

Seleukid Perspectives – Band 1

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CHAPTER 12

ŠAR WARS: HOW A JUDAEAN AUTHOR IN THE 160'S BCE TRANSFORMED A PTOLEMAIC VIEW OF HELLENISTIC HISTORY INTO A THEOLOGY FOR HIS TIME

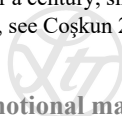
Benjamin E. Scolnic

Abstract: While historians see the conflicts between the Seleukid and Ptolemaic kingdoms as the result of clashing imperial ambitions, the Judaeen writer of *Daniel* 10–12, living in the wake of the sixth of those wars, portrays an ongoing conflict between celestial powers, *šarim*. When the *šar* of one kingdom wins in heaven, his earthly counterpart wins as well. Writing in a world that thought of heaven and earth as a continuum of power and identity, he attempts to solve the theological problem of the Judaeen God's apparent powerlessness during the centuries of Judaeen exile and then lack of self-rule by claiming that everything is happening according to the Divine plan revealed to the sage Daniel in 6th-century Babylonia. The author of *Dan* 11 takes the Ptolemaic, anti-Seleukid narrative of the chequered relationship between the two kingdoms and superimposes a celestial plane, causing complicated problems of understanding. The vision emphasizes a final chapter when the conflicts in heaven and earth will end, ushering in an eternal future of peace.

Modern critical scholarship sees the historical account of *Dan* 11 as a *vaticinium ex eventu*, a prophecy written c. 166 BCE, as if it were foretold in the sixth century BCE by Daniel, a probably legendary Jewish sage in the Babylonian exile.¹ The cosmic forces in *Dan* 10 reflect a theological introduction to the detailed history found in *Dan* 11 and the apocalyptic prophecies of *Dan* 11–12, all to explain why the Jews have been ruled for centuries by foreign powers. Everything that has happened and will happen is presented as God's Will. Since these centuries of foreign domination are part of God's plan, once the next stage of God's plan is reached, everything will change. Therefore, there is hope.

In chapter 10, Daniel laments the persecution of his religion and mourns for those who have been killed in the early stages of the Antiochene persecution. The situation is outlined in *Dan* 11.31–35, where the forces of Antiochos attack and the

1 This consensus has held steady for over a century, since Driver 1900; cf. Childs 1979, 612. For a more specific chronological analysis, see Coşkun 2019.



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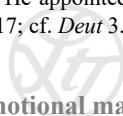
persecution of Judaism begins.² Finally, after three weeks and three days of mourning and supplication, Daniel sees a mysterious divine being with astonishing things to say. The speaker explains that he would have come as soon as Daniel started praying, but the *śar* of the kingdom of the Persians had opposed him for twenty-one days. Now, Michael, ‘a *śar* of the first rank,’ has come to help, so the Speaker has a little time to tell Daniel what is recorded in the Book of Truth. At the end of chapter 10 and the beginning of chapter 11, the speaker states, in a very confusing and ambiguous manner (see below), that he soon will have ‘to go back to fight the *śar* of Persia. When I go off, the *śar* of Greece will come in. No one is helping me against them except your (pl.) *śar*, Michael ... And I, in the first year of Darius the Mede, my standing (will be) (*la-mā’ōwz*) to be a Strengthened and a Protector for him.’

The idea that the Jewish people, like every other nation, has its own heavenly prince, is a departure from other Biblical and Jewish texts where God Himself is the protector of the Jewish people.³ This may be a kind of levelling born from centuries of foreign rule; it reflects an admission that these other kingdoms have heavenly protectors, too. This idea that each nation has its heavenly *śar* was a response to the cognitive dissonance between the belief that God ruled the world and the reality that foreign nations ruled the world. The conflict between celestial princes is an attempt to soften the dissonance and visualize reality on a different plane. Divine beings are fighting to prevent each other from gaining eternal dominance. These *śarim* are generals of celestial armies or singular titanic fighters who control or fight alongside their earthly patrons. The power of the kingdoms is envisioned in a concrete way. The monotheism here is flexible enough to create a paradigm that fits the historical reality. Jewish people have always believed in both an all-powerful God and reality, and sometimes it takes a great deal of imagination to bring these things together.

In *Dan* 10–12, the Hebrew word *śar* may mean either celestial or earthly power and the very ambiguous word *mā’ōwz* can mean ‘a protecting national Power’ but also a place or moment of intersection of heaven and earth where/when the *śar* takes his stand and fights. So the speaker is a *mā’ōwz* for Michael; he is a force of power capable of contending with or supporting a terrestrial power in the interest of God’s overarching plan. While the *śarim* are avatars for their respective nations, the speaker seems to have a more general role in fulfilling God’s plan, which seems to include the preservation of the Jewish people during this time of great kingdoms. The speaker expresses a kind of loneliness in fighting against these powers; the heavenly resistance against him is strong because God has a plan that allows these other *śarim* to stay strong. At a prescribed time in the future, the speaker and Michael will prevail over the present enemy. The supernatural dimension of reality

2 ‘Forces will be levied by him; they will desecrate the temple, the fortress; they will abolish the regular offering and set up the appalling abomination.... The knowledgeable among the people will make the many understand; and for a while they shall fall by sword and flame, suffer captivity and spoliation.’ All translations are from *NJV* unless otherwise noted.

3 As in the contemporary Ben Sira: ‘He appointed a ruler over every nation, but Israel is the Lord’s own portion’ See *Sirach* 17.17; cf. *Deut* 3.8f.; Collins 1993, 374f.



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will be the scene of a divine battle that eventually will be won, as we can see in the apocalyptic climax in *Dan* 12. Once Antiochos IV conquers Egypt only to die in a foreign land, Michael will appear and miraculous things will ensue, including final judgment and resurrection of the dead. It will be the end of history as such. The power of the kingdoms, embodied in their heavenly *śarim*, will come to an end.⁴

What the Jews are going through under Antiochos IV is so horrible that, paradoxically, it is the beginning of the *end* for the *kingdoms*, as predicted in *Dan* 2. The author of *Dan* 11 talks about the rise and fall of the kingdoms in a fascinating way, subsuming a Ptolemaic perspective on the historical past onto the theological grid of the cosmic battle. The framework is supernatural, but the content will be the historical relationship between the Seleukid and Ptolemaic kingdoms, and the geographical focus is Syria and Palestine. *Dan* 11 is one of most complex texts in the Bible because it tries to do so much at the same time:

- 1st To interpret historical data through a theological grid, so that wars between the two kingdoms are seen as intersections of the historical and mythical planes; the respective kings are often strengthened or weakened by divine forces, which are sometimes referred to as a *śar* (singular) or *śarim* (plural).⁵
- 2nd To apply, alternatively, the term *ma'oz*, a divine protector who fights for his kingdom, with the result that the divine beings keep each other at bay and thereby keep the balance of power.⁶
- 3rd To predict that Antiochos IV will disregard his dynasty's gods and instead worship *eloha ham'auzzim*, the god of these divine powers, and thus bring about the apocalypse.

In this study, I will discuss the first two topics in this sequence, leaving the latter topic for another occasion.

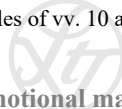
I. THE PTOLEMAIC BIAS OF *DAN* 11

The author of *Dan* 11 speaks to an audience that knows enough about recent Hellenistic history, and specifically about the interaction of the Ptolemaic and the Seleukid kingdoms in that period, to understand the thinly veiled 'vision' allegedly revealed to a 6th-century figure named Daniel that correctly 'predicted' later events, thereby substantiating the rest of the vision that prophesied things to come in the

4 Baldwin 1978, 163; Bevan 1892, 156–158; Charles 1929, 392; Collins 1993, 354f.; Driver 1900, 138–140; Goldingay 1989, 262; Gowan 2001, 135; Hartman and Di Lella 1977, 251f.; Montgomery 1927, 96–99; Miller 1994, 253; Newsom 2014, 307; Porteous 1965, 141f.; Redditt 1999, 160–162; Seow 2003, 148f.

5 The Seleukid and Ptolemaic kings are presented in an individualized and undifferentiated manner at the same time. Each king is an individual with distinct actions but also is presented as a kind of mythical 'king of the north' or 'king of the south.'

6 The author uses the term inconsistently and the text becomes confusing and, in a sense, deconstructed in the details, as in the examples of vv. 10 and 17 (see below).



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