

The book of Daniel: three issues

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1. An exegetical issue

My concern in this note is to formulate an approach to some of the problems in Daniel, which is at some points parallel to that of Dr Gurney (I shall not try systematically to note the parallels and differences) but is independent of it. Like him, however, I am concerned to interpret the book of Daniel in a way that does justice to its place in the canon of Scripture. Like him, I believe that Daniel's fourth empire is Greece, not Rome. Unlike him, however, I see the book as originally God's message to Jews in Maccabean times, and, indeed, as written in that period.

The two main ways of interpreting the four empires (Dn. 2 and 7) and the seventy weeks (Dn. 9) are represented, for instance, by Driver and Heaton¹ on one hand, and by Young and Harrison² on the other. The first concludes that the fourth empire and the seventieth week refer to the Greek period and specifically the Maccabean crisis; but that this means that Daniel got his history wrong both in implying that there were separate Median and Persian empires between the Babylonians and the Greeks, and in suggesting that sixty-two 'weeks of years' passed between the restoration and the Maccabean period. The other main view is that if we are to abide by a belief in the inspiration of Scripture, we must see the climax of the visions as referring to the Roman period; they look forward to the first coming of Christ, and beyond that to his

¹ S. R. Driver, *The Book of Daniel* (Cambridge Bible, 1900); E. W. Heaton, *The Book of Daniel* (Torch Bible Commentaries, London: SCM, 1956).

² E. J. Young, *A Commentary on Daniel* (London: Banner of Truth, 1972; originally published as *The Prophecy of Daniel*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949) (also more briefly in *NBCR*); R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (London: IVP, 1970).

second coming.³

I find neither of these views entirely satisfactory. First, both general and specific considerations suggest that these visions focus historically on the Maccabean crisis.

(1) It is desirable to argue from the known to the unknown; as one would put it theologically, we interpret Scripture by Scripture. Now we know from the two other major visions of the book, the ram and the he-goat (Dn. 8) and the appalling abomination (Dn. 10-12),⁴ that Daniel is concerned with the Maccabean crisis. We would expect the same concern to lie behind the other visions, though we will not want to force the interpretation of the former on to the latter. Nevertheless the whole vision series has a degree of unity if its consistent main concern is to reassure God's people with regard to the one time of crisis.

(2) Particular considerations in fact reinforce this preliminary understanding. There are several specific resemblances between the promised deliverance from Antiochus described in chapters 8 and 10-12 and the fall of the fourth empire described in chapters 2 and 7. The enigmatic 'little horn' (7: 8) which is obscure and problematical on the alternative interpretation,⁵ becomes intelligible, for 8: 6-11 speaks of Antiochus as a 'little horn' (such a phrase comes nowhere else in the Bible) which 'magnified itself' (cf. 'speaking great things' in

³ Some understand the main reference to be to Christ's first coming (so Young, *Daniel*, pp. 213-19), others to his second coming (the dispensationalist view: cf. J. C. Whitcomb in *NBD*), but for the purpose of this article these may be regarded as variants on the same type of approach.

⁴ Part of this vision looks beyond Antiochus, of course, but there is no dispute that he is the primary historical reference of Dn. 11.

⁵ Cf. Harrison, p. 1130.

Paul concludes
idea
This is not necessary

7: 8).⁶ Further, Antiochus is to be broken by no human hand (8: 25); similarly, the feet of the image (representing the fourth empire) are to be broken by a stone cut by no human hand (2: 34). Again, the 'time, two times, and half a time' of 7: 25 invites equation with and explanation by that of 12: 7 and the 1,290 days of 12: 11, which certainly refers to the Antiochene persecution.⁷

It is difficult to believe that the same language is several times used to describe events that are the prelude to the bringing in of God's kingdom with the events being different in some passages from what they are in others. This is confusing enough to us now, let alone what it would have been to the first hearers.

So the book of Daniel forms a more coherent whole if the empires in chapters 2 and 7 are those of the Babylonians, Medes, Persians and Greeks. Does this, however, imply, secondly, that the author misunderstood the historical outline of the period? Pointers elsewhere in the book show that he recognized that there was only one Medo-Persian empire. Daniel speaks of the Babylonian kingdom being given to the Medes and Persians (5: 28) and of 'the law of the Medes and Persians' (6: 8, *etc.*), apparently one law. He symbolizes the Medo-Persians as one animal (8: 20), though it has two horns which might again suggest that he saw it as having two elements.

Since Daniel speaks elsewhere of one Medo-Persian empire, why does he divide it in chapters 2 and 7?

The four-empire scheme resembles a pattern which appears in Greek, Latin, and Persian writings, whereby four successive ages are symbolized by metals of diminishing strength or value, as in Daniel 2:⁸ the oldest certain occurrence of this symbolism comes in the eighth century Greek poet Hesiod (*Works and Days* 106-201). These parallels suggest that Daniel's fourfold scheme pictures post-exilic history according to a common pattern. Probably it is more than merely a literary device: it makes a polemical point, like the use of near-

Eastern mythological motifs elsewhere in the Old Testament.⁹ It expresses the conviction that Yahweh is the God who is really putting his will into effect in history. He is in control even of the degeneration which men can observe. Daniel applies the common image of four empires to the period of history with which he was concerned. This began with the Babylonians and ended with the Greeks, who thus have to be the first and last members of the scheme. What about the intervening material? Dr Gurney suggests that two empires fit quite happily in between since a period of Median ascendancy occurred in between that of the Babylonians and of the Persians. But even if one has to grant that the material has to be squeezed (or rather stretched) to fit the scheme, this does not entail finding Daniel confused over post-exilic history. If he stretches a point over a period of history that is not in itself his main concern, this is because he is using an illustration which cannot be modified (otherwise, the point of using it disappears). His situation, in fact, is not unlike Paul's with his unlikely horticulture in Romans 11: 24, or even Jesus's with his unlikely business methods in Matthew 20: 1-15. Gardeners do not remove and then regraft branches, employers do not pay a day's wage for an hour's work. The Medes (perhaps) did not strictly rule the Middle East between the Babylonians and the Persians: but at each point the illustration is nevertheless used because it helps to communicate a point.¹⁰

A similar approach may be taken to Daniel 9: 24-7. Young himself describes the seventy sevens as a 'symbolical number' which does not refer to an exact 490 years. 'The emphasis... is not so much upon the beginning and termination of this period as it is upon the great results which the period has been set apart to accomplish.'¹¹ Young in fact takes it that this period lasts from the issuing of God's command concerning the rebuilding in Jerusalem to the appearance of Christ, but the exegetical approach outlined above would

⁹ E.g. G. F. Hasel, 'The Polemic Nature of the Genesis Cosmology', *EQ* 46 (1974), pp. 81-102.

¹⁰ Of course a further purpose in a reference to the Medes, and in the mention of the Median Darius (especially if he is to be identified with Cyrus: so D. J. Wiseman in *Notes on Some Problems in the Book of Daniel*, London: Tyndale Press, 1965, pp. 12-16) may be a desire to indicate the fulfilment of prophecies that Babylon would fall to the Medes (e.g. Is. 13: 17, 18). The argument about the identity of this Darius tends on both sides to lead to a losing sight of the question why he is mentioned, whoever he was.

¹¹ *NBCR*, *in loc.* The non-literal interpretation of a round number is paralleled by the approach now usually adopted to the 480 years of 2 Ki. 6: 1.

⁶ The identification is disputed by Young (pp. 275-79; cf. Harrison p. 1129), but his analysis proves no more than that the two descriptions are complementary. C. F. Keil (Keil and Delitzsch's commentary, *in loc.*) grants the identification, though explains it typologically.

⁷ Young (*in loc.*) refers 12: 7 to Antichrist alone, 12: 11 to Antiochus and, typologically, Antichrist. The complicated switching of reference is not suggested by the text itself.

⁸ For summary and references see, as well as the commentaries, J. J. Collins in *JBL* 94 (1975), pp. 221-23; M. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism* (London: SCM, 1974), I, pp. 181f.; II, pp. 122f.

suggest that here, too, the reference is to the period lasting until the Antiochene deliverance.¹²

The alternative to the mainstream approaches to these visions which I would therefore like to suggest is that, while it is correct to see their climax as referring to the Antiochene crisis, it is not necessary to infer that their inspiration is thereby imperilled. On the contrary, in as far as a more coherent and intelligible interpretation of them is made possible, it is buttressed. In all ways, Daniel focuses on the Maccabean crisis and encourages God's people to believe that they will see evil deposed and punished, and righteousness established and rewarded.

2. A theological issue

But the eschaton was not ushered in by the Antiochene crisis. There is here a more serious issue of biblical theology to be considered—one raised, indeed, by the book even if the above approach to these particular chapters is incorrect. The book seems to promise the imminent establishment of God's kingdom; but the kingdom does not so arrive.

As with the exegesis, the 'liberal' and 'conservative' views of this question of Daniel's eschatological beliefs present us with what I believe to be a false alternative. The former assumes that Daniel was simply mistaken. The latter suggests that at crucial points such as the end of chapter 11 Daniel's reference moves on from the present crisis to the final one, rather as Jesus, in Mark 13, distinguishes between the crisis of his own ministry and the fall of Jerusalem on the one hand, and that day and hour of which no-one knows (v. 32) on the other. Similarly, the prophets are sometimes thought of as leaping from some present historical crisis to the millennium.¹³

There is, of course, a profound sense in which it is true that prophecies refer to events far beyond the prophets' own time; more precisely in what sense, I shall try to suggest below. But the text itself rarely implies a distinction between what was historically imminent and what belongs to the distant future. One would never guess that 'the time of the end' (Dn. 11: 35, 40) is thousands of years after the events related in the rest of the chapter; it naturally implies the end of the crisis which the rest of the chapter refers to. The descrip-

¹² There is no space here for a discussion of the verses' interpretation. Many of the terms are sufficiently allusive to be applicable to the Maccabean deliverance or to the work of Christ, though I find it difficult to connect the anointing of a most holy place, for instance, with anything but the former.

¹³ See, for instance, J. B. Payne's systematic treatment in his *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* (London: Hodder, 1973).

tion that follows in the last paragraph (vv. 40–45) is of the same kind of events as have been referred to in the earlier part of the chapter. Even when the transition to a more other-worldly picture comes in 12: 1–3, the events now described happen 'at that [same] time'. At least one of the references to the timing of these events in the book's closing verses explicitly alludes to the Antiochene crisis (12: 11). But this deliverance was not historically the prelude to the resurrection: hence exegetical attempts to find points where Daniel moves from referring to the one to referring to the other.

But descriptions of an imminent consummation of God's final judgment and salvation do occur rather often in the Bible. In Genesis God declares that Adam will die on the day he eats the fruit of a certain tree. In Exodus God says he is about to fulfil his promise of such material and spiritual blessing that the whole world will be aroused to envy. Amos declares in the northern kingdom that Yahweh's day of judgment is imminent; Zephaniah asserts the same in the south. Jeremiah promises Judah a new covenant. Ezekiel promises the exiles a new heart. Zechariah says the world will flock to Jerusalem. Daniel sees the kingdom given to Israel. Jesus declares God's kingdom is here. Paul says the eschaton is round the corner.

In a literal final sense, these expectations are not fulfilled. We thus find the question asked, 'Were the exilic prophets/Daniel/Jesus/Paul mistaken in suggesting that the eschaton was imminent?' If these passages are discussed in isolation from one another, however, the point is missed that they are actually examples of the same recurring phenomenon in the Bible. That phenomenon is, to see each evil, each crisis, each judgment, each victory, each blessing as the embodiment in time of the ultimate struggle between right and wrong, chaos and cosmos, in which evil ever threatens to be victorious, but God wins the actual victory. Biblical theology eventually crystallizes the conviction—how early, opinions will differ—that the ultimate achievement of this victory will only come at the end; though it is at the same time somehow a victory won finally at the beginning, when *tôhû wābôhû* gave way to cosmos and Rahab was cut to pieces. Within history, however, there are recurrent partial realizations of that ultimate achievement—of which the greatest came through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.¹⁴

The Jews' deliverance from Antiochus—and there was a notable deliverance—was one such realization. It was not the final breaking-in of the eschaton. But it was the breaking-in of the eschato-

¹⁴ On this paragraph, see G. B. Caird's comments on eschatology in *Exp T* 74 (1962-63), p. 84.

logical God. It was not the fulfilment of God's final purpose but it was an *arrabōn* of that fulfilment, and (we can see with hindsight) pointed forward to it.

By virtue of their all constituting temporal embodiments of the ultimate conflict these events are also linked to each other, and are described in similar terms. Indeed Jesus can pick up the description of Antiochus's 'appalling abomination' and apply it to an incident to occur as part of the coming fall of Jerusalem.¹⁵ This is not the event to which Daniel directly refers, but it is a parallel realization of the same sacrilegious arrogance of evil.

And if Daniel (or Paul) is not careful to distinguish too sharply between the present crisis or opportunity and the ultimate one, then he has something to teach us. We would do well to look at what happens to us as individuals and as the church as part of the struggle between chaos and cosmos which is the world's story from its beginning to its end, and to see these things as the dealings of the eschatological God. In all the power, holiness, and love that belong to creation and to the end, he is with us in each crisis, and we can experience another foretaste of the final victory.

3. A critical issue

But when did the eschatological God give this revelation about his intervening in the Maccabean crisis? The book asserts *prima facie* that he gave it to a man named Daniel in the sixth century, a man who saw the beginning of the four empires/seventy weeks' history described in chapters 2, 7, and 9—which, then, must have been revealed to him ahead of time by the God who was in control of it.

Most (non-'conservative') scholars date the book of Daniel much later than the time of its hero, however, and assume that, although the stories about him may well be ultimately based on fact, they have been at least extensively elaborated in a subsequent period in order to bring God's message to a later generation. The time to which the book finally belongs, according to this approach, is the period to which it refers and to which its message relates, namely the second-century Maccabean crisis. The declaring of future history in visions is a literary device, whereby events of the history (which is nearly all in fact past from the perspective of the real writer) are declared to have been in the control of the God of Israel all along. He knew

¹⁵ Despite the verbal correspondence between Mt. 24: 15 and Dn. 11: 31 (whose Antiochene reference is undeniable), Payne (p. 486) connects Mt. 24: 15 with Dn. 9: 26-7 (where the correspondence is less exact but the interpretation more equivocal).

how this history was going to develop; his lordship is certain. Therefore he can be trusted in the crisis of the present situation to control historical events that really are future from the writer's perspective.

In justification of this approach, scholars commonly refer to questions of historical accuracy (Daniel is thought to be strangely unreliable in his description of events in the exile for a man who allegedly lived then), of history of language (in Driver's often quoted tag,¹⁶ 'the *Persian* words presuppose a period after the Persian empire had been well established; the Greek words *demand*, the Hebrew *supports*, and the Aramaic *permits*' a date after 332), and of history of ideas (did apocalyptic appear in full flower in the sixth century?). Some of these points are not very impressive.¹⁷ The point to be made here, however, is that underlying these detailed reasons is another, often unstated. Daniel did not prophesy the second century in the sixth because this would be impossible and irrelevant. And the 'conservative' underlying response to these points is that such prophecy is by no means impossible if you believe in God. To exclude it is ultimately rationalist. And the relevance of it lies not in the sixth century but in the second, for the function of the book in the second century was to assure people that God was in control by showing how he had foreseen the situation long before. And further, for it to make this point, it is important that the book really comes from long before: if it does not, it is (however well-meant) a fraud.¹⁸

What are we to make of this conversation? The comfort that the book would have been to the believers of the second century may be granted. Further, the danger of rationalism is real. It is easy to be beguiled by the world's assumptions and to refuse to let these be corrected by Scripture's own evidence. The possibility of God having revealed these events to Daniel in the sixth century must be granted. But on the other hand, the assertion that 'if pseudonymous and *ex eventu*, then fraudulent', is surely without adequate foundation.

Pseudonymity is a complex phenomenon. Its motivation is equally complex: Metzger¹⁹ mentions fear, shame, financial greed, malice, respect, modesty, dramatic concern, and desire for credence. It was evidently quite possible for an author in good faith to publish in the name of someone else; Metzger instances the Neo-Pythagoreans who, centuries after Pythagoras, attributed their treatises

¹⁶ p. lxiii.

¹⁷ See, for instance, the symposium by Wiseman *et al.* (n.10 above).

¹⁸ E.g. Young, *Daniel*, p. 25.

¹⁹ B. M. Metzger, 'Literary Forgeries and Canonical Pseudepigrapha', *JBL* 91 (1972), pp. 5-12.

to him rather than ascribe to themselves the glory of their inventions.

We have no hard information, only guesses, as to the motivation or psychology that lay behind inter-testamental pseudonymous apocalyptic.²⁰ The possibility that these authors, too, wrote in good faith cannot be denied. At least one of their works is quoted with approval in the New Testament (see Jude 14); this may suggest that we are mistaken to trouble ourselves over the ethics of the matter. In the case of Daniel, then, too, 'whatever idiom or mode of expression he would use in ordinary speech must surely be allowed him when moved by the Holy Spirit'.²¹ The synoptists' 'plagiarizing' of one another is a clear enough proof that we cannot apply our literary conventions and morals to the Bible, and the fact that the theory involves an appeal to pseudonymity ought not in itself to be allowed to rule out the possibility of a second century date.²²

For the sake of argument, let us grant that what we might call the argument from theological propriety against a second century date (namely, that such a date involves the appearance of pseudonymity in the Bible) is not necessarily conclusive;

but also, on the other hand, that prediction of the second century events in the sixth century is both theologically possible, and pastorally relevant to the second century; and furthermore, that the historical arguments against a sixth century date are not necessarily conclusive. The question we might then ask is not 'could God?' but 'would God?' It seems to me to be at least arguable that the God who is revealed elsewhere in Scripture would not. He does not give signs and reveal dates. His statements about the future are calls to decision now; he is not the God of prognosticators.²³ He calls his people to naked faith and hope in him in the present, and does not generally bolster their faith with the kind of revelations that we are thinking of here. He does sometimes grant evidences to those who cannot believe without them, and thus we dare not exclude the possibility that this was the case with the book of Daniel. But the presumption is by no means in favour of this possibility.

Dating Daniel in the sixth century, indeed, brings not more glory to God but less. It makes it a less impressive and helpful document. It makes it seem more alien to me in my life of faith, for God does not treat me this way. But if in the book of Daniel God is revealing himself to his people in the second century, and calling them in that situation, by means of this strange literary form, to faith in him as the one who is Lord despite the evidence to the contrary, then this God I recognize both in Scripture and in experience. He is the one who says, 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'

²³ See recently the remarks of George Steiner in *After Babel* (London: OUP, 1975), pp. 146f.

²⁰ See the survey by D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (London: SCM, 1964), pp. 127-39. Russell himself appeals to the notion of 'corporate personality', but this is itself a dubious concept.

²¹ Metzger, p. 22. The question why Daniel alone was included in the canon if it was of similar date and origin to other apocalypses, invites the responses (1) Have you read the other apocalypses? (2) Why weren't Paul's other letters included in the NT? (3) Perhaps Daniel's was the original?

²² I have discussed these issues more generally in an article on 'Inspiration, Infallibility, and Criticism' in *The Churchman* 90 (1976), pp. 6-23.