An Exposition of Daniel 11:36-12:4

11 The king will do as he pleases. He will exalt and magnify himself above every god and will speak astonishing things against the God of gods. He will be successful until the indignation has been accomplished, for what has been determined will take place.

37 He will show no reverence for the gods of his fathers, nor will he have [a natural] desire for women, nor will he reverence any god; for he will magnify himself above all things. 38 Instead of them, he will honor the god of fortresses; a god whom his fathers did not know he will honor with gold and silver and priceless jewels and all sorts of treasures. 39 He will attack the strongest fortresses with the help of a foreign god, and he will greatly honor those who acknowledge him. He will make them rule over many people and will distribute lands as a reward.

40 At the end of time the king of the South will contend against him; and the king of the North will come against him like a whirlwind—with chariots and horsemen and many ships. He will invade many countries and sweep through them like a flood. 41 He will even invade the Glorious Land, and many shall perish. But Edom, Moab and the head of the children of Ammon will be spared from his hand. 42 He will extend his power over all the nations; the land of Egypt will not escape. 43 He will gain control of the treasures of gold and silver, and over all the riches of Egypt; and the Libyans and the Ethiopians will be in submission to him. 44 But reports out of the east and out of the north will alarm him. So he will set out in a great rage to destroy and annihilate many. 45 He will pitch his royal tents between the Sea and [beside] the Glorious Holy Mountain; but he shall come to his end, and no one will help him.

12 At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will stand up. There will be a time of trouble such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone [whose name] is found written in the book—shall be delivered. 2 Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake; some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. 3 Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the heavens; and those who turn many to righteousness [shall shine] like the stars forever and ever. 4 But you, Daniel, preserve the words and seal the book, [safeguarding it] until the time of the end. Many will diligently study it, and the understanding [of these things] will increase. (Dan. 11:36-12:4)

Introduction

Daniel 11:3-35 contains a very detailed account of ancient history, covering the period between the Persian Empire and the rise of the Roman Empire, concentrating on the interaction between the kingdom of Syria and the kingdom of Egypt, with Israel in the middle. But beginning with Daniel 11:36, ancient history is left behind and we are projected forward to the last chapter of world history.

Two characteristics of the prophetic literature of the Bible especially need to be appreciated in understanding and interpreting this passage. First, the persons and events of the Old Testament era prophetically foretell and reveal persons and events of the New Testament era. For example, the Syrian king, Antiochus Epiphanes,
prophetically foretells and reveals the final anti-Christ who shall appear at the end of the New Testament era. Second, in Old Testament prophecy, the persons and events of the New Testament era are described by means of Old Testament terminology. Note, as an example of this biblical principle, the New Testament passage of Matthew 17:10-13,

The disciples asked him, “Why then do the teachers of the Law say that Elijah must come first?” 11Jesus replied, “To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. 12But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him whatever they desired. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.” 13Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist. (Matt. 17:10-13)

In this passage of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus explains how the Old Testament figure, Elijah, was prophetically foretelling and revealing the New Testament figure, John the Baptist. Notice that in referring to John the Baptist, the prophetic person whom the Old Testament prophet Elijah typified, Jesus continues to use Old Testament terminology, identifying John the Baptist as “Elijah.” It is important to appreciate these two principles of biblical prophecy if we are to have a true understanding of the passage of Daniel presently before us.

I. The Anti-Christ: His Character (11:36-39)

Verse 36 describes his arrogant pride. “The king will do as he pleases;” he shall do whatever he desires. He shall neither heed nor even recognize any form of restraint. He shall be completely self-willed. Note that in 2 Thessalonians 2:8 the anti-Christ is described as “the lawless one.”

Furthermore, “He will exalt and magnify himself;” he shall lift himself up above all the kings of the earth. What is more, “he will ... magnify himself above every god.” He shall not be content to exalt himself among men; he shall also magnify himself above the gods of men, indeed, “he ... will speak astonishing things against the God of gods.” Having successfully magnified himself above the idols of men, he shall arrogantly and foolishly speak against the true and living God. Uttering “astonishing things” has the connotation that it shall be amazing what he shall dare to speak against the God of heaven; note Revelation 13:6, “He opened his mouth to blaspheme God, to blaspheme his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven.”

We are told, “he will be successful until the indignation has been accomplished.” To our surprise, the God of heaven will silently allow this arch blasphemer to continue for a time, namely, “until the indignation has been accomplished.” One reason for the anti-Christ’s rise, and for God’s endurance of him for a time, is the sin of God’s people. Note, by way of example, Daniel 8:19, where “the indignation” is a reference to the divine punishment enacted against Israel in the form of the Babylonian captivity. The rise of the anti-Christ is a form of temporal judgment
against the church, as well as a form of testing the true allegiance of the church and revealing the true nature of the world. But his blasphemous reign shall only be of limited duration, “for what has been determined will take place.” “What has been determined” is a reference to the final judgment that shall be enacted against the anti-Christ. Here is the assurance that God’s sovereign plan shall be accomplished—the rise, and final judgment, of the anti-Christ is a part of God’s divine purpose and plan.

Verse 37 describes the unnatural attitudes exhibited by the anti-Christ. “He will show no reverence for the gods of his fathers.” He shall be devoid of all natural religious affiliations; he shall completely disregard the religion of his fathers, he shall show no loyalty to his ancestral religion. “Nor will he have a [natural] desire for women.” He shall be devoid of all natural sexual desire and human affection. “Nor will he reverence any god.” He shall be completely devoid of any religious allegiance; he shall be godless. The reason he refuses to revere any god is to be found in the fact that “he will magnify himself above all [things].” That is to say, he shall make an idol out of himself; he will assume the position of God, note 2 Thessalonians 2:4, where the anti-Christ is described in the following terms: “He opposes and exalts himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, and even sets himself up in God’s temple, presenting himself in the place of God.”

Having described the anti-Christ as being basically godless, verse 38 curiously goes on to describe his religion. “He will honor the god of fortresses.” In the place of any traditional form of religion, he shall worship power and reverence might; in the words of Habakkuk 1:11, “his might shall be his god.” Verse 38 declares, “a god whom his fathers did not know he will honor with gold and silver and precious jewels and all sorts of treasures.” Here is a hint that there is a personality, a spirit, a god, that he worships, verse 39 reveals more about this strange god.

Verse 39 describes the anti-Christ’s power. “He will attack the strongest fortresses with the help of a foreign god.” This king shall manage to scale apparently insurmountable obstacles and conquer what appear to be unconquerable fortifications; and he shall do so “by the help of a foreign (or, “strange”) god.” In the light of Revelation 13:2b, here is a reference to the demonic power that shall assist him in his conquests, “The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority.” “The dragon,” (a reference to the devil), is said to give “the beast,” (a reference to the final anti-Christ and his empire), his power.

Verse 39 goes on to say, “he will greatly honor those who acknowledge him. He will make them rule over many people and will distribute lands as a reward.” Those who submit to his rule, and hail him as their sovereign, he will honor. In other words, he assumes a God-like role, note 1 Samuel 2:30, a passage in which the Lord declares, “those who honor me I will honor.” The honor he gives takes the form of bestowing glory, dominion, and land; again, such are the blessing that God bestows upon them who love and honor Him. In Revelation 3:21, the Lord Jesus makes the following promise to those who honor Him and are faithful to Him:
“To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne.”

II. The Anti-Christ: His Career (11:40-43)

Verse 40a declares, “At the end of time [i.e., the end of history] the king of the South will contend against him.” In accordance with the biblical principles for interpreting Old Testament prophecy enumerated earlier, we would interpret this to mean that in the last period of history there appear two rival powers, dominating the world in much the same way that Syria (“the kingdom of the north” referred to in Daniel 11:2-35) and Egypt (“the kingdom of the south”) dominated the Near East in the time following Israel’s return from Babylon. In the course of time, “the king of the South” shall pose a challenge to his rival, the king of the North (who is the anti-Christ); literally, the king of the South “shall push” (יַנָּחֵל נַחְל) at him.

According to verse 40b, in response to this challenge, the king of the North will strike out against the king of the South “like a whirlwind.” In other words, he shall retaliate with intense, unrestrained fury; and with an immense, all-out war effort: “with chariots, horsemen, and many ships.” Verse 40c declares that the king of the North “will invade many countries and sweep through them like a flood.” It is implied that the king of the North totally defeats and subjugates this enemy power known as the king or kingdom of the South. His conquest of the kingdom of the South opens up the way for the king of the North to extend his evil dominion over “many countries” (i.e., over the nations of the world) like a flood—there being no longer any obstacle put in his way by his former rival. It seems to be implied that the kingdom of the South served as a buttress that restrained the king of the North from exerting his evil dominion with unlimited scope.

Verse 41a goes on to state that the king of the North “will even invade the Glorious Land.” The king of the North (a.k.a., the anti-Christ) shall not only take possession of “many countries,” entering into them, overflowing them and passing through them—the passage uses the imagery of a great flood that sweeps away all before it. He shall also seek to take possession and extend his dominion over “the Glorious Land,” an apparent reference to the land of Israel, the land of God’s Old Testament covenant people. Note that the king of the North shall enter into the Glorious Land, but shall not overflow and pass through—i.e.; here is the beginning of an assault but it is not carried through to a triumphant conquest, as was the case in his campaign against the other countries.

Verse 41b declares, “many [countries] shall perish. But Edom, Moab and the head of the children of Ammon will be spared from his hand.” The anti-Christ shall defeat whatever opposition there may be against him and shall extend his dominion on an international scale. But the archenemies of the Old Testament people of God (Edom, Moab, and Ammon) are exempt from the ravaging
conquests of the anti-Christ. Again, employing Old Testament terminology, the passage is indicating that those peoples and nations who are especially hostile to the L ORD and His people are the natural allies of the anti-Christ.

Verse 42 now informs us that the king of the North “will extend his power over all the nations; the land of Egypt will not escape.” Again there is emphasized the dominion that the anti-Christ will exercise over the conquered nations, as is seen by the description of his stretching his hand over them. It is especially noted that “the land of Egypt (the kingdom of the South that posed as his rival and served as a buttress against him) will not escape.” Not even “Egypt,” this great archrival, will be able to stand; she, too, will be conquered.

The king of the North “will gain control of the treasures of gold and silver, and over all the riches of Egypt” (vs. 43a.) “Egypt” is depicted as an incredibly wealthy nation, and one that will be totally plundered by the king of the North. Verse 43b further states, “the Libyans and the Ethiopians will be in submission to him.” Libya (located west of Egypt) and Ethiopia (located south of Egypt) depict “Egypt’s” empire in its breadth (i.e., its satellites and allies.) The point is that the anti-Christ shall not only conquer his great rival, but the former “Egyptian” allies shall render their service and allegiance to the conqueror—literally, they are portrayed as being “at the steps” of the king of the North, an act of subservience to him.

III. The Anti-Christ: His End (11:44-45)

Verse 44a declares, “reports out of the east and out of the north will alarm him.” This verse seems to indicate that as the king of the North is advancing his empire and subjugating the world, his advancements are interrupted by troubling reports of hostile activity in the east that create disruptions in his homeland of the north. The verse goes on to say, “he will set out in a great rage to destroy and annihilate many.” His reaction to this unexpected threat is the same as when his archrival first challenged him (vs.40b): he meets the challenge with military fury and with the intention of totally destroying this foe. According to verse 45a, “he will pitch his royal tents between the Sea and [beside] the Glorious Holy Mountain.” Verse 45a appears to be merely a statement describing how far the anti-Christ has advanced against the land of Israel at the time he is divinely halted by the reports out of the east and north and subsequently meets his doom.

The latter half of verse 45 reports on the final state of the anti-Christ: “but he shall come to his end, and no one will help him.” The anti-Christ shall not be able to carry out his design; he shall not conquer the holy land. On the contrary, he shall come to his end. None shall be able to uphold him, not even the devil who gave him his power, and prevent his final judgment.
IV. The Final Consummation (12:1-4)

“At that time Michael ... will stand up.” Michael is identified as “the great prince who protects your people.” In this passage Michael is an angelic representation of Christ. (Note: In the apocalyptic literature of the Bible, namely the Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation, angelic figures are employed to symbolically represent and reveal the person and work of Christ or God the Father.) The reference to Michael standing up at the time of the end is a reference to Christ’s defense of His people by means of His second coming.

“There will be a time of trouble such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then.” Never before have the people of God encountered tribulation of the magnitude and intensity as will be the case in the days of the reign of the anti-Christ just prior to the return of the Lord Jesus Christ in power and great glory. Here is a reference to the great tribulation to which the people of God will be subjected at the close of history by the oppressive presence of the anti-Christ and his demonic empire. Speaking prophetically of the anti-Christ, Daniel 7:25 declares, “he will utter words against the Most High and will wear out the saints of the Most High.”

“But at that time your people ... shall be delivered” (12:1c.) “Your people” are further defined as “everyone [whose name] is found written in the book;” i.e., God’s elect—all those whom He has sovereignly given to Christ; hence, all those who willingly come to Christ.

Verse 2 goes on to speak about the general resurrection that shall occur on the last day. Note that Daniel uses the term “multitudes” to emphasize the vast number of mankind who shall appear before their Maker at the final judgment. The Lord Jesus, in alluding to this passage of Daniel, uses the word “all,” thereby clearly indicating the universal scope of the resurrection on the last day:

Do not be amazed by this; for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs shall hear his voice and shall come out: they who have done good shall be resurrected to life; but they who have done evil shall be resurrected to condemnation. (Jn. 5:28-29)

Verse 3 speaks of the glory that will be bestowed upon the people of God at the time of our Lord’s return. “Those who are wise” is a reference to those who hear the Savior’s call and build their lives upon Him and His Word, as He teaches at the conclusion of His Sermon on the Mount:

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man that built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who
built his house on sand. 27The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash. (Matt. 7:24-27)

The redeemed are described as shining “like the brightness of the heavens” and “like the stars forever and ever”—these images are depicting the honor and glory bestowed upon them by their Lord at His coming:

The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. 42They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. (Matt. 13:41-43a)

In verse 4 Daniel is issued the command, “preserve the words and seal the book, [safeguarding it] until the time of the end.” He is to preserve this revelation so that the people of God will have it “until the time of the end” as a permanent record of what to expect from the world, especially during the reign of the anti-Christ, and of the sure promise of the LORD’s salvation. The phrase often translated, “many shall run to and fro” (in the NIV it is rendered, “many will go here and there”), may perhaps better be translated, “many will diligently study it.” The phrase appears to be an idiom, meaning “to diligently study a book in an effort to understand its meaning.” The Hebrew term sometimes translated “run to and fro” (שְׂמַח) is also used metaphorically to mean “to diligently pour over” or “to scrutinize” (Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon, Bagster, p.705.) 2 Chronicles 16:9a is an example of the term being used in just such a way: “the eyes of Jehovah run to and fro throughout the whole earth.” We are told, “[the] understanding [of these things] will increase.” If the Hebrew term, שְׂמַח, is used in the metaphorical sense, then this present phrase would best be interpreted to mean that as history passes on, as the diligent study of this revelation continues, and as the time of the end draws near, the LORD will grant His people an increasingly greater understanding of the revelation with regard to its details and its fulfillment.