

DANIEL

INTRODUCTION

Introduction to Daniel

The name of the recipient of the revelations contained in this Book is Daniel [דָּנִיֵּאל, *dānīy'ēl*], meaning “my judge is 'El.” 'El is the high god of the Semitic peoples, and there is evidence in the legends of the Ancient Near East of a 'Daniel' who is the proverbial wise and righteous man. The prophet Ezekiel witnesses to this. In 14:14, 20 he lists Noah, Daniel and Job as models of righteousness. In 28:3 he writes: ‘You are indeed wiser than Daniel; no secret is hidden from you’. The legendary figure of the Book of Daniel draws on this ancient folklore.

The first part of the Book of Daniel is a small anthology of separate stories that are set in the sixth century BC, in the period of the Babylonian Exile. It will become obvious that the setting is not for the purpose of presenting historical facts. Throughout the commentary we will point out where the text is at variance with what we know of the history of the 6th century exilic period. What is important is that we look at the historical context of the publication of the Book which was during the reign of the Syrian ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164BC) who attempted to impose Greek culture on Yehud (Judah). This is the period of the Maccabees (see 1&2 Maccabees). As John J. Collins writes in his commentary on Daniel in the Hermeneia Series (Augsburg Fortress Press, 1993) page 122: ‘By the end of the nineteenth century, a consensus had developed in favour of the Maccabean date [for the Book of Daniel].’ Situating Daniel among the exiles in Babylon is a literary device aimed at those undergoing persecution from Antiochus, to remind them of an earlier period of persecution in which the foreign power (Babylon) was wiped out, and the exiles emerged victorious (returning to rebuild Judah). The Book of Daniel was a timely reminder of God’s fidelity to those who remain faithful to the covenant. It is a manifesto encouraging people to be faithful and to trust their God who is the one who controls history. Antiochus will not have the last word any more than did the Babylonian rulers three hundred years earlier. If they remain faithful to the covenant, they, like their forebears in Babylon, will experience redemption.

Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164BC)

Upon the death of Alexander the Great in 323, one of his generals, Ptolemy, seized control of Egypt. Another, Seleucus, seized control of Asia Minor, Syria and east to the Indus River. They fought over Palestine, wedged between the Arabian desert and the Mediterranean, and the only land bridge to Egypt. In 301 Ptolemy I emerged victorious from the battle of Ipsos and Egypt controlled Palestine throughout the third century BC. The Ptolemies followed a policy of Hellenization, inculcating Greek customs in the political, social, cultural, economic and religious life of the conquered peoples, including the Jews of Yehud.

In 198 Antiochus III of Syria defeated Ptolemy V of Egypt at Panias, at the headwaters of the Jordan River. Initially the people of Judah welcomed what appeared to be liberation from heavy Egyptian taxation. However ten years later Antiochus was defeated by the new power, Rome, at the battle of Magnesia, and his son, later to be Antiochus IV, was taken as a hostage to Rome. The Taurus mountains became the new western boundary of the Seleucid empire, and Rome imposed upon Syria a huge indemnity, which could be met only by imposing heavy taxation throughout the kingdom (including Judah).

Things took a turn for the worse when the Seleucid ruler, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, took over control in 175. He became more and more aggressive in his determination to wipe out Judaism and turn Jerusalem into a Greek city. Some Jews saw accommodation to Hellenization as the only way to ensure the survival of Judaism. Others saw the advantages of giving away their faith and taking on Greek ways. Others, however, stubbornly resisted every attempt to compromise the practices of their ancient faith.

Antiochus dismissed the high priest Onias III in favour of his brother Jason, who paid the Syrian ruler a huge bribe in exchange for the office and promised to support Hellenization. Among other things, he built a gymnasium in Jerusalem for Greek games and encouraged Jews to have surgery to hide circumcision. However, his period as high priest lasted only three years, for a certain Menelaus paid an even bigger bribe and replaced Jason in 172. He plundered the temple treasury to pay his debts, and had Onias III murdered (see 2Maccabees 4:33-38; Daniel 9:26; 11:22). Jason tried unsuccessfully to regain the high priesthood. In 169 Antiochus seized control of Jerusalem, massacred many faithful Jews, and plundered the temple to help him make his payments to Rome.

In 167 Antiochus sent Apollonius to crush all resistance in Jerusalem (see 1Maccabees 1:29). Practising Judaism was outlawed, pagan shrines were built and a statue of Zeus was placed on an altar erected over the altar of holocausts in the sanctuary of the temple. This is called the ‘appalling abomination’ in Daniel 8:13; 9:27; 11:31; 12:11 (compare 1Maccabees 1:54; and in the Newer Testament Mark 13:14; Matthew 24:15). The temple became a place for drunken orgies and debauchery.

One strand of the stubborn resistance to the enforcement of the policies of Antiochus is seen in the story of Mattathias, a priest of the Hashmon family (hence “Hasmonean”) and his sons, especially Judas, the Maccabee. This is recounted in the Books of the Maccabees. Independence was finally achieved at the end of 164 when the temple was rededicated.

Another strand – and the one that interests us here – is that demonstrated in the Book of Daniel, which was published against this background. As we will see, the authors of the Book of Daniel did not approve of the violent methods of the Maccabees. As already noted, their call was for fidelity to the covenant, even at the price of losing one’s life. Victory over the pagan oppressors was to be a work of God not man. YHWH (not Antiochus) is the Lord of history. The stories collected in the Book of Daniel show that it is possible to live under foreign domination, and even to find advancement. This is something that the great prophet Jeremiah advised: ‘Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to YHWH on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare’ (Jeremiah 29:7). They must, however, like Daniel, remain faithful to their God and to their Jewish traditions. They must not submit to the demands of Antiochus that they renounce their faith.

As we will see when commenting on the text, they broke new ground by insisting that not even death could separate the faithful Jews from their God.

The complex nature of the Book of Daniel

1. The Book of Daniel opens (1:1 – 2:4) with an Introduction by the author responsible for compiling the Book. It is written in Hebrew, a statement of the author's pride in the traditional and sacred language of his people.

2. This is followed (2:4 - 6:28) by a series of what might best be described as 'court tales' (a ruler has an adviser from a subject people who exhibits greater wisdom than his own advisers and he advances in the ruler's favour). These are composed in Aramaic, the language of Aram (Syria) that was the shared language of the western parts of the Persian Empire, and continued into the Greek period. After examining the Aramaic of these stories, John J. Collins on page 17 of his commentary concludes: 'Balance of probability favors a date in the early Hellenistic period for the Aramaic portions of Daniel, although a precise dating on linguistic grounds is impossible.' It is likely that the tales are older, and circulated separately before finding the written form that we find in the Daniel scroll. Those responsible for collecting the stories and including them in the Daniel scroll gave them a special focus that reinforced the message that they wished to convey to their contemporaries. These pious stories have parallels in parts of the Books of Esther, Tobit, Judith and the apocryphal 1 Esdras, works which come from the same period of Jewish history.

3. Some time in the early years of the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, chapter 7 was composed, also in Aramaic, as an appendix to these stories. There are clear connections with the story of Nebuchadnezzar's dream in the first of the stories in chapter 2, and it focuses on the difficulties faced by the Jews under Antiochus. It is in the form of a vision experienced by a Babylonian king. Inspired by God, Daniel interprets the vision as applying to the situation under Antiochus. In this way the author demonstrates that the difficult circumstances experienced by the Jews under Antiochus fall within the overarching providence of the God of the Jews, the Lord of history. No kingdom can stand against God's design. It will be Judaism and God's chosen people who will prevail, not Antiochus or any other foreign oppressor.

4. The rest of the Book (chapters 8-12) is composed by a number of authors reacting to developments during the years of aggressive persecution (167-164). They are composed in Hebrew, to assert the special place of Judaism and of the traditional language of the Jewish people. They carry on from chapter 7, and are characterised as belonging to the literary genre 'apocalypse'. In his commentary page 54 John Collins writes:

The following discussion assumes the definition of the genre "apocalypse" as published and defended in *Semeia* 14 (1979). An apocalypse is "a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involved another, supernatural world". To this may be added that the genre normally serves "to interpret present, earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world and of the future, and to influence both the understanding and the behaviour of the audience by means of divine authority".

Some apocalypses involve a journey into another world. Daniel is a historical apocalypse. It focuses on people's present experience in this world. The meaning of their experience is revealed via a symbolic vision. The transcendence of God is acknowledged in that the revelation is mediated through an angel who interprets the vision. This also demonstrates that the meaning is beyond the power of human interpretation. The persecuted Jewish community is to look beyond human decisions, and see what is happening with the eyes of a 'seer' to whom is revealed the spiritual struggle between the supernatural forces of good and evil, with the ultimate victory of God assured. Those who survive will experience God's blessing, but so, too, will those who die a martyr's death. They will be raised by God to enjoy divine communion (and so life) for ever.

The beneficiary of the revelation is a figure from the past who is portrayed as foreseeing the historical events which the anonymous authors are concerned to interpret. This 'foreseeing' is a reminder to the audience that what they are experiencing comes within the over arching providence of God. They have nothing to fear so long as they remain faithful.

While the focus of the book is on the circumstances of the persecution of 167-164, its message transcends any particular historical setting (see the Book of Revelation in the Newer Testament). No human kingdom lasts for ever, and human hope for those faithful to the covenant is not for this world only.

There is no suggestion in Daniel of hostility towards Hellenistic culture as such, though there is opposition to those who are attempting to force Hellenisation on the Jews as well as to those Jews who are 'abandoning the covenant' (Daniel 11:30). The key problem is always opposition to the will of God. In the tales (chapter 2-6) the pagan kings learn to respect YHWH. In the visions (chapters 7-12) they are in rebellion against the Most High. The conflict is not cultural; it is religious.

5. Then there is material found in the Greek versions of Daniel, but not in the Hebrew Version. There are two main Greek Versions: the Old Greek, translated towards the end of the second century BC; and the Version associated with the Jewish proselyte, Theodotion, whose aim was to translate the Hebrew Bible into Greek that was more faithful to the Hebrew. Theodotion was working about 180AD. However, the Greek translation of Daniel that is associated with his name pre-dates the Newer Testament, and so pre-dates Theodotion. In his commentary on Daniel, John J. Collins page 9 note 78 provides a list of Newer Testament texts dependent on the Theodotion Version.

In the Preface to his Latin Vulgate translation of Daniel, Jerome declares that the Old Greek Version 'is not read by the Churches of our Lord and Saviour'. The Christian Church opted to use the Theodotion Version. In keeping with this long tradition it is the basis for the translation we are using for the Greek Additions to the Daniel scroll.

The Prayer of Azariah and the Hymn of the Three Young Men is inserted in chapter 3, between verses 23 and 24. Though we do not have any extant Semitic versions of this material, today's scholars are agreed that the number of characteristically Semitic features in the Greek indicate that we are dealing with a Greek translation of a text that was originally composed in either Hebrew or Aramaic (probably Hebrew).

It is likely that the Prayer and the Hymn had a separate life in the temple or synagogue worship, before being incorporated into the Daniel scroll. Since there are no indications in the Greek that either the Prayer or the Hymn were translated separately from the rest of the Daniel scroll, it would appear that they were incorporated into the Daniel scroll prior to the Old Greek translation.

An analysis of the content of these inserts will show that they fit well into traditional Jewish piety and enhance the text with their focus on the greatness of God and the faith of the young Jewish exiles. This raises the question: If this material was already part of the Daniel scroll when it was translated into Greek, why was it not included in the text accepted at Jamnia towards the end of the first century AD, with the result that, while the Daniel Scroll is found in the official Hebrew Masoretic Text, the additional material is not? There is nothing in the content that would account for its exclusion: it fits perfectly with normative Jewish theology. The Prayer of Azariah acknowledges God's action in history in favour of his chosen people. The Prose Narrative introducing the Hymn shows God intervening on behalf of those who faithfully serve him and place their trust in him. The Hymn sings of God the Almighty Creator and Sustainer of the world.

The Rabbis at Jamnia accepted Daniel because it was about a prophet who belonged to the exile. Perhaps they left these sections out because they were clearly recent additions, and so not judged to be part of the sacred tradition.

The same can be said of the stories of Bel and the Snake, which is placed after chapter 12 in the Greek 'Theodotion' Version, and Susanna, which is placed before chapter 1. The story of Bel and the Snake ridicules idol-worship (compare Isaiah 44:9-20; Habakkuk 2:18-19; Jeremiah 10:1-16; Psalm 115; Psalm 135). The story of Susanna was probably a secular story into which Daniel was inserted (first mentioned in verse 45). Whereas the story of Bel and the Snake portrays Daniel as remaining faithful into his old age, the story of Susanna portrays him as being wise from his boyhood. Both stories were probably composed in Aramaic. Like the stories in 2:4 – 6:28, these stories originally circulated separately. They were added to the Daniel scroll some time after its publication (c. 160BC) and before the Septuagint translation (c.100BC).

By way of an addendum, we note that fragments of three other stories attached to Daniel and composed in Aramaic were discovered in Qumran. They were never part of the Hebrew Scroll or the Old Greek. Daniel obviously attracted such additions.

Introduction to Daniel

In his Introduction to his commentary on the Book of Daniel in the Anchor Bible Series (Doubleday, 1978) Alexander A. Di Lella writes (page 53):

The principal thrust of the book as a whole was threefold: (1) to remind the Jews that their monotheistic religion is a glorious heritage infinitely superior to paganism with its gross idol worship; (2) to encourage the Jews to remain loyal to that heritage like the outstanding protagonists of the book who were willing to risk their social, economic, and political status and even their lives by steadfastly refusing to compromise their faith; and (3) to show dramatically and imaginatively that the God of Israel comes to the rescue and delivers those who believe in him despite even the severest reverses, including death by martyrdom.

Inspired by Daniel?

Di Lella has an excellent concluding section to his Introduction (pages 103-110). On page 103 he notes:

One senses that the work was composed in response to some of the pressing questions men and women have always asked themselves, especially in times of adversity: What is the meaning of the human enterprise? What sense can evil or suffering possibly have? If God is all just and all powerful, why does he remain silent and inactive when men, women and children suffer unjustly? What lies in store for people after death? If there is retribution for a person's moral decisions, when and where will it take place? Is there more to human existence than tending to one's needs and attaining a place in the world? If God has spoken to men and women in Israel's history, what does that truth imply for the believer today? In view of the chaotic forces at large in human history, can one seriously affirm that God exists, or, perhaps more pointedly, that God really cares about what happens to people?

Because of the often heroic suffering of so many Jews who determinedly held on to their faith even at the cost of their lives, those responsible for composing the Book of Daniel came to an insight that built on, but went beyond, the traditions they inherited. They rejected the idea that suffering must be a sign of God's anger and is divine punishment for the sins of the sufferer. Those suffering persecution were often clearly innocent, even heroically so. Their physical death could not possibly mean an end to their communion with God. Since God is necessarily just, life (communion with God) cannot be limited to this present existence. To judge the meaning of life they encouraged their contemporaries to look to eternity and the assurance of communion with God on the other side of death.

They had a solid conviction that God controls everything that happens in history. It followed from this that our response should be to accept whatever is happening, even when we cannot comprehend it. It will all work out for the good, for it is within the providence of an all-wise, all-powerful, and all-just God. The kingdom of God is God's achievement, not ours, so they were not in favour of the often violent tactics of the Maccabees. In response to persecution people were to remain completely faithful to their covenant with God. Those who perpetrate evil cannot thwart the will of God, and they will ultimately fail and have to suffer the consequences of their actions. Pious Jews must choose to be faithful, even at the cost of their lives.

In the Introduction (pages 17-18), we examined the assumption, found throughout the writings of ancient Israel, that God controls whatever happens in history. In its simplicity it carries a certain strength. However, it is not sufficiently subtle to make sense of our experience. Thanks to Jesus we have come to see that God loves – which is not the same as controlling. We may, perhaps, be more sympathetic with the position taken up by the Maccabees who judged that force was necessary to defend themselves against unjust oppression.

This having been said, we can learn a lot from the authors of Daniel. In the ultimate analysis their sense was right. However we understand the relationship of divine providence to the just and unjust events of our history, our response is to maintain our trust in God and respond to life with justice and love, in the belief that not even death can separate us from God's love. Di Lella goes on to state:

Men and women of faith are called upon to work mightily for the Kingdom and to respond with conviction and energy to the demands of the Kingdom. Those demands include obedience and constancy to the will of God (Dan 1:8; 3:16-18; 6:11), acknowledgment of God as Source of all life and ultimate meaning (Dan 2:20-23; 3:28 [95] - 33[100]; 4:31-34; 6:27-28), willingness to suffer and even die to preserve one's faith intact (Dan 3:12; 6:11-12), enthusiasm in sharing with others the good news of God's Kingdom (Dan 11:33; 12:3). Living up to these demands and challenges is a sign that a person is destined for God's everlasting Kingdom (Dan 7:13-14, 18, 22, 27).

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From Ben Sira 48:20 and 49:6-10, composed a generation before Daniel, it appears that the list of the prophetic scrolls had been fixed. In the Jewish Bible Daniel is included among the Writings (not the Prophets). Appropriately, Daniel is listed after Esther. However in the Greek Septuagint (followed by the Latin Vulgate), Daniel is included among the prophetic scrolls. If Jonah is considered a book of prophecy, there is no fundamental argument against including Daniel (see Matthew 24:15). Its focus, after all, like that of all the prophetic books, is not on history but on YHWH.