

THE CENTRE FOR CATHOLIC BIBLE STUDIES

P. O. Box 211 20800 Lougheed Highway, Maple Ridge, BC V2X 7G1— biblestudies@shaw.ca

Biblical Notes on “The Book of DANIEL”

In subject-matter “The Book of DANIEL” falls into two parts. *Chapters 1 to 6* are narratives: Daniel and his three companions in the service of Nebuchadnezzar, 1; Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of a composite statue, 2; adoration of the golden effigy, and Daniel’s three friends in the furnace, 3; Nebuchadnezzar’s madness, 4; Belshazzar’s banquet, 5; Daniel in the lion’s den, 6.

From all these trials, in which the reputation and even the life of Daniel or of his companions is at stake, they emerge victorious and the pagans give glory to the God who has saved them. The action takes place in Babylon in the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, of his son Belshazzar, and of ‘Darius the Mede’ , Belshazzar’s successor.

Chapters 7 to 12 are visions granted to Daniel: the Four Beasts, 7; the Goat and the Ram, 8; the Seventy Weeks, 9; the great vision of the Time of Wrath and of the End, 10 to 12. They are assigned to the reigns of Belshazzar, Darius the Mede and Cyrus King of Persia, and located in Babylonia.

From the existence of these two sections some have deduced two distinct documents of different periods combined by an editor. But there are other indications which are against such a distinction. The narratives are indeed in the third person, while the visions are described by Daniel himself; but the first vision, *Ch. 7*, has its introduction and conclusion in the third person. The beginning of the book is in Hebrew but in *Ch. 2:4*, there is a sudden change to Aramaic which continues to the end of *Ch. 7* and so into the vision section; the remaining chapters are in Hebrew.

Many explanations of this duality of language have been offered, none satisfactory. There is no correspondence, therefore, between the division established by subject-matter (narratives, visions)

and the division on the ground of style (first and third person) or of language (Hebrew, Aramaic). On the other hand *Ch. 7* has its commentary in *Ch. 8* but is parallel to *Ch. 2*; its Aramaic is indeed the same as in *Ch. 2 to 4* but certain of its stylistic characteristics recur in *Ch. 8 to 12*, though these chapters are in Hebrew. This *Ch. 7*, therefore, links the book’s two sections and proves that it is in fact an integral composition. Also, Belshazzar and Darius the Mede both appear in each section of the book, so the historical problem is present as much in one section as in the other. Lastly, the literary devices and habits of thought are consistent throughout the book, which is the strongest argument for its unity.

The date of composition is decided by clear evidence given in *Ch. 11*. The wars between the Seleucids and Ptolemies and a portion of the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes are described with a wealth of detail quite unnecessary for the author’s purpose. This account bears no resemblance to any of the Old Testament prophecies and, despite its prophetic style, refers to events already past. But from *Ch. 11:40* onwards the tone changes and ‘The Time of the End’ is foretold in a way that is reminiscent of the other prophets. The book must therefore have been written during the persecution under Antiochus Epiphanes and before his death, even before the success of the Maccabean revolt; that is to say between 167 to 164 BC.

There is nothing in the rest of the book to contradict this dating. The narratives of the first section are set in the Chaldaean period, but there are indications that the author is writing a short time after the events. Belshazzar was the son of Nabonid and not, as the book says, of Nebuchadnezzar.; nor was he ever king. Darius the Mede is unknown to historians, nor is there room for him between the last Chaldaean king and

Cyrus the Persian who had already conquered the Medes. The neo-Babylonian background is described in words of Persian origin; the instruments in Nebuchadnezzar's orchestra are given names transliterated from the Greek. The dates given in the book agree neither among themselves nor with history as we know it, and they seem to have been placed at the chapter heads without much care for chronology. It seems therefore, that ancient traditions, the extent of which is hard to determine, have provided the material for a much later work.

The late composition of the book explains its position in the Hebrew Bible. It was admitted after the canon of the Prophets had already been fixed, and placed between Esther and Ezra among the varied group of 'other writings' forming the last section of the Hebrew canon. The Greek and Latin Bibles put it among the Prophets and add certain deuterocanonical sections, namely, the Psalm of Azariah and the Canticle of the Three Youths, *Ch. 3: 24-90*; the story of Susanna illustrating the shrewdness of the young Daniel, *Ch. 13*; and stories of Bel and the sacred serpent, which are satires on idolatry, *Ch. 14*.

The aim of this book was to sustain faith and hope among the Jews persecuted by Antiochus Epiphanes. Daniel and his companions have been similarly tempted: to desert the Law, *Ch. 1* and to commit idolatry, *Ch. 3 and 6*. From these trials they emerge victorious, and the persecutors were forced to acknowledge the power of the true God. The contemporary persecutor is painted in darker colours, but when the wrath of God is satisfied, *Ch. 8:19; 11:36*, the time of the end will come, *Ch.8:17; 11:40*, when the persecutor will be destroyed, *Ch. 8:25; 11:45*. This will mean the end of sorrows and of sin and the coming of the kingdom of the saints, ruled over by a 'Son of Man' whose reign will endure forever, *Ch. 7*.

This expectation of the end, this hope of the kingdom, runs through the whole book, *Ch. 2:44; 3:33 (100); 4:31; 7:14*. God will bring it to fulfilment after a lapse of time fixed by Him, but long enough to embrace the whole of human history. The various stages of the

world's history become stages in the operation of God's eternal purpose, so that these world stages, past, present, future, themselves become prophetic of a further future since all are contemplated through the eyes of God 'who controls time and seasons', *Ch.2:21*. By this double vision, at once in time and transcending time, the author reveals the prophetic significance of history. The secret of God, *Ch. 2:18*, etc; *4:6*, is revealed by mysterious intermediaries who are the messengers and agents of the Most High. The doctrine of angels is asserted in The Book Daniel, as in Ezekiel and particularly in Tobit. The revelation concerns the hidden plan of God for His people and for the nations. It concerns both peoples and individuals. An important passage on the resurrection proclaims the rising of the dead either to eternal life or eternal punishment, *Ch. 12:2*. The expected kingdom will include all nations, *Ch. 7:14*, and will have no end; it will be a kingdom of saints, *Ch. 7:18*, the kingdom of God, *Ch. 3:33 (100)*; *Ch. 4:31*, the kingdom of the Son of Man to whom all power is given, *Ch. 7:14*.

This is the last expression of messianic prophecy in the Old Testament. The coming of the kingdom will be the central theme of the Synoptic Gospel narratives, and Jesus, king of the kingdom, will call Himself 'Son of Man', thus clearly asserting that He has come to fulfil the prophecies of The Book of Daniel. The 'sealed book', *Ch. 12:4*, with its revelation of a divine secret, its angelic commentators, its message for generations to come, its deliberately enigmatic style, is the first mature apocalypse, a literary form found already developing in Ezekiel and later to flower in Jewish literature. The New Testament counterpart to the Book of Daniel is The Book of Revelation, but in this the seals of the closed book are broken, *Revelation Ch. 5-6*, its words are secret no longer since 'the time is at hand', *Revelation Ch. 22:10*, and the coming of the Lord is expected, *Revelation Ch. 22:20*; and *1 Corinthians Ch. 16:22*.

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