



The Book of Daniel

The Apocalyptic Genre

A Different Tone

The tone of the book of Daniel changes abruptly in Chapter 7. This chapter is still in Aramaic. The Aramaic chapters of the book are arranged chiastically: chapters 2 and 7 each feature the motif of the four kingdoms, chapters 3 and 6 each feature miraculous deliverance, chapters 4 and 5 feature confrontations between Daniel and Babylonian kings. It may be that the Aramaic chapters once circulated as a separate unit. As the book is now structured, however, chapter 7 is also linked to the following chapters, which are in Hebrew. The chapter is set in the time of Belshazzar, whereas Daniel 6 had reached the time of Cyrus the Persian. The sequence of Babylonian, Median and Persian kings is repeated in Daniel 7-12.

Daniel 7 is also linked to what follows, rather than what precedes, by setting and genre. Chapters 7-12 are still set in the court of Gentile kings, but Daniel is no longer interpreting the dreams of these kings. Rather, he has his own visions, which are interpreted for him by an angel. All of these visions concern events that come to a climax in the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century BCE. There can be no doubt that the visions, unlike the tales, were composed during that time, to address the crisis of persecution. Accordingly, they present a very different view of Gentile kingship from what we saw in chapters 1-6. In the tales, the kings might be arrogant and tyrannical, but they could be redeemed. Beginning in chapter 7, they are beasts that rise from the sea, demonic figures, who are only destined for destruction.

A New Genre

There is obvious continuity between the symbolic dreams of Nebuchadnezzar and the symbolic visions of Daniel, but there are differences too. Daniel's visions concern not only human history but also its heavenly backdrop, involving heavenly, angelic, beings. They resemble some of the visions in the later prophets, especially those of Ezekiel and Zechariah. The Book of Daniel is traditionally classified with the Prophets in the Christian Bible, and Daniel was regarded as a prophet in the Dead Sea Scrolls, and by the Jewish historian Josephus. His reputation as a prophet rests mainly on the visions in the second half of the book. But this is prophecy in a new key. Daniel does not pronounce oracles in the name of the Lord. Moreover, his view of human

history is different from that of the older prophets. The course of history is measured out in advance. Most importantly, it culminates in the resurrection of the dead, an idea for which Daniel provides the first clear biblical attestation. Despite its undeniable continuity with prophecy, Daniel, or at least the second half of the book, witnesses to the emergence of a new literary genre, the apocalypse.

The Genre Apocalypse

The genre apocalypse takes its name from the Book of Revelation, or Apocalypse of John, in the New Testament. Revelation, too, is often regarded as prophecy, and even contains several oracular sayings, but it too has long been recognized as qualitatively different from the books of the Hebrew prophets. It was only in the 19th century, however, that scholars came to recognize that there was a whole genre of apocalyptic writing in both Judaism and Christianity in antiquity, much of it prior to Revelation. The key to this recognition came in the early 19th century, when the Book of Enoch was brought back from Ethiopia and translated into English and other western languages. The Book of Enoch, or 1 Enoch, turned out to be a collection of (at least) five books, some older than Daniel, but at least one of which (the Similitudes or Parables of Enoch) was clearly dependent on the biblical book.

Like Daniel, the books of Enoch were pseudonymous. They were not actually written by the person to whom they were ascribed. According to Genesis, Enoch lived before the Flood, in the seventh generation from Adam. It is said of Enoch in Genesis that he “walked with God (elohim),” and he was not, for God took him. In Genesis, this means that he was a righteous man, but in 1 Enoch it is taken to mean that he walked with the angels (taking elohim as plural, = gods or angels). So the tradition developed that Enoch had made a “round trip” to heaven, and had returned to tell his children what he had seen there.

In heaven, Enoch was shown the heavenly tablets, on which the course of history was inscribed. But he also saw other heavenly mysteries, such as the movements of the stars and the resting places of the dead. The range of subjects that Enoch reveals is much greater than that revealed by Daniel and includes cosmology as well as history. Like Daniel, however, 1 Enoch accords a prominent place to the activities of angels, and to the judgment of the dead.

Daniel and Enoch are representative of two main strands of apocalyptic tradition. Enoch has the prototypical heavenly journey, which equips him with knowledge beyond that which is normally available to human beings. The Enoch tradition is continued in later apocalypses from the Common Era, such as 2 Enoch, which is only preserved in Slavonic, and 3 Baruch, which is preserved in Greek and Armenian. Daniel is representative of the historical type of apocalypse, which deals with revelations about the course of history. Some sections of 1 Enoch also deal with history. Two major Jewish apocalypses from the late first century CE, 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch, stand in the tradition of Daniel, and are mainly concerned with the course, and especially the end, of history.

This kind of literature was not unique to Judaism. It is also found in the Persian tradition. We have already mentioned a Persian text, the Bahman Yasht, in connection with Daniel 2. Most of

the relevant Persian texts are late (late antiquity, early Middle Ages) in the form in which they are preserved, but they may well preserve old traditions. Due to the difficulty of dating the Persian materials, their relationship to Daniel remains uncertain.

The Dead Sea Scrolls

Much new light has been shed on Jewish apocalypticism by the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Scrolls preserve a number of apocalypses, but these are usually in fragmentary form. But the Scrolls also show that the ideas associated with apocalypses can also be found in other genres. For example, the Scrolls include a Rule for the War of the Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness, better known as the War Scroll. This text is quite similar to Daniel insofar as it posits a final battle in which the forces of Light are led by the archangel Michael, while those of Darkness are led by Belial or Satan. The Scroll differs from Daniel, however, in the way that it imagines a balanced dualism, in which good and evil each prevail for set periods of time. The underlying system of dualism is laid out clearly in another text from the Scrolls, the Discourse on the Two Spirits, in the Community Rule, columns 3 and 4. According to this text, God created two spirits for humanity to walk in, and divided humanity between them, but at a fore-ordained time he will destroy Evil forever. This kind of dualism has strong affinities with Zoroastrianism, which also imagined two spirits ruling human kind, and associated them with Light and Darkness. In Daniel, however, the force of wickedness is not part of a divine design, but rather results from rebellion against divine rule. We shall see the underlying myth in Daniel 7. Similarly, in 1 Enoch, the spread of evil on earth is not part of a divine design but is rather due to the rebellion of the Fallen Angels, who are mentioned briefly in Genesis 6.

We may distinguish between the literary form of an apocalypse, which we find in Daniel and 1 Enoch, and apocalypticism, or a complex of ideas that is typical of apocalypses but can also be found in other literary forms, as we find in the War Scroll or in the Discourse on the Two Spirits. All of this literature, however, posits a world that is out of joint, and in crisis. In the case of Daniel 7-12, the crisis is connected with the attempt of Antiochus Epiphanes to suppress the Jewish cult. That crisis led to the Maccabean revolt, but it is not apparent that Daniel is sympathetic to the Maccabees. In the case of the earliest parts of 1 Enoch, such as the Book of the Watchers, the crisis seems to be cultural. The Fallen Angels or Watchers, are said to spread new customs on earth, ranging from metallurgy to the art of making up the eyes, and to have led to great evil and much fornication. It seems plausible to read this story as an allegory for the spread of Hellenistic civilization in the third century BCE. The apocalyptic response, as expressed in 1 Enoch, is to withdraw from the corrupt world and take flight to heaven. This is also the attitude that we find in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Daniel and Enoch express the hope that the righteous will become companions to the angels after death. The sectarians who preserved the Scrolls believed that they were already living as companions of the angels in this life.

The Importance of Apocalypticism

Apocalypticism appears late in the Old Testament. The New Testament includes only one full blown apocalypse, the Book of Revelation. Accordingly, apocalypticism is often considered marginal to the Bible. In fact, however, apocalyptic ideas are pervasive in the New Testament, and it has been claimed with some justification that apocalypticism is the mother of Christian theology. While the attitude of Jesus towards apocalypticism is perennially disputed, there is no doubt that Paul is imbued with apocalyptic ideas. All the Synoptic Gospels include visions of Jesus coming as the Son of Man on the Clouds of heaven, an image derived from Daniel 7. Most crucially, it is the apocalyptic tradition that introduced the belief in resurrection to Judaism. This was the presupposition of belief in the resurrection of Jesus, which was foundational to Christianity. As St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised. The historical importance of apocalypticism for Western religion, then, is enormous.

In modern times, apocalypticism is often held in disrepute because of its association with Fundamentalism, and more specifically with Dispensationalism, which entails the attempt to calculate the end of the world. We shall find that the calculation of the end plays a part in the Book of Daniel, but it is a relatively minor part. Fundamentalist and Dispensationalist readings of books like Daniel and Revelation suffer from literalism, the attempt to read them as if they were simply factual predictions. In fact, these are highly imaginative books that rely heavily on symbolism, and often express their ideas in several different ways, none of which is meant to be taken literally.

It is also important to remember that books like Daniel and Revelation were written with specific crises in mind. They can transcend these crises, and still speak to us centuries later, but they are not timeless truths. They are written in the idiom of a particular time and place that is remote from our own. We need to attend to that idiom if we are to appreciate these Scriptures properly.

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