

# The Futurist Model for Interpreting Daniel

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## Introduction

In this paper,<sup>1</sup> which has special reference to Dan 11, futurism is defined as any system of interpretation that applies part of the chapter to the future without leading up to that future application in gradual historical stages. For preterists there is no future application at all, while for historicists the transition from distant past to near future is accomplished through a series of intermediate events. It could be said that in the above sense futurism occupies middle ground between the other two major schools of prophetic interpretation. Dan 11 is singled out for emphasis in the present introductory sketch because of the central importance it has for futurists themselves.

Futurism is closely associated with dispensationalism, which "arose as a reaction against the spiritualizations of the liberal theology of the nineteenth century."<sup>2</sup> The two are not identical, however. Futurism takes a number of different forms, only one of which is dispensationalist in nature.

## Inspiration

Futurists, a majority of whom are also dispensationalists, have a uniformly high regard for Scripture and accept its divine inspiration. There is no uncertainty on this point.

The theological liberal quite naturally opposes dispensationalism, for he finds completely unpalatable its plain interpretation, which is based on a verbal, plenary view of the inspiration of Scripture.<sup>3</sup>

With special reference to Dan 11, the recognized dispensationalist scholar John F. Walvoord writes:

If the test is properly interpreted, the alleged historical errors fade; and Daniel's record stand accurate and complete, although not without problems of interpretation such as are true in any prophetic utterance. The expositor of this portion of Scripture has no convenient compromise between the two diverse views. Either this is genuine prophecy or it is not. The fact that it corresponds so closely to history should be, instead of a basis for criticism, a marvelous confirmation that prophecy properly understood is just as accurate as history.<sup>4</sup>

From the above quotations it is clear that the divine element in Scripture is not only acknowledged by futurist writers but emphasized by them.

## The Dating of Daniel

Since futurists have no theological reasons to reject the concept of genuine prediction, and since they respect Scripture as having a divine as well as human origin, they consistently support an early date of authorship for the book of Daniel. Joyce G. Baldwin, after presenting a balanced and detailed summary of the issues involved, concludes as follows:

When all the relevant factors are taken into account, including the arguments for the unity of the book, a late sixth- or early fifth-century date of writing for the whole best suits the evidence.<sup>5</sup>

## Prediction and Historical Applications

A willingness to accept the concept of genuine prediction in prophecy is perhaps the main factor that separates futurists from preterists in Dan 11. Due to the nature of the issues, however, and the fact that one's view of futurity in the chapter can range all the way from an exclusive emphasis to one that is distinctly in the background, what seems to be a dramatic difference at first is actually a series of many gradual steps that connect the two models. As Desmond Ford states, "The preterist interpreter, to understand Daniel, always looks to the past--the days prior to and including the time of Antiochus IV."<sup>6</sup> The futurist looks to the past as well, but not always to the past. Speaking of different approaches one might take in interpreting Dan 11:36-45, H. C. Leupold states that

The possibilities involved are these: This section [vss. 36-45] refers to Antiochus Epiphanes, or it is a section which is in a general way typical of the Antichrist, or it is a direct prophecy of the Antichrist.<sup>7</sup>

Leupold's first possibility is the preterist position. This leaves two options for futurists--mixed reference to the future and the past simultaneously and reference only to the future. But there is more than one way in which future and past reference can be combined. For convenience I subdivide Leupold's second possibility below, proposing that one type of mixed reference places more emphasis on the past than on the future and that another places more emphasis on the future than on the past. Thus, a more complete list of possibilities than that of Leupold would include: (1) exclusive reference to the past, (2) mixed reference with primary emphasis on the past and secondary emphasis on the future, (3) mixed reference with primary emphasis on the future and secondary emphasis on the past, and (4) exclusive reference to the future. It must be realized, however, that we are dealing with matters that do not fit well in a fixed number of discrete categories.

### Verses that apply to the past

A majority of futurists hold that vss. 21-35 apply exclusively in the past, and more specifically in the second century B.C.<sup>8</sup> Thus Walvoord writes:

Beginning with verse 21, a major section of this chapter is devoted to a comparatively obscure Syrian ruler who was on the throne from 175 to 164 B.C., previously alluded to as the "little horn" (Dan 8:9-14, 23-25).<sup>9</sup>

Philip C. Johnson supports this view.

Now [in vs. 21] Daniel comes to the king who was remembered and despised by the Jews more than almost any other oppressor in their history. This is Antiochus IV, Epiphanes, . . .<sup>10</sup>

### Verses that apply to the future

It is at this point that we begin dealing with differences of relative emphasis and not with fundamentally distinct categories. In fact, as suggested earlier, the very use of categories might be misleading. What I am trying to describe is actually a continuum of thought with one position shading into the next.

As we discuss the different degrees of robustness with which futurist writers have interpreted future time reference in Dan 11, the section primarily in view is vss. 36-45. Differences of opinion on just how the chapter should be outlined are discussed in another paper.<sup>11</sup>

*Past primary, future secondary.* For some futurists the last ten verses of Dan 11 represent past history for the most part, but look forward also in an extended or secondary sense to future events. Baldwin states:

There is universal agreement that Antiochus Epiphanes (175-163) fulfilled the description given here [vs. 21], but we may well wonder why so much space should be given in Scripture to an obscure (to us) upstart of the second century BC. . . . Antiochus is the prototype of many who will come after him, hence the interest shown here in his methods and progress.<sup>12</sup>

The same writer goes on to compare the way Antichrist is referred to in Dan 11 with the way the end of the age is referred to in Matt 24 and Mark 13. In both cases there is a primary historical application, according to Baldwin, but a secondary application to the future.<sup>13</sup> Thus, for Baldwin the relative emphasis in Dan 11 is on Antiochus in a primary sense and on Antichrist in a secondary sense.

*Future primary, past secondary.* For other futurists the last verses of Dan 11 are thought to indicate future events for the most part, but past history in a secondary sense. Thus, Ford<sup>14</sup> suggests that

The dramatic intensity of events increases as the chapter progresses. These verses [vss. 36-39] transcend Antiochus and pagan Rome, though including reminiscences of them.<sup>15</sup>

Note that Keil places great emphasis on futurity in vs. 36, but remains unable to dissociate himself entirely from a prior historical fulfillment:

These circumstances also are not satisfactorily explained by the remark that the prophecy regarding Antiochus glances forward to the Antichrist, or that the image of the type (Antiochus) hovers in the image of the antitype (Antichrist); they much rather show that in the prophetic contemplation there is comprehended in the image of one king what has been historically

fulfilled in its beginnings by Antiochus Epiphanes, but shall only meet its complete fulfillment by the Antichrist in the time of the end.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, while Keil's major point of emphasis is on an Antichrist yet to come, the evil brought about that figure is not entirely original. The general course of his life "has been historically fulfilled in its beginnings by Antiochus Epiphanes."

*Future only.* Finally, a majority of those futurist writers whose work was examined for the present study see the last part of Dan 11 as having a future application only and no past application at all. According to Walvoord,

Beginning with verse 36, a sharp break in the prophecy may be observed, introduced by the expression *the time of the end* in verse 35.<sup>17</sup>

It should be born in mind that the different sorts of future time reference discussed above apply differently in different parts of the chapter. No futurist scholar applies all of Dan 11 to the past; that would be the preterist position. Opinion is divided, however, on the question of which verses should be applied to the future and on exactly how future reference, once asserted, should be understood.<sup>18</sup>

## Other Comments

There are a number of difficulties implicit in the futurist model for Dan 11. Consider the following statement by Leupold, a futurist.

One can hardly begin to read this chapter before it becomes evident that a very special problem confronts the Bible student. A certain minuteness of prediction in matters of detail is noted after the opening verses of the chapter have been read. It is true that the prophetic Scriptures do not usually seem to go into detail at such great length, except perhaps in matters that are of the utmost importance, such as the minutiae of the life of the Christ.<sup>19</sup>

The problem is stated somewhat more boldly by Farrar, a preterist.

If this chapter were indeed the utterance of a prophet in the Babylonian Exile, nearly four hundred years before the events--events of which many are of small comparative importance in the world's history--which are here so enigmatically and yet so minutely depicted, the revelation would be the most unique and perplexing in the whole Scriptures. It would represent a sudden and total departure from every method of God's providence and of God's manifestations of His will to the mind of the prophets. It would stand absolutely and abnormally alone as an abandonment of the limitations of all else which has ever been foretold.<sup>20</sup>

Leupold accuses Farrar of speaking in "words that savor of strong partisanship,"<sup>21</sup> and such an accusation might well be justified, but partisanship is not the only component of Farrar's remarks. There is enough of substance in them to merit further consideration here.

## An analysis of the problem

Farrar's criticism of the futurist position comes in three related parts, and the parts in turn are set within a context. His specific have to do with (1) the chapter's overall level of significance in terms of world history, (2) its apparent minuteness of detail, and (3) the lack of any precedent for such writing in the prophetic literature. The context for the above points, which is an inseparable part of the argument as a whole, is the conservative assertion that some 400 years separate the time when Dan 11 was written from the time when most of it was fulfilled--i.e., in the second century B.C., according to Leupold's view.

Note carefully that the objection put forward is not simply against details in prophecy (point 2) that are inconsequential in terms of world history (point 1), but against inconsequential prophetic details that are claimed to have been predicted "nearly four hundred years before the events."<sup>22</sup> It is the unlikely combination of large scale perspective and small scale significance for which the critic finds no precedent (point 3).

Farrar's own solution to the problem he posed was to deny that any supernatural large scale perspective of 400 years existed. Thus, for him the chapter applies to the second century B.C. and was also written in the second century. The solution was to assume that the chapter's perspective corresponds to its overall level of significance in history, as he understood its significance. For Farrar both factors were small. This of course is only one of two possible ways to resolve the problem.

In response to Farrar, Walvoord uses two lines of evidence to show that detailed prophecy does indeed have a biblical precedent. On the one hand there is "the whole subject of Messianic prophecy which predicted the coming of Christ with hundreds of details",<sup>23</sup> on the other we have the fall of Babylon and other similar historical predictions. Jer 50:38; 51:32, 36,39,57; Isa 13:17-18; 21:1-10; Zech 9:1-8 are cited. In conclusion Walvoord states:

Actually, however, proof texts are not needed, as the issue is a clear-cut question as to whether God is omniscient about the future. If He is, revelation may be just as detailed as God elects to make it; and detailed prophecy becomes no more difficult or incredible than broad predictions.<sup>24</sup>

Walvoord is right, of course, as regards faith and Farrar could profitably have come to a similar conclusion. But something of the force of Farrar's criticism is lost in the way Walvoord's conclusion was reached. Messianic prophecy does not really address the issue, because although its prophetic perspective is large--details of Christ's life were predicted centuries in advance--its level of significance is large as well. And the various other historical fulfillments referred to are little better as evidence, because the prophets who recorded them lived fairly close to the events they discussed. If the level of significance for the rest of world history in such cases is small the prophetic perspective is also small. Thus, perspective and significance correspond in both cases and the original problem is not solved but set aside.

Actually solving the problem implies first realizing that it is a problem. A vital first step is to admit that Farrar was correct in pointing out an incongruity between futurist exegesis of the first part of the chapter (vss. 5-35) and futurist views on its authorship. A simultaneous claim for large scale perspective and small scale significance in Dan 11 does represent a problem exegetically. But changing one's theory of the chapter's historical perspective to match its perceived level of overall significance in history is not the only solution to it. In this case the level

of both would be small. It is also possible, and would be more desirable, to change one's perception of the chapter's overall significance in history to match the claims the book makes for itself about its historical vantage point. In this case the level of both factors would be large. Unfortunately the second alternative involves making extensive modifications in the sort of interpretation that was popular for much of the chapter when Farrar wrote, and is still popular among futurists today.

### An illustration of the problem

We now take up the matter of what should be changed in the futurist model and why. A simple illustration will help to make a valuable point here. It is as though a length of crepe paper were extended across a room and attached to the wall on either side. Let the paper in our illustration represent a timeline that starts in Daniel's time and ends with the second coming of Christ. Toward the left are the centuries before Christ, on the right the centuries after Christ. See fig. 5.

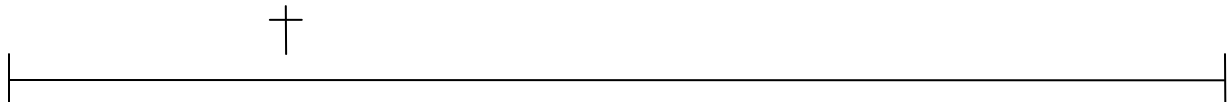


Fig. 5. Abstract representation of a timeline as a streamer attached with no break to two distant objects.

If it were felt that the paper should not cross the entire room in this way, and that instead most of it should be confined to the left side of the room, any attempt to put it there would have two immediate results. First, a gap would appear in the streamer. Second, the resulting jumble would have an appearance of complexity when compared with when it extended all the way across the room. In fact the amount of complexity would appear to be extreme. See fig. 6.



Fig. 6. The above illustration repeated with undue complexity on the left, a gap in the middle, and a small piece on the right.

Both the nature of the futurist gap in Dan 11 and the chapter's appearance of minute historical complexity are illustrated in fig. 6, and shown to be related. From the perspective of the historical claims made by the chapter itself, the futurist gap in Dan 11 is not a sudden leap forward in time as it would otherwise appear to be. It does not result from shifting the application of a small number of verses forward in time, but from holding the application of a larger number of verses back in time, confining them to the space of a few years in the mid-second century B.C.

Froom has ably demonstrated that in every age there have been a number of interpreters united in the belief that the prophecies of Daniel represent a preview of history which covers the entire period between Daniel's visions and the second coming of Christ.<sup>25</sup> Thus, an end-time conclusion for the chapter has always been available to the believing

exegete. Recognizing and emphasizing this fact is not a futurist contribution to protestant thought, nor is a second-century confinement of history for much of Dan 11. On the one hand there is a long tradition of historicist exegesis which emphasizes the eschatological implications of the chapter's final verses, and on the other there is an almost equally long tradition of preterist exegesis which urges a second century application in minute detail. Accepting simultaneously the preterist emphasis on a detailed application to the second century B.C. and the historicist emphasis on future events, futurists have been forced to adopt a gap theory to bring together these otherwise incompatible lines of thought. So Farrar, and even Leupold, acknowledge that the "minuteness of prediction in matters of detail" encountered by futurists in Dan 11 represents a problem area to be dealt with.<sup>26</sup> But the minuteness is not in the chapter; it is in a second-century interpretation of the chapter. This is an important distinction to bear in mind.

## Discussion

Confining history within Dan 11 primarily to the second century B.C. has a third result, perhaps unforeseen, that goes beyond the matter of accounting for a historical gap and an extreme amount of apparent historical detail. For this third consequence we return to the illustration introduced earlier. Suppose that the outline of a cross had been drawn with India ink on our streamer at an appropriate point. The cross would be prominent so long as the paper on which it was drawn is extended to its full length, but when the paper is confined to a small space the cross could no longer be prominent and might not be visible at all. I submit that to take down the broad expanse of history within Dan 11 and confine most of it to a single century at some point before the cross, must inevitably obscure the cross and remove Christ from view within the chapter.

Such an omission imposes exegetical limitations on Dan 11 that are as insurmountable as they are unnecessary. The gap in Dan 11 should be repaired and the streamer of history be put back in place. This is the second solution to Farrar's problem--the one he did not choose. It is unfortunate he did not choose it, because once one accepts a solution along these lines the original problem is resolved and in fact disappears altogether. No exegetical incongruity remains. The prophet's historical perspective is seen to be on a very large scale (from the sixth century B.C. to at least the twentieth century A.D.) and so is the chapter's overall significance in history. The narrative ceases being minute in this way but is still detailed. A preview of history such as this finds its precedent in Dan 2, 7, and 8-9 and its parallel in the New Testament book of Revelation.

## Conclusion

In the course of discussing Farrar's criticisms of the futurist model a strong claim for Dan 11 has emerged. This claim bears no similarity to the position that

. . . there is a drab sameness about history which allows us to say that, in addition to being a prophecy of a particular period of Syrian and Egyptian history, this may be regarded as a panoramic view of all history in a picture that is idealized, at least to some extent.<sup>27</sup>

On the contrary, what is here envisioned is a panorama of history that is neither drab nor idealized, but highly significant in its sweep and specific in its details. One alternative, apart from denying at the outset that a problem exists, is the skepticism of Farrar. Another is the claim of

faith that, in this one remarkable chapter, God has summarized the major turning points in history from His own perspective as they relate to His people in different ages, starting at the time of Daniel's visions in the sixth century B.C. and extending to the second coming of Christ.



<sup>1</sup>See Frank W. Hardy, "An Historicist Perspective on Daniel 11" (M.A. thesis, Andrews University, 1983), pp. 58-64.

<sup>2</sup>Hans K. LaRondelle, "The Essence of Dispensationalism," *Ministry*, May 1981, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup>Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), p. 10.

<sup>4</sup>*Daniel: The Key to Prophetic Revelation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971), p. 254. Note that when Walvoord speaks of historical accuracy in Dan 11 he can only be referring to those parts of the chapter that precede the gap, i.e., those verses that fall within or precede the end of the second century B.C. As far as the gap, wherever that may be in a given case, futurist interpretation of Dan 11 roughly parallels preterist interpretation.

<sup>5</sup>*Daniel: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1978), p. 46. See pp. 35-45 for her entire discussion of the topic. Other sources that make a case for the early authorship of Daniel are D. J. Wiseman et al., *Notes on Some Problems in the Book of Daniel* (London: Tyndale Press, 1965); E. L. Emery, *Daniel: Who Wrote the Book?* (Elms Court: Arthur H. Stockwell, 1978); and Josh McDowell, *Daniel in the Critics' Den: Historical Evidences for the Authenticity of the Book of Daniel* (San Bernardino: Here's Life, 1979).

<sup>6</sup>*Daniel*, with a Foreword by F. F. Bruce (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1978), p. 65.

<sup>7</sup>*Exposition of Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1949), pp. 510-11.

<sup>8</sup>An exception is Lang, *Histories and Prophecies of Daniel*, p. 157, for whom vss. 5-45 are all future.

<sup>9</sup>*Prophetic Revelation*, p. 264.

<sup>10</sup>*The Book of Daniel: A Study Manual* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1964), p. 87.

<sup>11</sup>See Hardy, "What and Where Is the Futurist Gap in Dan 11?" in this issue of *Historicism*.

<sup>12</sup>*Introduction and Commentary*, pp. 191-92.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 202. For discussion see Desmond Ford, *The Abomination of Desolation in Biblical Eschatology* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1979), pp. 62, 67-68; *ibid.*, pp. 163-66; *idem*, *Daniel*, p. 266. A double application of the sort proposed by Baldwin illustrates what Ford calls the "apotelesmatic principle." For discussion see Ford's *Daniel*, p. 49; *idem*, "Daniel 8:14 and the Day of Atonement," *Spectrum* 11, 2 (1980):34. See also George McCready Price, *The Greatest of the Prophets: A New Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1955), pp.30-31.

<sup>14</sup>Ford's work on Daniel is not easy to classify. I submit that both historicist and futurist positions are maintained side by side in his 1978 Daniel commentary. Others have found hints of futurism in Ford's work as well. See William H. Shea, "Shea Replies to Ford," *Spectrum* 11, 4 (1981):57. As a compromise measure Ford will therefore be included in the present paper on futurism as well as in a forthcoming paper on historicism.

<sup>15</sup>*Daniel*, p. 271. See also C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), vol. 9: *Ezekiel, Daniel*, by C. f. Keil, p. 450.

<sup>16</sup>*Ezekiel, Daniel*, pp. 462-63.

<sup>17</sup>*Prophetic Revelation*, p. 270. See also Johnson, *Study Manual*, pp. 90-91; Leupold, *Exposition of Daniel*, pp. 510-12; Louis T. Talbot, *The Prophecies of Daniel, in Light of Past, Present, and Future Events* (Wheaton, IL: Van Kampen Press, 1940), pp. 202, 206.

<sup>18</sup>For further discussion see Hardy, "What and Where Is the Futurist Gap in Dan 11?" in this issue of *Historicism*.

<sup>19</sup>*Exposition of Daniel*, pp. 470-71.

<sup>20</sup>This statement by Farrar is cited in both *ibid.*, p. 471, and Walvoord, *Prophetic Revelation*, p. 253.

<sup>21</sup>*Exposition of Daniel*, pp. 470-71.

<sup>22</sup>See Leupold, p. 471; Walvoord, p. 253.

<sup>23</sup>Walvoord, p. 253.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>LeRoy E. Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers: The Historical Development of Prophetic Interpretation*, 4 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1951). See especially vol. 1: *Exposition, Subsequent Deflections, and Medieval Revival*, pp. 401-64, and vol. 2: *Pre-Reformation and Reformation Restoration, and Second Departure*, pp. 783-96. If it is objected that Jerome was a futurist (see Jerome's "*Commentary on Daniel*," trans. Gleason L. Archer, Jr. [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978; paperback edition, 1977], p. 134), I would counter that he should have been. He looked forward to something that was future and was correct in doing so. It would not be equally correct to look forward to something that is past. For additional comment see Ford, *Daniel*, p. 272, and George McCready Price *The Time of the End* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1967), pp. 63-123.

<sup>26</sup>Leupold, p. 470.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., pp. 475-76.