

RUNNING TO AND FRO

Tom's Perspectives
by Thomas Ice

"But as for you, Daniel, conceal these words and seal up the book until the end of time; many will go back and forth, and knowledge will increase."
—Daniel 12:4

One of the most popular interpretations of an Old Testament prophetic passage within our prophecy circles is the view that Daniel 12:4 relates to contemporary times. At one time I held and taught this view, until I studied the passage more in-depth. When studied in its context, Daniel 12:4 refers to the fact that during the tribulation period, many Jewish people will study the prophecies of Daniel and come to faith in the Messiah. Let's now look at some important issues.

A SEALED BOOK

Some prophecy teachers within our camp have taught that Daniel's concealing and sealing of his book relate to the fact that his prophecies would not have been understood by Daniel's contemporaries because they spoke of modern times, like the days in which we currently live. The understanding of these prophecies must await those of modern times because only as we approach the fulfillment of these events would we understand what the prophet saw. I disagree with such thinking. The concealment and sealing up of the book until the end of time, relates to something different, it is a command to preserve the book of Daniel.

An excellent explanation of this aspect of Daniel 12:4 is found as follows in Stephen Miller's commentary:

In the ancient Near East the custom was to "seal" an important document by impressing upon it the identifying marks of the parties involved and the recording scribe. A sealed text was not to be tampered with or changed. Then the original document was duplicated and placed ("closed up") in a safe place where it could be preserved. An excellent illustration of this process is recorded in the Book of Jeremiah: "So I [Jeremiah] bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel and weighed out for him seventeen shekels of silver. I signed and sealed (*hâtâm*) the deed, had it witnessed, and weighed out the silver on the scales. I took the deed of purchase—the sealed copy containing the terms and conditions, as well as the unsealed copy—and I gave this deed to Baruch son of Neriah [the scribe]" (Jer. 32:9–12). The sealing of Jeremiah's property deed was not done to "hide" the contents or to keep them "secret" but to preserve the document. As a matter of fact, Jeremiah performed this transaction in the presence of his cousin "and of the witnesses who had signed the deed and of all the Jews sitting in the courtyard of the guard" (Jer 32:12). There also was an "unsealed copy" of the deed that presumably was open for inspection.

Gabriel therefore was instructing Daniel to preserve "the words of the scroll," not merely this final vision but the whole book for those who will live at "the time of the end" when the message will be needed.¹

The same thing is said to Daniel in 8:26 where he is told to seal up that vision as well. Thus, the idea being communicated to Daniel was not one of sealing these words so that they will remain a secret until a future time, instead, they are to be sealed so that the prophecy may be preserved and made available when it is needed in a future time. But, at what time in the future?

THE END OF TIME

This Hebrew phrase, “the end of time,” is found five times in the Old Testament. All five uses are found in the book of Daniel (8:17; 11:35, 40; 12:4, 9). In addition, a similar phrase, “the appointed time of the end,” is also found in Daniel 8:19. Daniel 8:26, speaking of a vision, says, “For it pertains to many days in the future.” Then Daniel 10:14 tells us, “Now I have come to give you an understanding of what will happen to your people in the latter days, for the vision pertains to the days yet future.” Interestingly, at the end of Daniel’s book, where there is a concentration of future prophecy, a statement relating to the end of time is used at least eight times. This clearly lets us know when these things will occur in relation to God’s prophetic plan for history.

This terminology refers to the end of what time? Since the phrase “the end of time” is unique to the book of Daniel, I believe that it refers to the end of a time sequence that should be found in Daniel’s book. Daniel 8:17 says, “Son of man, understand that the vision pertains to the time of the end.” While verse 19 says, “Behold, I am going to let you know what will occur at the final period of the indignation, for it pertains to the appointed time of the end.” When we take 8:17 and 19 together, since they both refer to the same things, we see that they both must have in mind the same time reference. In the context, the first period of indignation would be to the events related to the time of Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century B.C. But here the angelic messenger tells Daniel that he is speaking of “the final period of the indignation, for it pertains to the appointed time of the end.” Throughout the book of Daniel the final indignation will be the tribulation period right before the coming of Messiah. Leon Wood explains the meaning as follows:

I shall cause thee to know (i.e., by way of explanation of vv. 1–18) what will occur in the latter portion of the indignation (i.e., the Great Tribulation), which will have long before been foreshadowed by the oppression of Antiochus Epiphanes (directly predicated by vv. 1–18, this “latter portion” constituting the appointed time of the end of the period of the Gentiles.²

The other uses of “the end of time” in Daniel (11:35, 40; 12:4, 9) all refer to the same thing, which is the tribulation period. “The prophecies thus revealed were to have primary application to those living in ‘the time of the end,’” notes John Walvoord. “In fact, the entire revelation, even the portions already fulfilled through Daniel 11:35, are designed to help those seeking to trust in the Lord in their affliction at the climax of the age.”³

RUNNING TO AND FRO

I have heard it taught for many years that the phrase, “running to and fro” from the King James Version is a prediction of the increase in the speed of travel. It is often said that in the 20th Century civilization has progressed from a horse and buggy to high-speed travel in outer space. “Isaac Newton predicted on the basis of this verse that the

day would come when knowledge would be so increased that people would be able to travel 50 miles an hour! And Voltaire in response cast great ridicule upon Newton and the Bible."⁴ Newton was right on his general prediction about the development of high-speed travel and the great atheist Voltaire was wrong. However, Newton was incorrect to base his future prediction on this passage. What do this expression mean?

When we examine this phrase in the original Hebrew, we learn that this verb appears here in the "polel" stem "and means basically 'to move quickly, run to and fro.'"⁵ Until undergoing my current study, I had thought that this Hebrew verb referred to "the movement of to and fro . . . to that of the eyes through leaves" of a book as one anxiously reads.⁶ That meaning is possible for the broader use of the verb (Job 1:7). "But every other polel use of the verb in the Old Testament refers to movement of one's body to and fro, in search of something, especially information (cf. 2 Chron. 16:9; Jer. 5:1; 49:3; Amos 8:12; Zech. 4:10), which makes that meaning likely here."⁷ Leon Wood has provided the sense of the passage in his following paraphrase of the verse: "Many shall run to and fro in their desire for knowledge of the last things, and, finding it in Daniel's book, because it will have been preserved to this end, their knowledge shall be increased."⁸ I would add that the context has in mind specially Daniel's people, the Jews, will be the ones who run to and fro.

Harry Bultema notes that view that takes this passage to refer to an increase in the speed of modes of transportation was developed and propagated primarily by Adventists, who interpret prophecy from the misguided historicist perspective. This wrong approach should not continue to be spread by futurists who are inconsistent with the literal principles of interpretation. G. H. Lang says,

that has given rise to such an irrelevant notion as that the angel pointed to trains, motor-cars, and aeroplanes which would bring about the modern half-insane, restless rushing hither and thither. The real sense, however, is: "Many shall peruse the book" (Variorum); "many shall diligently investigate" (Darby); "many shall read and review the book" (Pierson); "many shall scrutinize the book from end to end" (Tregelles); "many shall search it through and through" (Pember), and so "knowledge [of it] shall be increased."⁹

KNOWLEDGE WILL INCREASE

I remember watching a weekly prophecy program on television in the late 1990s that spent a year documenting the explosion of modern technology and constantly repeating the refrain that "knowledge doubles every 17 months." All of this documentation was based upon their (mis)understanding from this passage in Daniel that such an explosion of knowledge was a fulfillment of the prophecy that "knowledge will increase." I don't doubt a knowledge explosion that was noted previously, but Daniel 12:4 is not a prediction relating to the growth of scientific knowledge at any period in history. Instead, it speaks, as clearly can be discerned by those who follow the flow of the context, of the Jewish people coming to an understanding of this prophecy during the tribulation period.

The knowledge being spoken of in this passage is not just knowledge in general. If that were the case then the original Hebrew would not have the definite article. Since the definite article is used, the text has in mind specific, not general, knowledge about something. In context, it can refer to nothing other than the understanding of the prophecies that Daniel was commanded to seal up until the end of time.

Even though Daniel was told to seal up and preserve the book for the end of time and specifically for the Jewish people during the tribulation, it does not mean that no one will be able to understand these prophecies until that time. I believe that Daniel's prophecy can be understood today by born-again believers who study and search out their meaning. However, in context, this passage is specifically saying that the Jewish people, as a whole, will not come to understand the prophecies of the book of Daniel until the end of time. The reason that they will not understand the prophecy is because of the spiritual blindness that currently exists among all Jews, except the elect remnant during the church age, when it comes to understanding even their own Old Testament. Paul tells us: "But their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ. But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart; but whenever a man turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away" (2 Cor. 3:14–16). That veil will be removed at some point during the tribulation period and Israel will come to understand the proper meaning of their prophetic Scriptures. Beware, Gentiles, lest we think that spiritual blindness is unique to Israel alone. It is not! In fact, it is the condition of all mankind before one comes to know Christ as their Savior (see 1 Cor. 2:6–16; Eph. 2:1–3; 1 John 5:19).

I also believe that my understanding of this passage is reinforced by a later statement from the angelic messenger to Daniel. "Go your way, Daniel, for these words are concealed and sealed up until the end time. Many will be purged, purified and refined; but the wicked will act wickedly, and none of the wicked will understand, but those who have insight will understand" (Dan. 12:9–10). The unrighteous will never understand these things and they will be purged out or removed from Israel, so that all that are left by the end of the tribulation will be those Jewish people who become believers in Jesus as their Messiah, called here "those who have insight." When do they gain insight and understanding? It will come when Daniel 12: 4 is fulfilled. John Walvoord notes: "it is not too much to say that a twentieth-century interpreter of Daniel may understand these prophecies with greater clarity and be able to relate them to history in a way that was impossible in the sixth century B.C."¹⁰ Allan MacRae says:

Some writers have taken this sentence as a prediction that in the last days there will be a great increase in travel and also in knowledge. Most interpreters, however, starting as early as St. Jerome, have considered the second clause as closely connected with the first, so that the increase of knowledge would be a result of the fact that many "go here and there," hunting through the document, and comparing Scripture with Scripture to find God's truth.¹¹

One of the interesting things as I studied this passage was that I consulted over 50 commentaries. Only two of those works put forth the increase in travel viewpoint. One was a historicist interpreter from the nineteenth century and the other one did not even interact with text, he just started expounding his view. I bring this point up to make the point that the text does not support such a view even though that view has a certain level of popularity.

CONCLUSION

For many years when I lived in the Washington, D.C. area I would often attend events where Jews and Christians would come together in support of the modern state

of Israel. Whenever I would encounter orthodox Jews I sought to ask them their interpretation of the seventy weeks prophecy of Daniel 9:24–27. It was common for these orthodox Jews to answer something like the following: “My rabbi does not allow us to study that passage.” What? No wonder many Jews currently reject the Messiahship of Jesus, since they are not allowed to study many of the passages that prove that Jesus of Nazareth is their Messiah. However, Daniel 12 teaches us that his prophecies are being preserved and there will come a time during the tribulation period when the Jewish people as a whole will excitedly study these prophecies and come to realize that the Man from Galilee has been their Messiah all along. What a great day that will be, when God’s first-born, Israel, comes home after years of wandering. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ Stephen R. Miller, *Daniel*, Vol. 18 of *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), pp. 320–21.

² Leon Wood, *A Commentary on Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), p. 224.

³ John F. Walvoord, *Daniel: The Key to Prophetic Revelation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971), p. 291.

⁴ Donald K. Campbell, *Daniel: Decoder of Dreams* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1977), p. 141.

⁵ Wood, *Daniel*, p. 321.

⁶ Harry Bultema, *Commentary on Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1988), p. 349.

⁷ Wood, *Daniel*, p. 321.

⁸ Wood, *Daniel*, p. 321.

⁹ G. H. Lang, *The Histories and Prophecies of Daniel*, (Miami Springs, FL: Conley & Schoettle Publishing Co., 1985), p. 181.

¹⁰ Walvoord, *Daniel*, p. 292.

¹¹ Allan A. MacRae, *The Prophecies of Daniel* (Singapore: Christian Life Publishers, 1991), p. 250.