



The Book of Daniel

Daniel 10-12

Daniel 10-12 constitutes the last revelation in the book. The initial vision is not described. Daniel does, however, have a vision of an angel, who gives him the interpretation.

The Vision of the Angel

After the initial revelation, Daniel fasts for three weeks. Visionaries use various techniques to induce visions. Enoch reads a petition beside running water. Ezra, in 4 Ezra, eats the flowers of the field, and later drinks a fiery liquid. We do not know whether the people who wrote the Jewish apocalypses practiced such techniques, but they evidently were aware of the possibilities.

At the end of the three weeks Daniel has a vision of a "man" who is evidently not an ordinary man. He is dressed in linen, has a belt of fine gold, his body is like topaz, his face and eyes are fiery and his limbs gleam like burnished bronze. (Ezekiel has a similar vision in Ezekiel chapter 8, which probably served as a model for Daniel's vision). The angel is described as "one who looked like a man" (10:16, 18). The expression in Hebrew is not a translation equivalent of the Aramaic phrase, "one like a son of man," which we met in chapter 7, but it means the same thing. In apocalyptic literature, figures who look like human beings often turn out to be angels.

Angelic Princes

Daniel falls in a trance, but the angel reassures him, and tells him that he has come to satisfy his desire for understanding. He also explains to Daniel the backdrop of the historical events, He has been engaged in a struggle with "the prince of the kingdom of Persia." Michael, one of the chief princes, came to relieve him, so that he could explain to Daniel what is to happen to his people at the end of days. A "prince" is a patron angel. Michael is the patron angel of Israel (10:21; 12:1). Other nations have their angelic princes too. In an earlier period, these heavenly figures were called simply gods. According to Deuteronomy 32, God divided the nations among the sons of El, and Israel was Yahweh's portion. In 2 Kings 18:33, the Assyrian envoy asks whether the god of any nation ever delivered his people from the hand of the king of Assyria.

The angelic princes of Daniel 10 are the successors of the national gods of the ancient Near East. After the prince of Persia, the prince of Greece will come. The implication is that the wars of the Hellenistic age are being fought out between the patron angels of the various countries. In the modern world, we would say that earthly conflicts are being projected onto the heavenly level. In antiquity, people were more likely to think that the heavenly realm is more real, and that earthly events are only a reflection of what happens between the gods.

Daniel 11

In Daniel 11, the angel proceeds to tell Daniel what is written in “the book of truth.” The vision is set in the reign of Cyrus of Persia, so the history of the Hellenistic age was still in the future. The implication is that all future history is already determined and recorded. In the Book of Enoch, the future is recorded on the heavenly tablets, which are modeled on the Babylonian idea of the tablets of destiny. This does not mean that human beings have no free will. The course of events is determined, but individuals can still choose how to behave, even if their choices are already known to God.

What follows in chapter 11 is an account of Hellenistic history, written in the form of prophecy. No names are named, but the events and characters are easily identified. The author was not very well informed about the Persian era. There were approximately twelve more kings of Persia after Cyrus. (The exact number depends on whether one counts a few pretenders who claimed the throne but did not establish themselves). No one in Judea in the Hellenistic and Roman periods seems to have had reliable information about the length of the Persian period or the number of kings.

The author did, however, have good information about the Hellenistic period, although we cannot now identify the source. The warrior king in vs. 3 is Alexander the Great, who died at the height of his power. The scattering of his power refers to the division of his kingdom among his generals, known as the Diadochi, or Successors. The account in Daniel 11 focuses on the two generals who had most impact on Palestine: Seleucus of Syria, who founded the Seleucid dynasty, and Ptolemy of Egypt, who founded the Ptolemaic dynasty. Daniel refers to the Seleucids as the “kings of the north” and the Ptolemies as “the kings of the south.”

The narrative concerns Judea more directly from 11:20 onward. The figure who sends an official for the glory of the kingdom is Seleucus IV, who sent Heliodorus to extract revenues from the temple in Jerusalem. The story is told in colorful detail in 2 Maccabees 3. It is now apparent from an inscription published in 2007 that Heliodorus was involved in restructuring the finances of the Seleucid Empire. He apparently did not succeed in his mission to Jerusalem, but he subsequently murdered Seleucus IV. The next king is described as a contemptible person on whom royal majesty was not conferred. This is Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the younger brother of Seleucus, who was not originally in line for the throne. He ousted Heliodorus. The legitimate heir, the son of Seleucus, was still a hostage in Rome, so Antiochus seized power. The “prince of the covenant” who is swept away before him is the High Priest Onias III, who was replaced by his brother Jason, and was subsequently murdered. The passage goes on to describe

Antiochus's first invasion of Egypt, which was successful. Daniel implies that Antiochus always intended evil towards Judea (his heart was set against the holy covenant) but this is unlikely.

Dan 11:29 refers to Antiochus's second invasion of Egypt. This did not go well. He was confronted by the Romans, who are called Kittim. (Kittim, derived from Citium in Cyprus, meant "westerners." Alexander is called "king of the Kittim" in 1 Maccabees. Kittim refers to the Romans in the Dead Sea Scrolls). The Romans demanded that Antiochus withdraw from Egypt, and he complied. It was at this point that he intervened militarily in Jerusalem. It is clear from 2 Maccabees 5 that fighting had broken out in Jerusalem between Jason, who had replaced Onias III as High Priest, and Menelaus, who had subsequently replaced Jason. The king thought Judea was in revolt and intervened to put it down. Daniel, however, says nothing of the fighting in Jerusalem, and attributes the king's action to his frustration after his humiliation in Egypt. The repressive measures have already been mentioned briefly in the earlier chapters of Daniel. The crucial ones are the prohibition of the regular burnt offering and the setting up of "the abomination that makes desolate," a pagan altar superimposed on the altar of the Jerusalem temple. Daniel does acknowledge that those who "forsake the holy covenant" are complicit in the king's actions, but it places the main responsibility on the king.

The heroes of the story, however, are "those who know their God," who stand firm and take action. It is not entirely clear what action they take. The only action mentioned is that they "give understanding to many." The heroes are referred to as "the wise" or "wise teachers" (maskilim). Some of these people are killed. They are said to receive "little help." Ever since the commentary of St. Jerome, this has been interpreted as a slighting reference to the Maccabees. Daniel does not appear to have thought that deliverance would come by human means.

The Hybris of the King

The chapter goes on to describe the hybris of the king. He will speak horrible things against the God of Israel, but he will also fail to respect the gods of his ancestors. According to Daniel 11, he would pay no respect to any god, because he considered himself greater than all. (His epithet Epiphanes meant "Zeus made manifest." Some of his critics quipped that he was "Epimanes," a madman). This picture is undoubtedly exaggerated. The "god of fortresses" is the god worshipped by the Syrian soldiers in the fortress Akra in Jerusalem, probably Zeus Olympios. The traditional god of the Seleucid dynasty was Apollo.

Dan 11:40-45 describes how the king meets his end, in a battle with the "king of the south." He would die "between the sea and the holy mountain," in the land of Israel. But Antiochus did not in fact die in this manner. He died of disease in the east, on a campaign against the Parthians, in 164 BCE. The erroneous prophecy of Daniel 11 is a valuable clue to the time of composition. Already in antiquity the Neo-Platonist philosopher Porphyry recognized that the accurate prophecies down to Dan 11:39 were composed after the fact; but that the account of the king's death was a real, but inaccurate, prediction. The whole passage must have been composed before the news of Antiochus's death became known in Jerusalem in early 163 BCE.

The Resurrection

The death of the king is the prelude to the end of history. At that time the archangel Michael will arise in victory. Israel will be delivered, but not every Israelite. Only those who are “found written in the book.” In this case, the reference is to the book of life. Many of those who sleep in the land of dust (= Sheol, or the Netherworld) will arise, some to everlasting life and some to everlasting contempt. This is the first undisputed reference to the resurrection of the dead in the Hebrew Bible. It does not envision universal resurrection. Only the very good and very bad will be raised. The wise will shine like the stars. From a parallel in 1 Enoch 104 it is clear that this means that they will become companions to the angelic host. Daniel 12 does not say that the resurrected righteous will return to earth, and it is not clear that they will have bodies of flesh and blood. Other early apocalyptic texts, such as 1 Enoch 104 and Jubilees 23, seem to envision what St. Paul would call “a spiritual body” (1 Cor 15:44). The crucial point is that there is a judgment that separates the righteous from the wicked. Daniel does not describe a judgment scene, as some later apocalypses do, but it clearly distinguishes the fate of the good from that of the wicked. Salvation, then, is no longer a matter of belonging to restored Israel. It is decided on an individual basis. Daniel is still told that “your people will be restored,” but “your people” has been redefined, to exclude those who forsake the covenant.

Daniel is told to keep this revelation secret until the time of the end. Supposedly, Daniel had received this revelation in the Persian period. Yet it was unknown before the Maccabean period. The command to secrecy explains why this was so. It does not mean that the actual author of the book was supposed to keep it secret.

Daniel 12: 5-13

Daniel has one more vision. He sees two angels (men clothed in line) conversing about the timing of these events. Two figures are given. “From the time the burnt offering is taken away and the abomination that makes desolate is set up, there shall be one thousand two hundred ninety days. Blessed are those who persevere and attain the thousand three hundred thirty five days. All these figures are approximations of three and a half years, but the figures in Daniel 12 are slightly higher than the one thousand one hundred and fifty days given in chapter 8. Most markable is the juxtaposition in Daniel 12 of two different numbers. The simplest explanation of this phenomenon is that the first number of days had passed, and that the author recalculated and came up with a higher number. This phenomenon of recalculation is well known among modern apocalyptic groups, most famously the Millerites, forerunners of the Seventh Day Adventists, in 1843. It is easier to suppose that a calculation was incorrect than that the whole prophecy was unreliable.

If this is correct, the figures in Daniel 12 must have been added more than three years after the suspension of the daily sacrifice. Yet 1 Maccabees 4:52-53 claimed that Judas Maccabee had purified the temple on the third anniversary of its desecration. It is apparent that the Maccabean reconsecration of the temple was not the “end” that Daniel had in mind.

Presumably, he hoped for a more definitive restoration, one that would involve the resurrection of the dead.

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