

DANIEL



Stephen L. Cook

Daniel is among the Bible's profoundest revelations about God's hopes for humanity. God's interests and ideals, and their coming impact on earthly experience, are nowhere clearer, or more bracing. The book envisions Scripture's most powerful symbols and goals finally blossoming in concrete, material form—an end-time scenario that has commanded the attention of Jews and Christians for century after century. Certainly, Jesus took the book of Daniel most seriously.

When Jesus speaks of his future, transcendent vindication and concrete reign, he cites Daniel 7:9-14. "Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory" (Mark 13:26; cf. 14:62). Each year during Advent, the Church renews its wakefulness about this coming, triumphal return of Jesus as Daniel's heavenly hero, the *Son of Man*. We see the Second Coming as the one event that will forever clarify and fulfill

Jesus' past messianic work of humiliation and suffering.

Life in the present, however, is as much the concern of Daniel as the future fulfillment of God's plan of salvation. A consideration of the end time should energize our sense of mission in *this* world. It should lead the reader to discern in the here-and-now a more profound, more vibrant reality than what the naked eye can see. The *last things* are present and actual already, Daniel claims, although currently a hidden backdrop to mundane life. We have to live our daily lives with *last things* in mind.

Turning to Daniel from other parts of the Bible, even from the prophetic books, requires readers to make some adjustments. The book has the distinctive biblical genre *apocalypse*. In this genre, a visionary, with angels' help, grapples with a transcendent reality parallel to human experience and on a collision course with history. This type of literature has little to do with the

tried and true. Sometimes using sharp images from mythology, the apocalyptic imagination exposes embedded, trans-personal evil, uncovers primal conflicts of existence, and evokes humanity's awe before God.

Daniel has two parts, folktales about courtiers in exile (chapters 1–6) and reports of visions (chapters 7–12). The court tales (part one) include such well-known accounts as the story of the fiery furnace, the writing on the wall at Belshazzar's feast, and Daniel in the lion's den. The visions (part two) reveal nightmarish monsters, the Ancient of Days seated for final judgment, and the blazing advent of the Son of Man. They even include the prospect of the bodily resurrection of the dead.

Daniel's stories and visions came together over time, compiled in their present form only in the period starting around 167 B.C.E. (see the discussion below). At that time, Judea, under the Maccabees, revolted against Antiochus

IV Epiphanes, an infamous Seleucid ruler from Syria.

The true scope of the book, however, bursts beyond the confines of the period of original composition. The expansive, awesome visions of the Bible's apocalyptic literature defy a critic's attempt to reduce them to one set of historical circumstances. The history of interpretation shows the rich capacity of Daniel's visions to speak to multiple situations over a long expanse of time.

The Daniel group hoped for a speedy fulfillment of their writings, but never claimed these hopes were part of the inspired revelations they recorded. The book of Daniel never mentions Antiochus by name. It never claims that he must be the final anti-messiah to be destroyed at the apocalyptic coming of the Son of Man.

The Court Tales

The first half of Daniel contains folktales about the hero Daniel and his three companions, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. The stories are set far from Judah in foreign courts, in the period of Israel's Babylonian exile and Babylon's defeat by the Persians (605–536 B.C.E.). In some of the tales, conflicts at court endanger the heroes and they almost become martyrs. Other tales involve contests at court, in which the heroes outshine their competitors.

The primary message of these tales is God's divine sovereignty, freedom, and triumph. When the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, falls prostrate before lowly Daniel, the reader sees an initial fulfillment of Isaiah 40–55, which prophesies that earth's rulers will bow down before the exiles, the lowly remnant of God's chosen people. Here, it is already clear that only God has true power to reign on earth. It is a small step from this perspective in the court

tales to the visions of God's reign concretely and incontestably established in the book of Daniel's second half.

God's reign with power is on its way to earth. Awakened to this fact, readers should radically revision reality. They should commit to doggedly follow God, even in a world outrageously ignorant of heaven's ways.

The developing apocalyptic imagination of the court tales is perhaps most apparent in chapter 2, the story of Nebuchadnezzar's dream of a great statue made of four sections. There is a contest at court to recount both the dream and its interpretation. The stakes are high, since the king threatens to tear his advisors "limb from limb" if none among them comes through with a true understanding of the dream.

Fortunately, a night vision reveals the mystery to Daniel, who is thus able to achieve a God-given victory over all of Babylonia's sages. The victory proves the truth of Isaiah 44:25-26.

Israel's Lord is a God who "makes fools of diviners."

As Daniel explains, the four sections of the dream's great statue represent a panoramic vision of earth's history. The dream has unveiled a blueprint for the course of time, one that anticipates Daniel's later chapters, where God preordains the reigns of a sequence of kingdoms leading ultimately to earth's final destiny.

At the climax of chapter 2, a stone strikes and crushes the great statue. This rock is the realm of God, which puts an end to all earth's kingdoms, becomes a great mountain filling the earth, and endures forever. God's reign invades earth, thunderously halting history and establishing itself as a new creation.

One of the best known of Daniel's court tales is the story of the fiery furnace in chapter 3. The tale is well told, full of literary artistry and outrageous humor. The tale's mockery of the bloated egos of earth's imperial

rulers is especially entertaining. The theological claim behind this caricature is that in God's eyes the egoistic pretensions of earth's superpowers are preposterous.

Professional jealousy and ethnic prejudice at the royal court propel the story's conflict. Overcome by envy, rival courtiers turn in Daniel's three friends for refusing to worship a golden image that Nebuchadnezzar has erected. A furnace of blazing fire is to be the punishment.

The friends have rightly discerned that dark powers lurk behind the king's religious edicts, fundamentally challenging peace and well being. The apocalyptic literature calls its readers to just such discernment, which should lead to active social intervention. According to this literature, sacrifice and heroic, life-risking action may be necessary when faced with the mesmerizing, dehumanizing powers of evil.

God's cause is vindicated in our story, as a mysterious figure protects the friends amid the super hot flames of the furnace. Their miraculous preservation recalls the words of Isaiah 43:2, "When you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you."

The End-Time Visions

The visions of Daniel 7–12 disclose a heavenly world and an imminent culmination to history. They contain pulsing images on a mythic scale; they predict the ultimate triumph of good over evil.

A steady increase of worldwide evil is inevitable, according to the visions, but there will follow an end-time triumph of God over its forces. God is about to intervene in history, destroying the dehumanizing spirit embedded within the world's empires. When that happens, God will overthrow wholesale all imperial systems of control, establish

an everlasting dominion on earth, and reward the faithful.

Chapter 7 summarizes God's overall saving plan for history. Building on chapter 2's blueprint, it adds details about God's coming reign and the powers that furiously oppose it. These powers emerge as a series of chaos monsters, spawned by the raging, primeval sea. A series of earthly empires incarnate their predatory spirit, which eventually comes into focus in the reign of a boastful tyrant, the vision's "little horn." The tyrant is a veritable anti-messiah, who, like Nebuchadnezzar in chapter 3, dictates a controlling religion of his own device.

Despite all its monsters, the revelation of Daniel 7 is hope filled. Heaven overthrows the little doomsday tyrant effortlessly, and God's reign makes its epiphany on the clouds of heaven for all to see. At its arrival, all resistance to salvation is permanently defeated, and all peoples, nations, and languages serve God.

The authors of Daniel doubtless suspected that the contemporary Seleucid tyrant Antiochus was the end-time foe described by their writings. These suspicions proved premature, as history did not end in their era. As we know, life has gone on for centuries after the Maccabean conflict.

God's postponement of judgment day, however, does not mean that Daniel 7 failed its original audience. In retrospect, what the audience experienced was a close brush with God's termination of history. In their crisis with Antiochus, apocalyptic chaos made a temporary foray into earthly experience and prefigured history's final hour.

Daniel 7 gave its original audience a way to understand their challenging circumstances. It illuminated the spiritual dimensions at play in that partial apocalyptic incursion of chaos into human history. Preserved as canonical Scripture, the vision would likewise help future readers understand

repeat experiences of miniature apocalypses (for instance, Rome's destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., the martyrdoms of Tudor England, Hitler's atrocities during World War II, the current experience of African Christians in Sudan). Fascinatingly, apocalyptic texts are capable of *ongoing* fulfillment over the ages. This makes the book of Daniel relevant for readers of all times.

Up against incursions of evil and chaos, those who are faithful and take risks sometimes suffer badly. Such faithful suffering is far from meaningless, according to Daniel 11:33-35. These verses echo the portrayal of an ideal *Suffering Servant* of God in Isaiah 53. Isaiah's Servant-image inspired Daniel to advocate faithful, nonviolent resistance among the God-loyal during times of severe tribulation.

Most all mainline lectionaries appoint an extraordinary passage from Daniel's final chapter for the next-to-last Sunday of Year B. The passage, Daniel 12:1-3, is part of a set of

readings calling the church to consider last things. As the church year ends, it is appropriate to reflect on the goal toward which God's ongoing work is directed. This goal turns out to include a dazzling transformation of embodied existence.

Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, reads verse 2. *Sleep* here is a euphemism for death; reference to the *many* is a biblical idiom referring to *all* God's people (see Psalm 40:3; Isaiah 53:11; Mark 1:34; 10:45).

In this astounding reading from Daniel, the hope filled visions of the book reach a crescendo. Chapter 12 promises that God's saving plan to defeat all evil powers on earth includes conquering death. God's saving work wipes out all causes of weeping, culminating in a fellowship community where the faithful of all eras are united and the grim bane of mortality is destroyed forever.

According to this apocalyptic imagination, readers shortchange themselves if their hopes for life after death center primarily on ethereal, celestial ideas. God's end-time plans are much more tangible than mere heavenly harps and cloud condos. The divine commitment is ultimately to redeem the physical quality of existence, including the corporeal human body. God has nothing short of a new creation in store for us!

Daniel's Background

The earlier portions of the Daniel collection, the tales of suspense and intrigue at court in Daniel 1–6, come from late Persian and early Hellenistic times (sometime between 350 and 200 B.C.E.). The book of Daniel reached its final form even later, in the period of the outrageous domination of the Jews by the Seleucid leader Antiochus IV (the years leading up to 164 B.C.E.). Coming from this late in history, during

the Maccabean revolt, Daniel is the latest book of the Hebrew Bible.

Both major sections of the book of Daniel hint that their authors are wise men (*mantic sages*). Daniel 1:4 celebrates the heroes of Daniel's court tales as "young men—versed in every branch of wisdom." Daniel 11:33, 35 and 12:3, 10 likewise celebrate "wise men." These verses within the book's second half specially esteem these figures, who give instruction and understanding to their people during earth's last days.

Babylonia, the initial empire of Israel's exile, had a tradition of mantic sages. The term *mantic wisdom* refers to the skill of these sages in deciphering obscure revelations, such as omens or dreams. The Daniel authors likely operated as royal advisers in the foreign courts of their exile, in the tradition of this mantic wisdom.

Because the Daniel authors treasured scriptural traditions, mantic

wisdom took a particularly interesting turn among them. The puzzles most intriguing to the group were the enigmas of the Hebrew Scriptures, especially those Scriptures that remained unfulfilled. Group members wrestled with how the unfulfilled ideals and symbols of the Bible would eventually find definitive realization. That is why we have seen Daniel echoing Isaiah so much. The words of Israel's past prophets, including Isaiah, provided the authors with a knotty mystery of God, ripe for untangling.

Initially, life at court was competitive and full of pitfalls for the Daniel authors, but did not involve targeted persecution. The monarchs of the court tales expose Daniel and his companions to danger due primarily to royal incompetence and inanity. For his part, in fact, King Darius tears his hair out all night to come up with a plan for *delivering* Daniel from the famous lions' den.

Beware of the frequent, mistaken opinion that apocalyptic writings are a literature of desperation, a cry of despair in the face of hopelessness. Far more than that, this literature is a profound apprehension of hope. It is about a God-revealed hope that relativizes all mundane experience, both horrific and joyful. Daniel's visions of last things intend to inspire a re-visioning of readers' experience and a recommitment to active, risky discipleship, not pity for Daniel's authors!

Eventually, the Daniel group returned to Judea, their ancestral homeland, where they recorded the apocalyptic visions of Daniel 7–12. At this period, after 198 B.C.E., their burgeoning apocalyptic imagination increasingly exposed them to official censure and sanction. As noted above, an apocalyptic imagination often risks conflict with authorities, since it actively challenges all imperial efforts to control, mesmerize, and dehumanize.

With time, the Daniel writings took on a deadly seriousness. They became ever more honest that God's reign will not come without horrible birth pangs. But it *will* come.

Dr. Stephen L. Cook is the Catherine N. McBurney Professor of Old Testament Language and Literature at Virginia Theological Seminary, where he has taught since 1996. He is the author of several books, including The Apocalyptic Literature (Interpreting Biblical Texts; Nashville: Abingdon, 2003).

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