

Dan 12:6 - Does "How Long" Refer to a Period of Time?

Frank W. Hardy

Distribution

There are 27 examples of the expression *ʿad mātay* in the Old Testament.¹ In 26 cases it is a cry for relief. Only Neh 2:6 is neutral in its connotations. This verse in NIV says:

Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, "How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?" It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time. (Neh 2:6, NIV)

The other 26 references are as follows: Exod 10:3, 7; Num 14:27; 1 Sam 1:14; 16:1; 1 Kgs 18:21; Ps 6:4; 74:10; 80:5; 82:2; 90:13; 94:3; Prov 1:22; 6:9; Isa 6:11; Jer 4:14, 21; 12:4; 23:26; 31:22; 47:5; Dan 8:13; 12:6; Hos 8:5; Hab 2:6; Zech 1:12.

At issue:

Some claim that since Dan 12:6 uses the expression *ʿad mātay* and since the emphasis is obviously on the end of the period, the reference cannot be to the period itself but to what follows. This line of argument will convince those who want to be convinced by it. The sense of Hebrew *ʿad-mātay* is "up until what point?" "Until when" is not the same as "after."

In Dan 12:6 the expression *ʿad-mātay* shows a number of things. (a) It shows that the period in question is one of adversity. In every case where there are emotional connotations associated with its use, *ʿad-mātay* is used to inquire about the end of some sort of evil. There is only one exception to this rule (quoted above), and that is merely neutral. There are no positive examples. There is not one case where *ʿad-mātay* is used to ask when a period of positive good will end. From this, and from many other considerations, I conclude that the "time, times and half a time" of Dan 12:6 are a time of evil.² The hardship that God's people endured during the Middle Ages provides a perfect context for this expression in history.

There are two other supporting considerations. (b) It is true that Hebrew *ʿad-mātay* always asserts that a period will have an end (because of *mātay*, "when?"). (c) But it also always asserts that the end is preceded by a period (because of *ʿad*, "until"). Both elements are present and so both must be allowed to contribute to the meaning of the phrase. Saying "until when?" says "when?" and also "until." Neither factor can be removed. Hebrew *ʿad mātay* never refers to an isolated moment of time, as *mātay* by itself would. So let us take the text as it reads.

¹ Exod 10:3, 7; Num 14:27; 1 Sam 1:14; 16:1; 1 Kgs 18:21; Neh 2:6; Ps 6:4; 74:10; 80:5; 82:2; 90:13; 94:3; Prov 1:22; 6:9; Isa 6:11; Jer 4:14, 21; 12:4; 23:26; 31:22; 47:5; Dan 8:13; 12:6; Hos 8:5; Hab 2:6; Zech 1:12.

² An example of similar usage in the New Testament can be found in connection with the fifth seal. "They [souls under the altar] called out in a loud voice, 'How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?'" (Rev 6:10, NIV). The timeframe is the same in Dan 12:8 and Rev 6:10.