up the words and

seal the book till the time of the end.” He further predicts that “many shall rove around, and the knowledge shall increase.” In other words, the “roving around” comes at the “time of the end,” the result being an increase in “knowledge.” But until this time, the prophecy concerning the “time of the end” is said to be “shut up” and “sealed.” Within the context of chaps.10-12, Dan 12:4 traces other verses dealing with the “time of the end” (see 11:35,40; 12:9). That the book is “sealed” (12:4) is also repeated in 12:9. Since Dan 12:4 forms part of an apocalyptic unit of prophecy, it needs to be interpreted within the limits of this genre and with particular consideration of the time framework within which it is set.

3. Shut Up the Word

The Hebrew word *setom*, translated “shut up,” is a Qal imperative from the verb *satam*. The root *stm* is related to the Aramaic *setam* and its cognates “stop up, close, shut” which can also mean “something unknown, undefined.” In the Qal stem, *stm* may mean “shut up,” “stop up,” or “keep closed,” depending on the context of the passage in which it occurs. In certain passages (Gen 26:15; 2 Kgs 3:19; 2 Chr 32:30), *stm* means to “stop up” a well. In Neh 4:7, it is used of “stopping” or “closing” the breaches of the wall of Jerusalem. It is only in Ezek 28:3 and Ps 51:6 that the root *stm* is translated “secret” and “hidden” respectively. In both passages, however, the word has to do with knowledge and understanding. Apart from Dan 12:4, the root *stm* appears in two other places in the book of Daniel (8:26; 12:9). In 8:26, *setom* portrays the imagery of closing up the vision which Daniel himself did not understand. In this passage, the word seems to imply the case where the prophetic words are closed up until a future time. While preservation may be implied, it seems the emphasis is on the idea that the contents may not be available until a future time. In the context of Dan 8, the total vision is explained except the 2,300 “evenings, mornings.” Perhaps, that part is what is closed up. Thus, the understanding of the prophetic words is a key issue here. In 12:9, the Qal passive participle *setumim* denotes that the words are already “closed up.” The impression that is given here is that the prophetic words referred to here cannot be fully understood by Daniel at that time (cf. v. 8). It is in this same sense that *setom* is used in 12:4. The pairing of *setom* and *khatom* in 12:4 as well as their corresponding participles in v. 9 seems to emphasize the inability to understand parts of the prophecy until the “time of the end.”

4. Seal the Book

The word *khatom*, translated “seal” in Dan 12:4 is a Qal imperative. The Hebrew *khtm* in the Qal stem generally means “to affix a seal,” or “to seal up.” In some passages (1 Kgs 21:8; Neh 10:1,2; Esth 8:8,10; Job 33:16; Dan 6:18), *khtm* means to “affix a seal.” In Jer 32:10,11, it means to “seal” a deed of purchase or probably “to fasten up by sealing.” In Job 14:17 and Deut 32:34, *khtm* is applied figuratively to human sin and it seems to imply the keeping of these sins till a future time (cf. Job 33:16). Thus, *khtm* in the Qal stem generally means to “seal,” probably for purposes of authentication, preservation, or security. In prophetic passages, *khtm* seems to assume a metaphorical, rather than literal, meaning. In Dan 9:24, *khtm* appears two times: “sins” and “vision and prophet” will be sealed up by the end of the 70 week period. Probably, to seal up sins means to “put an end” to sin, and to seal up vision and prophet may mean to “seal up prophetic vision” by the fulfilment of the 70 weeks of a prophetic vision.” Apparently in Dan 9:24, no literal meaning is intended. Similarly, in Isaiah’s command to “bind up the testimony and seal the teaching” (Isa 8:16), *khtm* is not literal; it appears to be “an act of affirmation and attestation.”

Another metaphorical usage of khtm is seen in Isa 29:11-12 where an un-intelligible prophecy is said to be “sealed.” According to the text, the words of a sealed book cannot be read either because it is sealed or because the one to whom it is delivered to read is unlearned. However Isa 29:11-12 may be interpreted, the main idea of the text has to do with the ‘understanding’ of the prophecy, and this is what khtm seems to underscore. Thus, a sealed prophecy cannot be understood. The meaning of “shut up” and “seal” in Dan 12:4, 9 is to be understood in the “technical apocalyptic sense.” In 12:8, Daniel asserted not to understand the activities surrounding the “time, times, and half a time.” He then asks the angel the outcome of such activities. It is in answer to Daniel’s quest for knowledge about these events that the angel tells him the book is “sealed.” With this background, it is logical to conclude that sealing the book means that the events which Daniel did not understand would not be understood till the “time of the end.” While in 12:4 the angel says that Daniel himself should “seal” the book, in 12:9, the angel says that the book is already “sealed.” This suggests that the sealing of the book is not a literal activity that Daniel is to undertake. Thus, as elsewhere, the sealing of the book in Dan 12:4 is metaphorical, giving the impression that the unintelligible portions of the book will remain so for a future time. It is only when circumstances supplied the key that these enigmatic portions would be understood. Was the injunction to shut up the words and seal the book in reference to the whole book of Daniel or to some portion? Contrary to the view that the instruction applies to the whole book, it is reasonable to conclude that it applies only to the prophecy that concerns the “time of the end.” Since the angel had interpreted the larger part of the visions of the book, it is assumed that Daniel understood those parts. In two instances (8:27; 12:8), however, Daniel says he did not understand. What he could not understand concerned the events of the “time, times, and half a time” (12:6,7) and the vision of the 2,300 days (8:13,14). Consequently, it was only the events at the “time of the end” (8:13,17,26; 12:6-8) that were unintelligible to Daniel, hence forming the part sealed.

5. Time of the End

The Hebrew phrase translated as “time of the end” is ‘et qets. The expression ‘et comes from the root ‘nh II “to be occupied.” As noun, ‘et generally means “time, space of time, appointed time, proper time.” Among other uses, ‘et connotes a fixed, set time or period (1 Chr 9:25; Jer 8:12). It is used both in qualitative (Gen 24:11; Jer 50:16; Zech 10:1) and quantitative senses (Judg 11:26; 1 Kgs 6:1). In the book of Daniel, ‘et primarily refers to a chronological point or period of time (9:21, 25; 11:6,13; 12:11). A definite apocalyptic use of ‘et is found in 12:1: once it refers to the “time of the end” and twice to the “time of trouble.” This eschatological usage of ‘et is also found elsewhere (Jer 8:13; 18:23; 51:6; Joel 3:18). The expression qets is derived from the root qts., which means “end, limit, boundary.”

The predominant use of qets in the OT is temporal. Thus, qets may refer to the “end” of a specific period (Exod 12:41), or to an unspecified period (1 Kgs 17:7; 2 Chr 18:2; Neh 13:6). In the book of Daniel, qets is used with the general temporal meaning of “end” (cf. 11:6,13). In 9:26 qets seems to refer to the end of the Messiah and to the end when Jerusalem will be destroyed (70 AD). In 12:13a, it seems to refer to the end of Daniel’s life (cf. 9:26b), while in v. 13b it refers to the eschaton. The eschatological significance of qets is also found in 8:19; 11:27,45; and 12:6 where it points to the apocalyptic “time of the end.” The exact phrase ‘et qets appears five times in the apocalyptic sections of the book of Daniel, and nowhere else in the OT. In all five occurrences (8:17; 11:35,40; 12:4,9), the expression refers to the apocalyptic period of time that leads up to the end of the world.

Daniel uses the phrase “time of the end” to designate not the final end, but rather a certain time span that precedes the resurrection of the saints (11:40; 12:1,2). It seems that this apocalyptic period will begin at a definite time (11:35), and 12:7-9 seems to indicate that the “time of the end” comes at the completion of the “time, times, and half a time” or the 1,260 years. Roy Allan Anderson’s statement summarizes this idea: “The prophetic expression ‘the time of the end’ is not the end of time. It refers to the end of the 1260-year period of papal supremacy which lasted from A.D. 538 to 1798.”

6. Rove Around

The Polel form *yeshotetu* comes from the root *shwt* which may be related to the Aramaic *shwt* “swing, roam, move to and fro.” In the Polel stem, *shwt* generally means “go eagerly, quickly, to and fro” in search of some-thing. In some passages, this search may involve physical movement (Num 11:8; Job 1:17; 2:2; 2 Sam 24:2,8; Jer 5:1; 49:3; Amos 8:12). For example, in Num 11:8 people “rove around” in search of manna and in Amos 8:12 people will go in search of the word of God which cannot be found.

Yet, in other passages (2 Chr 16:9; Zech 4:10), it denotes “searching,” which scarcely involves physical movement. In 2 Chr 16:9, God’s eyes are said to “rove around” throughout the whole world (also Zech 4:10). Rather than a physical movement, the meaning here is that God observes the activities of men. In sum, *shwt* implies searching, involving either bodily movement in search of something or a mental activity of searching into something. The context of Dan 12:4 suggests that “rove around” be understood as “searching” into the meaning of something. The increase of “knowledge” directly sequels the activity of ‘roving around.’ Since “knowledge” here has to do with the sealed book, it follows that to “rove around” also has to do with the book. The phrase, therefore, is used here metaphorically, and it may point to a thorough search into the prophecies of Daniel at the time of the end.

7. Knowledge Shall Increase

The noun *da’at* “knowledge” is a derivative of *yd* “to know.” The root is used in every stem of the Hebrew language, and it expresses different forms of knowledge. The feminine noun *da’at* is a general term for knowledge, particularly that which is of personal, experimental nature (Prov 24:5). It is also used for technical knowledge or ability (Exod 31:3; 35:31; 1 Kgs 7:14) and discernment (Ps 119:66). In Proverbs, *da’at* is used interchangeably with *khokmah* “wisdom,” *tebunah* “understanding” and *binah* “understanding” (e.g. 2:5,6,10; 9:10). The prophetic ‘knowledge of God’ is also prominent in Hosea (4:1,6; 6:6). The people go into exile for lack of *da’at* (e.g. Isa 5:13; Jer 2:8; Hos 4:1,6). In this sense, *da’at* is necessary for the salvation of God’s people (cf. Jer 31:31-34). Daniel uses two Hebrew words for “knowledge”: *madda* ‘and *da’at*.

The former appears in 1:4,17 and seems to imply scientific knowledge. Thus, Daniel and his friends surpassed the others in *maddā* in their study (v. 17). In v. 4, both *madda*’ and *da’at* are used, yet while *madda*’ may be understood as scientific intelligence or thought (cf. Eccl. 10: 20), is to be taken as knowledge in a personal or experiential sense. It suffices to say, then, that scientific knowledge seems to be generally rendered *madda*’ in the book of Daniel, and that, had the prophet intended to refer to such knowledge in Dan 12:4, he would ordinarily have used the normal word, *madda*’. The meaning of *da’at* in Dan 12:4 seems to concern the prophecy of the book of Daniel. In Dan 12:10, the angel tells Daniel that the righteous, not the wicked, shall understand the subject of the end. This

means that, how-ever scientific the wicked are, they will not understand the revelation. The inability of the wicked to understand this revelation means that “know-ledge” as intended in 12:4 is not merely scientific. It has to do with the understanding of the prophecies (cf. v. 8). Further, the use of the definite article, ha, with da’at shows that da’at is specific, not general. As the context demands, it is the knowledge of “the book” (v. 4). Thus, the purpose of the ‘roving around’ is to increase “knowledge” of the book which will be unsealed at the “time of the end.”

8. Conclusion

This paper attempted to study the contextual meaning of Dan 12:4. A brief literature review has shown that scholars are divided in their interpretation of the text. The context and genre of Dan 12:4 is clearly apocalyptic, hence any interpretation of the text needs to take this into consideration. The lexical and contextual analysis of Dan 12:4 has yielded the following conclusions: 1. The phrases “shut up” and “seal the book” parallel each other and are to be construed metaphorically, not literally. While these phrases may imply authentication or preservation of the book of Daniel, the context of Dan 12:4 and the use of these phrases elsewhere seem to suggest that the understanding of some parts of the prophecy regarding the “time of the end” would not be possible till a future time. Thus, Dan 12:4 has nothing to do with concealment of the prophecies, nor does it point to pseudonymity of the book of Daniel. Daniel was asked to “shut up the words and seal the book,” meaning that the key to its interpretation was not readily available, and that general knowledge of it was not yet granted. Thus, a meaningful consideration of such an important prophecy was to be done at a time distant from Daniel’s.

The phrase “time of the end” is found only in the book of Daniel. As a technical term, it refers to the definite apocalyptic period of time that seems to begin at the completion of the 1,260 days but precedes the climax of earth’s history. Thus, beginning from this period, the sealed portions of Daniel would be unsealed, paving the way for a clearer understanding of the end time prophecies. 3. The activity that marks the time of the end is couched in the phrase, “rove around.” The phrase “rove around” denotes an act of “searching” involving either physical movement or investigation with the eyes. The context of Dan 12:4 suggests that “rove around” is an act of diligent investigation into the prophecies of the book at the time of the end. 4. According to the text, “knowledge shall increase” is the direct sequel to the activity of ‘roving around’. If ‘roving around’ contextually implies diligent study, then the object of the study is unmistakably “the book” of Daniel, particularly the prophecies concerning the time of the end. Therefore, “the knowledge” here is not scientific knowledge but rather know-ledge of the prophecies of the book of Daniel.

This interpretation receives support from the text in that in Dan 12:4-9 the main issue is Daniel’s inability to understand the prophecies relating to the time of the end. The meanings of the key phrases in v. 4 as suggested in this study relate well to the context and genre of Dan 11-12. While the interpretation advocated here is not entirely new, this study provides a de-tailed analysis of the text as well as solid arguments to support the under-standing that “knowledge” in this verse is prophetic knowledge as opposed to scientific knowledge.