

The Message of Daniel

His kingdom cannot fail

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GENERAL PREFACE

THE BIBLE SPEAKS TODAY describes three series of expositions, based on the books of the Old and New Testaments, and on Bible themes that run through the whole of Scripture. Each series is characterized by a threefold ideal:

- to expound the biblical text with accuracy
- to relate it to contemporary life, and
- to be readable.

These books are, therefore, not ‘commentaries’, for the commentary seeks rather to elucidate the text than to apply it, and tends to be a work rather of reference than of literature. Nor, on the other hand, do they contain the kinds of ‘sermons’ that attempt to be contemporary and readable without taking Scripture seriously enough. The contributors to *The Bible Speaks Today* series are all united in their convictions that God still speaks through what he has spoken, and that nothing is more necessary for the life, health and growth of Christians than that they should hear what the Spirit is saying to them through his ancient – yet ever modern – Word.

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Introduction

Medical staff, according to the clip in *Reader's Digest*, were baffled. They were transcribing medical audiotapes and one of them came upon a perplexing diagnosis: 'This man has pholenfrometry.' Being unfamiliar with that condition one of them double-checked with the doctor. He listened to the tape, shook his head, and translated: 'This man has fallen from a tree.' Sometimes things are that way – not so sophisticated as we suppose. It may be like that with a biblical book. It's usually wise to begin with what's simpler and ask: Just what seems to be here?

1. What do we meet?

So what do we find if we begin with a naïve view of the book of Daniel? Most everyone notes the book consists of about half stories and half visions; there is a series of stories in chapters 1–6, followed by a sequence of visions in chapters 7–12. So, six stories (told in third-person form about Daniel and his friends) and four visions (cast primarily in the form of first-person reports). Moreover, each 'set' of materials seem to stand in chronological order (1:1; 2:1; cf. 5:1, 31 and 6:1, for the stories, and note the specific dates in 7:1, 8:1, 9:1 and 10:1 for the visions). Visually – with the visions in time-tandem with the stories – it looks as shown overleaf.

However, things get a bit more complicated, for whether we read biblical languages or simply follow the footnotes in our translations we note that the book is bilingual!¹

Hebrew	1:1 – 2:4a
Aramaic	2:4b – 7:28
Hebrew	8:1 – 12:13

¹ The fragments of manuscripts from the Qumran caves attest these transition points from Hebrew to Aramaic and from Aramaic back to Hebrew; cf. Collins, pp. 2–3.

Stories					
Drawing a line in Babylon	Telling a world-determining dream	Fidelity in a hot spot	Deranged king, a God who is free	Hand wrote, curtain fell	A brief rendezvous with lions
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Visions					
The 'whole show' of history	Two kingdoms	Restoring Israel: prayer and answer	'What is to happen to your people'		
(7)	(8)	(9)	(10-12)		
ca. 553	ca. 550	ca. 538	ca. 536		

This scheme seems to ‘mess up’ the stories-vision pattern, for the linguistic pattern seems to carve off chapter 7 from the visions (now = chs. 8 – 12), place it with the ‘stories’ (now = chs. 2 – 7), and leave chapter 1 as a sort of prologue. We can look at this in more detail when we consider matters of structure. For the moment chapter 7 appears to have an overlapping role.

But I think one can infer a thumb-nail sketch of the book based on these broad ‘language’ divisions:²

- I. The place in which faithfulness is lived (ch. 1)
- II. The God to whom the kingdom belongs (2 – 7)
- III. The people to whom the kingdom is given (8 – 12)

2. When was it published?

Shelby Foote tells of an episode during the American Civil War. A force of northern troops had overrun some retreating southern soldiers and had captured a ragged Virginia private. The fellow puzzled the northerners – he obviously didn’t own any slaves and probably didn’t care much about ‘States’ Rights’. So they asked him, ‘What are you fighting for anyhow?’ and received the reply: ‘I’m fighting because you’re down here.’ He had no choice! And that’s the answer to any who wonder why we need to spill ink on the date of Daniel: we have to face it because others have made a big deal of it.³

If one simply reads the extant book of Daniel one may be tempted to think that the book arose in the Persian period near the end of said Daniel’s life (ca. 530 BC). One might guess that the stories about Daniel and friends (chs. 1/2 – 6) were edited together with the visions reported by Daniel (chs. 7 – 12) and that Daniel and/or a near collaborator were responsible for the editing.

But a dominant stream of scholars would say that is all wrong. They hold that the individual stories (chs. 1/2 – 6) were eventually brought together, but that occurred perhaps in the third century BC (ca. 250) – and many would hold the stories to be legendary. Chapters 7 – 12 were not combined with these stories till ca. 165 BC. How do they know that and why is that date so magical? They point to

² For the focus on God in Division II, note the repeated ‘polemical’ notes in 2:10–11 and 27; 4:7, 18 and 5:7–9, underscoring the inadequacy of paganism, and yet note how persistently the pagan kings praise and confess the kingship of the true God (2:47; 3:28–29; 4:34–37; 6:25–27). In Division III, note the focus on God’s people in 8:24; 9:24; 10:14; 12:1–2.

³ In this section I will not deal with historical difficulties in Daniel; those will be touched on at appropriate places in the exposition.

11:29–39, all of which they take as describing the activities of Antiochus IV (Epiphanes), a Syrian/Seleucid king who ruled 175–163 BC, and who, close to the end of his tenure, terrorized and persecuted the Jews and tried to annihilate the last vestiges of Israel's faith (more on him later). This section of Daniel 11 is cast in the form of prophecy predicting the activities of this king, but the prophecy is so precise and accurate that – so the argument goes – it could only have been written *after* the fact (i.e., for Latin buffs, *vaticinium ex eventu*); but when the writer tried his hand at genuine prophecy, about Antiochus' end in 11:40–45 (this view assumes that passage is also about Antiochus), he muffed the ball, for Antiochus met his end in Persia, not in Israel (11:45).⁴

The publication of Daniel, then, must have occurred about 165 BC, from a writer (or group) who had witnessed Antiochus' scourge and wanted to encourage Israelites to remain faithful in the face of this lethal assault on their faith even if it meant martyrdom.⁵ This means that Daniel is pseudonymous. Pseudonymity is not a disease but a device used by writers from 200 BC – AD 200 to provide 'cover' for their work. They would attribute it to an earlier, respected figure, but no-one was taken in by this. So the claims about Daniel having visions are simply a polite fiction, but this would cause, we are assured, no reader or recipient undue distress.

I have tried to keep this summary as concise as possible. However, enough has been said to keep you from being shocked when John J. Collins opens up his commentary with: 'According to the consensus of modern critical scholarship, the stories about Daniel and his friends are legendary in character, and the hero himself most probably never existed.'⁶ And elsewhere with a touch of disdain he writes, 'All but the most conservative scholars now accept the conclusion that the book of Daniel is not a product of the Babylonian era but reached its present form in the 2d century B.C.E. Daniel is not a historical person but a figure of legend.'⁷ There are, however, major problems with this position.

The problem of *language*. Even as early as 1927 a 'critical' scholar like Montgomery seemed loath to date the Aramaic section of Daniel (2:4b – 7:28) in the second century. It had, apparently, to be some time earlier.⁸ Nine-tenths of the Aramaic vocabulary of Daniel is

⁴ See, e.g., Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), pp. 520–521, for this argument.

⁵ So G. Fohrer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), p. 479.

⁶ Collins, p. 1.

⁷ In ABD, 2:30.

⁸ Montgomery, pp. 15–20.

attested in other texts of the fifth century BC or before.⁹ That *proves* nothing but indicates Daniel's Aramaic would fit well in an earlier period. However, the Aramaic of Daniel (as well as Ezra) is, according to Kitchen, simply a part of Imperial Aramaic that could fall anywhere from the 600–330 BC range. The sentence pattern of this biblical Aramaic is strikingly different from later Aramaic found, for example, in the 'Genesis Apocryphon' at Qumran.¹⁰ Nor is the case different for Daniel's Hebrew. Archer also compared the Hebrew of Daniel and that of the Qumran sectarian documents (the latter dating from the second century and following) and concluded: 'In view of the markedly later development exhibited by these second-century documents in the areas of syntax, word order, morphology, vocabulary, spelling, and word-usage, there is absolutely no possibility of regarding Daniel as contemporary.'¹¹

Linguistic data can prove slippery; most of us are not professional linguists and so are at the mercy of those who are. However, it seems that both the Aramaic and Hebrew of Daniel come from a time substantially earlier than the second century BC.¹²

The problem of *time*. The Daniel texts found at Qumran have implications for the date of the canonical book. Fragments of eight manuscripts of Daniel have been identified among the Dead Sea Scrolls, the oldest dating from 120–115 BC. All twelve chapters are

⁹ K. A. Kitchen, 'The Aramaic of Daniel', in *Notes on Some Problems in the Book of Daniel* (London: Tyndale, 1965), p. 32.

¹⁰ Kitchen, pp. 75–76. See especially, Gleason L. Archer, Jr, 'The Aramaic of the "Genesis Apocryphon" Compared with the Aramaic of Daniel', in J. Barton Payne (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Old Testament* (Waco: Word, 1970), pp. 160–169.

¹¹ Gleason L. Archer, Jr, 'The Hebrew of Daniel Compared with the Qumran Sectarian Documents', in John H. Skilton (ed.), *The Law and the Prophets* (n.p.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974), pp. 470–481. A bit of noise used to be made also over three Greek loan words appearing in Daniel (names of three musical instruments noted, e.g., in Dan. 3:5). The presence of these Greek words demanded, it was said, a date after the conquests of Alexander the Great. Naturally, they don't. In fact, they point in the opposite direction. If Daniel came from the second century after Hellenization had been in high gear one would expect to see Greek words and terms appearing like measles. But there are only three – and those in the 'technical' jargon of music. Greek terms in themselves should not be surprising in earlier material, for Greek contacts with the Near East were legion long before Alexander. As Edwin Yamauchi has not tired to point out, the evidence is crushing; see his 'The Greek Words in Daniel in Light of Greek Influence in the Near East', in Barton Payne (ed.), pp. 170–200.

¹² Cf. the matter-of-fact estimate by John E. McKenna: 'Scholars have long been aware that the language of Daniel is earlier than the second century. The consensus was that the Hebrew resembled that of the Chronicler and was earlier than that of the Mishnah. It is indeed noticeably closer to Chronicles than to Qumran (second-first centuries). Similarly, the Aramaic (2:4b–7:28) is closer to that of Ezra and the fifth century papyri than to that of Qumran' (in W. S. LaSor, D. A. Hubbard and F. W. Bush, *Old Testament Survey* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], p. 574).

represented among the Qumran materials, and the copies of the biblical text show the shift from Hebrew to Aramaic (at 2:4b) and the shift from Aramaic to Hebrew (at 8:1).¹³ From allusions to ‘the prophet Daniel’ in the Qumran materials (4QFlorilegium) it is clear Daniel was regarded as a prophet on the same level as Isaiah and Ezekiel. This proves a bit of a rub for the late-date view of Daniel. If Daniel was produced about 165 BC and yet shows up in a *copy* at Qumran as early as 115 BC, we are looking at a time differential of only 50 years. That strains probability: a mere fifty years for a work to become extant, be circulated and digested among the Jewish people and be accepted as Scripture. I suppose one could invoke miracle here – and it would almost have to be. Harrison’s point is well-taken: ‘But since all these [Qumran] manuscripts are copies, and not the original composition, the date of the autograph of Daniel must of necessity be advanced by half a century at the very least, so as to allow the absolute minimum of time for the book to circulate and be accepted as Scripture.’¹⁴ That is, the Qumran discoveries require that the latest possible date for Daniel would be ca. 220 BC.

The problem of *propriety*. Here the focus rests on the stories of chapters 1 – 6. The usual view holds that these stories were either produced in or taken over and used in the second-century situation in order to fortify Israel to stand firm in their ancestral faith in spite of the ravages Antiochus IV was inflicting on them. They should, they might have said, take the side of Mattathias, the priest from the village of Modin, who defied the apostasy-baiting of Antiochus’ officers and who sparked a rebellion of the faithful against the king (1 Macc. 2:19–28), a rebellion primarily carried on by Judah Maccabaeus, one of Mattathias’ sons.¹⁵ The problem is that the Daniel stories are a poor fit for that life-situation.¹⁶ Why depict Daniel manoeuvring to be faithful within and under ‘the system’ in chapter 1 when one’s objective is to stir absolute repudiation of the pagan system of Antiochus? Why show Daniel enlightening Nebuchadnezzar

¹³ For a summary, see Collins, pp. 2–3.

¹⁴ R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), p. 1118.

¹⁵ For background, see 1 Macc. 1 – 9 and 2 Macc. 3 – 15; Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 BC – AD 135)*, rev. and ed. by G. Vermes and F. Millar (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1973), 1:137–173.

¹⁶ I am not saying the stories would not have been useful as a general encouragement to faithfulness; Mattathias, according to 1 Macc. 2:49–61, cited Daniel’s friends’ fidelity in Dan. 3 and Daniel’s steadfastness in Dan. 6 (along with seven other Old Testament examples) as incentives for his sons to persevere. But late-date critics hold that the material of Daniel was meant to address *specifically* this Antiochus crisis – and, if so, it is an ill fit. David Gooding (‘The Literary Structure of the Book of Daniel and its Implications’, *Tyndale Bulletin* 32 [1981], pp. 47–49) notes that even a number of late-date advocates have recognized the problem.

in Daniel 2 and simultaneously saving the heads of the pagan dark-arts practitioners? Why pass on the record of Daniel 4 in which Daniel so obviously has a genuine concern and even compassion (4:19, 27) for the pagan king he serves? There seems to be a generally positive attitude toward Nebuchadnezzar and Darius (chs. 2, 4, 6), which is not what a second-century writer/editor would want to depict when he was trying to preach intransigence toward *his* current antichrist from Syria. Even Daniel 3 and 6, which seem most amenable to the ‘Maccabean’ setting, have something of a square-peg-round-hole character, for neither episode portrays a *general* life or death crisis. The threat to Daniel’s friends (ch. 3) only involved ‘civil service’ employees, not a whole exilic people; and Daniel met the lions (ch. 6) because of the jealousy of some government lackeys – there was no government decree to squash Israelite faith as such.¹⁷ Ronald Wallace put it well:

[I]f the book is intended as a tract with parallels being drawn between the days of the Babylonian captivity and the Maccabean persecution, why did the writer not try to make the Babylonian story fit better into the times he is supposed to be writing for? Why did he not choose more relevant stories; and if he was going to change them, why did he not make a decent job of the whole thing?¹⁸

So if the stories of Daniel 1 – 6 were specially selected and directed to Israel’s second-century emergency, it was ill done. One expects more finesse from an editor than that. He/they would have done better to take the stories of Esther and Mordecai and juice them up with a bit more religion. As it is, the second-century position implies that Daniel’s editor was at least singularly inept and perhaps abysmally stupid.

The problem of *psychology*. Here we enter this labyrinth of pseudonymity. Some make the claim that the rationale for writing under a false name from the past was to give status and credibility to one’s message – it would pack more clout if folks thought it came

¹⁷ These incongruities have often been noted, by, e.g., Zockler in *Lange’s Commentary on the Holy Scriptures*, vol. 13; Keil; Gooding (see previous note); and Raymond B. Dillard and Temper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).

¹⁸ Wallace, p. 20. Note Wallace’s further comment: ‘Throughout the whole book it becomes obvious that the work is written as a message not primarily for those who are suffering in the midst of deadly persecution but rather for those who are living in a settled condition yet within an alien culture – in other words, not in a Maccabean-type situation, but in a Babylonian-type situation’ (p. 21).

from Ezra or Enoch or Daniel.¹⁹ Of course, to be effective the ruse would have to work and the deception really deceive. This raises some minor conundrums such as what authority does a fraudulent ‘revelation’ have. More recently, we have been assured that the readers were aware of this literary convention (pseudonymity) and would have known how to hear such ‘prophecies’.²⁰ But that’s where the ‘psychological’ problem comes in. As Alec Motyer puts it: How can a recognized fiction help? ‘If “everyone” knows what it really is, it can only receive the amused rejoinder, “So what?”’²¹ I find it hard to get around that. Why would suffering saints find particular help in a batch of recently promulgated legendary court tales? Why should they give solemn credence to ‘prophecies’ they knew had been produced by a bunch of visionaries who were their own contemporaries? What divine authority could these pack? We must remember, after all, that the situation the book addresses (according to second-century daters) is the dire suffering of Israel under the rampages of Antiochus Epiphanes. They do not need advice on coping with life’s normal challenges but a true word that enables them to go on holding on by their fingernails. I think that what some call the ‘quasi-prophecy’ of Daniel would give such sufferers nothing more than quasi-encouragement.

The problem of *presuppositions*. The second-century date eliminates the apparent predictive prophecy from Daniel (except for the allegedly bungled one in 11:40–45). One suspects that the anti-supernaturalist bias in mainstream biblical studies furnishes much of the ‘push’ for this view.²² Since such criticism works ‘without a God hypothesis’ (von Rad), nothing is so axiomatic as that there can be no genuine predictive prophecy. But in Daniel studies the matter is often not put so baldly. Rather, in rejecting an earlier date, the question is asked why a sixth-century prophet should ‘focus minute attention’ on concerns of the second century (Collins). Others might say it is not a question of whether God could so predict but whether he *would* do so; such fairly long range prediction seems pointless – it does not line up with God’s concern for the here-and-now situation of his people.

Two considerations must be kept in mind. One is existential, having to do with the unique and unprecedented character of Antiochus’

¹⁹ See the discussion in D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), pp. 130–132.

²⁰ See Goldingay, p. 321.

²¹ Alec Motyer, *Roots: Let the Old Testament Speak* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2009), p. 298.

²² One hesitates to say that the king is naked and standing in the street, but if he is, one might just as well acknowledge it. See the comments of Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton in *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), p. 570.

persecution. Robert Dick Wilson spelled this out long ago. He said that the persecution of Antiochus Epiphanes is one of the most important events in the history of God's people, ranking on a level with the call of Abraham, the giving of the Law, the captivity and the incarnation. Antiochus instituted 'the deadliest peril the church has ever confronted'; he ordered the cessation of circumcision, stopped the services of the temple, instituted pagan worship instead, set up idol altars in every city, demanded every Jew should sacrifice in line with the pagan ritual, and commanded the holy writings to be destroyed. Those refusing conformity were ruthlessly slaughtered; whole families were exterminated for the guilt of one of their number, and the chosen people were on the point of annihilation. 'There never was, before or since, such a period of desperation or despondency in the history of the church.'²³ Epiphanes was attempting the 'entire destruction of people and religion at one fell blow'. Once one grasps this, says Wilson, one can see that 'the stupendous crisis justified the prediction'.²⁴ God's goodness was at work, forearming his people for what they would face.

The second consideration is theological and is best spelled out in Isaiah 40 – 48. There one finds something of a rationale for predictive prophecy (in reference to Yahweh's Cyrus-plan to give Judah release from Babylon). The ability to predict accurately is a litmus test of genuine deity; hence Yahweh's challenge to pagan 'godlets': 'Tell us what is to come hereafter, *that we may know you are gods*.'²⁵ In contrast Yahweh declares of himself:

I am totally God and there is none like me:
 declaring the end from the beginning
 and from ancient times what has not occurred,
 saying, 'My plan will stand
 and I will do all that I please,'
 calling a bird of prey [Cyrus] from the east,
 the man of my plan from a distant land.²⁶

The argument is that 'calling it' long in advance is the way the real God tends to function and thereby provides evidence (when fulfillment comes) of his real 'god-ness'. *Would* God grant predictions several centuries beforehand? Isaiah 40 – 48 implies that that is just what we could expect.

²³ Though one should not forget the Haman scheme in the book of Esther.

²⁴ Robert Dick Wilson, *Studies in the Book of Daniel*, 2 vols. in 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972 [1917/1918]), 2:270–276.

²⁵ Isa. 41:23, ESV; emphasis author's.

²⁶ Isa. 46:9c–11b.

Some would put little stock in this argument from Isaiah 40 – 48, partly because it has been late-dated by many as has Daniel.²⁷ If one takes Isaiah himself as responsible for the whole prophecy, one must assume that the prophet from somewhere between 740–700 BC prophesied the rise and work of Cyrus (which took place ca. 539 BC). Which raises the usual questions: Why would there be predictions of Cyrus 150–200 years ahead of time? What good would that do? So, many take the position that there was an Isaiah Junior, whose name we do not know (hence he’s dubbed ‘Deutero-Isaiah’), who years after Isaiah himself, say around 540 BC or so, was responsible for Isaiah 40 – 55. This means that the predictions about Cyrus become prophecies after the fact or else made so close to the time that Deutero-Isaiah could make an educated guess at what was coming. Note what this view does. It does not merely posit a later date or a different author, but annihilates one of the major *theological arguments* of Isaiah 40 – 48; it attacks the very theology of the text. But it illustrates that the main problem with predictive prophecy is not theological or practical but presuppositional, a built-in antipathy to the very possibility of predictive prophecy. The last thing people – including some biblical scholars – want is a real God running around loose and having the chutzpah to order history ahead of time.

I have simply outlined some of the problems I have with a second-century date for Daniel. Our considerations under ‘language’ and ‘time’ suggest that the *latest possible* date for Daniel would range between 300–220 BC, and that still leaves critics with the problem of predictive prophecy. I can’t claim to prove a sixth-century date, but I see too many problems with the second-century (165 BC) position, and I haven’t the faith to overcome those obstacles. Given those, it seems better to me to take a ‘naïve’ view and posit a date of ca. 530 BC.

3. How is it packaged?

We should always ask if a writer has left evidence of any design or structure on his work. In this matter I am unable to get around the use of two languages in Daniel: Hebrew in chapter 1, Aramaic roughly chapters 2 – 7, and Hebrew in chapters 8 – 12. Chapter 7 seems the climactic piece of the Aramaic ‘stories’ section and yet it is not a story but a vision. So language-wise chapter 7 belongs to 2–6 and yet category-wise, as a vision, it introduces a series of visions (8 – 12) and itself stands as the first vision in chronological sequence (7:1; 8:1; 9:1–2; 10:1). Chapter 7 then has an overlapping function in

²⁷ The matter is far more complex than I can treat here; I am merely touching on the effect the later dating of Isaiah 40 – 55 has on predictive prophecy.

the book's structure.²⁸ It is both climax and preface. In this section, however, I want to focus on the structure of chapters 2 – 7; the next segment will survey the import of 7 – 12.

Lenglet has proposed a *concentric* or 'chiastic' pattern for chapters 2 – 7,²⁹ which seems to follow accurately the emphases of the text. It may be summarized as follows:

- Vision of the four kingdoms (ch. 2)
- Deliverance of three from the furnace (ch. 3)
 - Divine discipline of a king – eventual success (ch. 4)
 - Divine discipline of a king – eventual judgment (ch. 5)
- Deliverance of Daniel from lions (ch. 6)
- Vision of the four kingdoms (ch. 7)

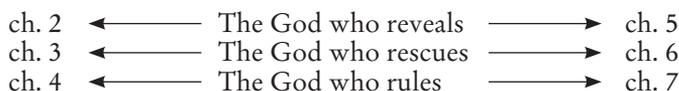
But there is also a *thematic* structure in 2 – 7, which develops in an ABC/ABC pattern. Let me substantiate this pattern by summarizing the key words that burden these chapters:

- 2: Tell, interpret, make known, reveal
verses 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 16, 19, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 36, 45, 47
- 3: Rescue, save/deliver
verses 15, 17 [twice], 28, 29
- 4: 'Rules' (ESV)
verses 17, 25, 26, 32 (English) [= vv. 14, 22, 23, 29 in Aramaic]
+ 'kingdom', 'dominion' (3, 34)
+ 'King of heaven' (37)
- 5: Show interpretation, make known, interpret
verses 7, 8, 12, 15, 16, 17, 26
- 6: Rescue, save
verses 14 [twice], 16, 20, 27 [3 times]
- 7: Dominion, throne(s), kingdom (ESV)
verses 6, 9 [twice], 12, 14 [5 times], 18 [twice], 22, 23, 26, 27 [6 times]

²⁸ See J. Paul Tanner, 'The Literary Structure of the Book of Daniel', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160 (2003), pp. 277–281; Richard D. Patterson, 'The Key Role of Daniel 7', *Grace Theological Journal* 12.2 (1991), pp. 245–261.

²⁹ In his article in *Biblica* 53 (1972), pp. 169–190. Many have noted it, including Baldwin, pp. 59–60.

The pattern is thematic but the emphasis is theocentric, showing the God of Judah's sorry exiles to be far superior to any would-be deities of Babylon or Persia. Hence, based on the thematic concerns of the text, we find the pattern repeated twice:³⁰



Yet it gets more fascinating, for one can also argue for a *pairing* pattern in this 'story' section, that is, that each set of two chapters may be meant to complement each other. Schematically, it looks like this:³¹

- 2: The rule of Babylon is temporary (therefore, rejoice in the enduring kingdom)
- 3: But the rule of Babylon may be tyrannical (therefore, be prepared to pay the price)

- 4: Proud king who was humbled and feared
- 5: Proud king too stupid to learn

- 6: Fidelity suffers in Persia as well as in Babylon
- 7: Fidelity will suffer in the end

It is interesting that none of these three structural layouts excludes the others. All three of these could be valid at the same time, and, if so, would indicate a rather complex artistry at work in the book.³² I know other biblical critics may pooh-pooh my inferences, but I always tend to associate sophisticated and conscious literary design with one originating, artistic mind rather than with an illusory committee making contributions over the centuries.

4. Why was it written?

To divine the purpose of the whole book we go primarily to the 'vision' section, chapters 7 – 12. Chapter 7 is again pivotal. As Fyall says, the scope of chapter 7 is the whole of human history, and chapters

³⁰ See my discussion in *The Word Became Flesh* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2006), pp. 55–56.

³¹ I do not recall if I read someone who proposed this or not. Upon reflection I believe I may have extrapolated the scheme based on some of David Gooding's work, viz., his stimulating article in *Tyndale Bulletin* 32 (1981), pp. 43–79.

³² Some may dismiss the pairing pattern as too subjective; perhaps so, but the con-centric and thematic ones are, in my view, quite solid.

8 – 12 unpack certain parts of that whole picture.³³ Chapter 2, we remember, to a certain degree parallels chapter 7. Both these chapters reveal that after the days of Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon, history – and by implication God’s people – will continue under the domination of an ongoing series of political powers. To use Acts 1:6 anachronistically, the exiles may see Babylon drop into political Sheol but God would not then ‘restore the kingdom to Israel’. Rather, another pagan world power would arise, and another. Hill and Walton have put it well, speaking of Daniel 2:

[W]e see a succession of kingdoms that conveyed to the Israelites that it was not yet time for the kingdom for which they had been waiting. Certainly this would have been a disappointing message for the exiles to hear. The main significance, however, is the fact that in God’s agenda, the mighty empires of the world come and go, and they will be superseded by the kingdom of God that will never be destroyed (2:44). This would give reason for continued hope.³⁴

The visions seem to reinforce this point. For example, chapter 7 speaks of a ‘little horn’ that comes up in the course of the fourth and ‘different’ kingdom (7:8), that makes war on the saints (7:21) and crushes and controls them (7:25). However, the Ancient of Days intervenes, disposes of the little horn and gives the kingdom to his people (7:22, 26–27). Then in chapter 8 we meet another ‘little horn’ (8:9) that comes out of the break-up of the Greek kingdom (8:8, 21–22) and will ravage many of God’s people (8:24–25). But the little horn of chapter 8 does not come from the final/fourth kingdom of chapter 7 but from the splintering of the Greek kingdom, which is equivalent to the third kingdom of Daniel 7:6. (This point will need to be established in detail when treating chapter 8.) This implies there will be a little horn wreaking havoc on the saints (ch. 8) before the (final) little horn does so (ch. 7). There will be a ‘little horn’ (ch. 8) before *the* ‘little horn’ (ch. 7). The little horn of chapter 8 will be a foreshadowing of the final one. Israel will face (to borrow John’s lingo) antichrists before she faces Antichrist³⁵ and should not allow

³³ Fyall, p. 18.

³⁴ Hill and Walton, p. 574. Jesus makes a similar point in Mark 13. He refers to wars and talk about wars, nation rising against nation, kingdom against kingdom, earthquakes, famines (vv. 7–8) and yet cautions: ‘but the end is *not yet*’ (v. 7b). What media preachers and televangelists may cite as signs of the end are, Jesus says, simply the distressing and spectacular events that will occur in the course of this present age.

³⁵ Cf. 1 John 2:18.

the similarities to fool them into thinking they are dealing with the latter or that ‘the kingdom of God was to appear immediately’.³⁶

Chapter 9 (Daniel’s prayer and its answer) carries the same message. Daniel was pondering Jeremiah’s prophecy (Jer. 25:12) and thinking how the seventy years’ exile might mean the ‘fulfilling’ (lit.) of the ‘desolations of Jerusalem’ (9:2). The answer Daniel received indicated that ‘while the return from exile would come within seventy years of Jeremiah’s prophecy, this should not be confused with the full restoration. Rather than seventy years, the required span would be seventy weeks of years’.³⁷

David Gooding finds the same argument operating in chapter 11. Because the critical issues surrounding chapter 11 are complex, I will not reconstruct the planks of Gooding’s argument here.³⁸ But his conclusion meshes with the emphasis already highlighted:

It is a very necessary warning in advance to people who will find themselves living in momentous times not to think that they are already living in the time of the end and that the End is at hand, simply because their own times show certain features that will mark the time of the end as well.³⁹

Two words of Jesus then might sum up the message of Daniel: ‘the end is not yet’, and ‘but the one who endures to the end – he shall be saved’.⁴⁰ That is not what we usually like to hear, for we think, for example, of the planned annihilation of Christians in Somalia and Iraq, of the decades of deprivation and terror endured by Christ’s flock in southern Sudan, of his servants tortured in Vietnam, and we long to tell them that the Lord has marked on his calendar a date in the very near future for their vindication. No, we have something like Daniel’s book instead – a realistic survival manual for the saints.

³⁶ Cf. Luke 19:11.

³⁷ Hill and Walton, p. 573. Keil, p. 24, long ago detected this burden in the visions.

³⁸ The reader can check the appropriate section of Gooding’s article, pp. 72–79.

³⁹ Gooding, p. 77.

⁴⁰ Mark 13:7, 13.

Daniel 1:1–21

1. There is a God in Babylon

Elisabeth Elliot was twice widowed, first by the martyr death of missionary Jim Elliot and then by the death of her second husband, theologian Addison Leitch. She tells of how helpful the Apostles' Creed was to her as she mourned the loss of Dr Leitch. She used it to answer the question: What things have not changed even though my husband has died?¹ One might imagine Daniel and friends asking a similar question after being hauled off to Babylon in 605 BC, far from Judah and all that was near and dear and clear. They might have wondered, what has not changed even though we have been carted to Babylon? And the text of Daniel 1 answers: God. God has not changed; he is still there, wherever 'there' is. Daniel 1 hammers this point home by its thrice-repeated theological note: *the Lord/God gave* (2, 9, 17; in each case the verb is *nātan*, lit., to give, which is visible in ESV but not in, e.g., NIV). Daniel will stir our souls in chapter 2 with his ringing declaration to Nebuchadnezzar: 'But there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries' (2:28). Indeed it is the keynote of Daniel 2. But in Daniel 1 the writer makes a similar yet different point. He is saying (as 2, 9, 17) 'There is a God in Babylon'. How then do we discern his presence?

1. God is present in his sovereign role (1–2)

Verses 1–2 face us with the historical data (1), the theological explanation (2a), and what we might call the media 'take' (2b) on Judah's demise. Verse 1 seems to depict events of 605 BC after Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian troops had whipped the Egyptians at Carchemish. He came on into Syria-Palestine conquering and subjugating; his

¹ Many thanks to Bill Smith, a pastor friend, who passed on this testimony in his church's newsletter.

‘siege’ of Jerusalem may not have been anything prolonged. This was the first wave of Judah’s exile, the one in which Daniel and friends were wrenched from home.²

The biblical writer insists that God exercises an *active* sovereignty in the history of his people. Why did Jehoiakim knuckle under to Babylon and why were the temple vessels pilfered? *The Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand*. You would never find that kind of statement in a historical work today. For one thing, we do not have the divine revelation needed to make such a statement, but neither, for the most part, do we have historians with a theocentric world view who would be willing to say – or admit – such a thing. Judah’s demise is not merely the inevitable corollary of Babylon’s military might. No, *the Lord gave* Jehoiakim up to Nebuchadnezzar. Right at the beginning of Daniel’s book we are told that Israel’s God is the Lord who directs history as he wills.

But we also meet a *faithful* sovereignty here. In beginning to give up Judah to Babylon the Lord is simply being true to his word spoken in the past, both generally and specifically.³ In Leviticus 26, Yahweh had spelled out the blessings and curses of the covenant; he had threatened that if he met repeated rebellion in Israel he would scatter them among the nations and leave them to rot in their enemies’ lands.⁴ Now that was beginning. But, more specifically, Isaiah had castigated King Hezekiah when that king had been willing to join an alliance with Merodach-baladin of Babylon (ca. 705 BC), trusting in their joint political-military muscle as a way of facing the ‘Assyrian Question’.

Look, days are coming
when all that is in your house
and what your fathers have treasured up to this day
shall be carted off to Babylon;
not an item will be left,
says Yahweh.

² Some charge the text with error for saying Nebuchadnezzar came against Jerusalem ‘in the third year’ of Jehoiakim, when Jer. 46:2 says Nebuchadnezzar’s victory at Carchemish was in Jehoiakim’s *fourth* year (plus Jer. 25:1 equates Nebuchadnezzar’s first year with Jehoiakim’s fourth year). However, Daniel likely uses the ‘accession-year’ system of reckoning royal reigns as was the custom in Babylon. In this scheme a partial year at the beginning of a reign was not counted; Jeremiah, however, followed the ‘non-accession year’ system and counted the partial first year as a year of Jehoiakim’s reign. For a lucid summary and a feasible historical reconstruction, see Steinman, pp. 80–83. On the matter of Jehoiakim’s third/fourth year, cf. also Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (rev. ed., Peabody: Hendrickson, 1998), sections 420–21, 433; same result but different process than, e.g., Steinmann.

³ I am indebted to Iain Duguid, pp. 6–7, for pointing out both aspects.

⁴ See Lev. 26:33, 39.

And some of your sons who have come out from you,
whom you fathered,
will be taken and they shall become
eunuchs in the palace of Babylon's king.⁵

Now that prediction is beginning to be fulfilled. We tend to think of God's faithfulness in more positive terms. But sometimes it may be a negative faithfulness. Here we meet with a *severe* faithfulness, and yet if we keep Leviticus 26 and Isaiah 39 in view we must still say it is a severe *faithfulness*. And if the Lord is so diligent over his threats of judgment, surely he will treat his assurances of grace with the same exacting care.

What is most striking, however, is that God operates by a *humble* sovereignty. The Lord not only *gives* Jehoiakim into Nebuchadnezzar's power but also *some of the vessels of the house of God*, so that Babylon's king carted them off to Babylon (lit., Shinar) and placed them in *the house of his god* (or *gods*) – in fact, he stashed them in *the treasure house of his god* (2b). Now there is no doubt about how the media would view this. In the Ancient Near East the fortunes of a god and a people were viewed together. That Judah's king and temple vessels were taken simply meant that the Lord was not able to protect them. If the people were losers, it meant the Lord was a loser. Much like the Olympics. If an athlete representing a nation loses in an event, we may say his or her nation 'lost'. Kenya lost, Germany lost, the USA lost. There is that identification.

We have a clear instance of this pattern much earlier in Israel's history. When the Philistines captured the ark of the covenant in battle with Israel and placed it in their shrine beside the image of Dagon (1 Sam. 5:1–2), no interpreter was needed to explain what it meant. Clearly Yahweh was subservient to Dagon, the victor. That impression got reversed, however, when Dagon's image was found face down before Yahweh's ark next day. In fact, Dagon began 'cracking up' (1 Sam. 5:3–4)!

So the Lord knew how it would 'look' when he gave his king, his people, his temple utensils into Babylon's power. Pagans would be singing, 'Praise Marduk, from whom all blessings flow.' Which is why his is a humble sovereignty – because he shows here that he is a God who wills to *suffer shame* if it might awaken his people to their danger. We see the same tendency in Christ Jesus, who 'did not consider equality with God as something to be used for his own advantage' but rather 'emptied himself by assuming the form of a slave' and 'becoming obedient to the point of death – even to death

⁵ Isa. 39:6–7.

on a cross'.⁶ Here in Daniel 1 – and picking up the later language about Daniel's resolve in verse 8 – we can say that Yahweh is a God willing to 'defile himself' if by doing so he can eventually purge his people.

Here then is God in his sovereign role, but a sovereignty not visible to the world. Only his people who know the secret of verse 2 (*the Lord gave*) will be able to see it – like the early Christians Michael Green mentions in *The Empty Cross of Jesus*: they dated the deaths of their martyrs by the appropriate year and then added, *regnante Jesu Christo*, 'in the reign of Jesus Christ'. Sometimes that is the only glue that holds one's sanity intact.

2. God is present in his silent role (3–16)

It is well that we have another 'God gave' testimony in the middle of this section (*Now God gave Daniel favour and compassions before the chief-of-staff*, 9)⁷, since we are far more aware of Babylon's dominance than of God's presence. Babylon's king wanted candidates for his civil service corps from *the sons of Israel* (3), lads who were politically elite (3b), physically impressive (4a), intellectually acute and socially poised (4b). In short, they must have status, looks, brains and 'presence'. And they were to undergo a total Babylonian makeover (4c). So Daniel and his friends face *the foreign regimen*.

Verses 3–7 summarize the Babylonianization programme. These lads are to be indoctrinated into a new culture (*the literature and language of the Chaldeans*, 4c), mollified by a new luxury (5a),⁸ and challenged with a new identity (6–7).⁹

⁶ Phil. 2:6–8, HCSB.

⁷ 'Chief-of-staff' is the way *God's Word* (World Publishing, 1995) renders *šar bassārīsīm*, which conveys the probable idea here. There is uncertainty about whether *sārīs* here in Dan. 1 occurs in its earlier sense of 'official' or its sometimes later one of 'eunuch' – and, if the latter, whether Daniel and his friends were made eunuchs. I doubt they were since the candidates wanted were to be excellent physical specimens 'without any blemish' (4). See Miller, p. 59, and G. H. Johnston, NIDOTTE, 3:288–294.

⁸ I am not assuming that the food allotment was overly sumptuous, but it was surely one of the perks of the programme. The training may be rigorous but not harsh. Babylon is a government that provides for them and so seeks to tame them. Babylon can be kind and therefore seductive.

⁹ The name changes may seem inconsequential but likely point to Babylon's design to take away every vestige of their Judah roots. They are even to think of themselves as Babylonians. The meanings of the Babylonian names are difficult and tenuous. Daniel ('God is my judge') is Belteshazzar ('May Bel [= Marduk] protect his life' [?]); Hananiah ('Yahweh is gracious') becomes Shadrach ('the command of Aku' [?], the moon god), Mishael ('Who is what God is') is Meshach ('Who is what Aku is' [?]), and Azariah ('Yahweh has helped') is Abed-nego (perhaps a corruption of 'servant of Nebo', god of wisdom). Some think the biblical writer deliberately corrupted the Babylonian names as a dig at Babylonian theology; see Steinmann, pp. 88–89, 92, for discussion.

What might the immersion in *the literature and language of the Chaldeans* involve? Probably the study of Sumerian, Akkadian and Aramaic among languages and the extensive literature written in them, including the various mythological texts, as well as historiography, astronomy, mathematics and medicine.¹⁰ They would likely have to imbibe the ‘scientific’ omen texts; for example, there was a series of astrological omens in seventy-seven tablets, twenty-three of which focused on observations of the moon; then perhaps medical omens – one series ran to forty tablets; nor could they neglect dream interpretation – the longest collection runs to one hundred and ten tablets.¹¹ The regimen could probably prove overwhelming; after a bit one likely felt awash in Babylonian literature and lore. Which may be why Daniel chose to draw a line, why we meet *the servants’ resolve*.

Verse 8 calls for special attention in our summary of verses 8–16. It opens with a use of the verb *šim* with Daniel as subject. What is not obvious in most English translations (because we like to avoid overly-wooden translations) is that *šim* also occurs twice in verse 7. It is a common verb, meaning to put or set. But if we get nastily literal it is easier to feel the ‘edge’ in verse 8a:

7a: *the chief-of-staff set names for them . . .*

7b: *so he set for Daniel Belteshazzar*

8a: *Now Daniel set (it) upon his heart . . .*

The Overseer of Babylonian Assimilation clips along in his normal fashion, imposing his Babylonian agenda on these captives – he sets names for them, sets a name for Daniel – but Daniel has his own ‘setting’ that he has done; he has set it upon his heart that he will not defile himself with the king’s food allotment.

What was wrong with the royal food allotment? Some think the problem was *dietary* – food from the royal table likely included meats, for example, that were off limits (‘unclean’) for Israelites (Lev. 11:1–23). This, however, does not explain Daniel’s rejection of the wine. Some think the objection was (what we would call) *religious* – the food may have been offered to idols before being taken to the king’s tables.¹² But what would guarantee that the *vegetables*¹³ Daniel

¹⁰ D. J. Wiseman, ‘Chaldea’, ISBE, 1:632.

¹¹ D. J. Wiseman, ‘Babylonia’, ISBE, 1:399–400. For a sample of dream omens, see Alfred J. Hoerth, *Archaeology and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), p. 373.

¹² Check the description in A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia* (rev. ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), pp. 187–192.

¹³ The traditional ‘vegetables’ is a bit misleading. The two related words in vv. 12 and 16 refer to produce grown from seed that is sown and so includes not only vegetables but fruits and grains – and presumably bread made from grain. See Miller, p. 69.

requested (12) had not also been part of an idol offering? Still others hold the difficulty was *symbolic* – sharing in the king’s food was a token of dependence on the king and a tacit sign of loyalty to him.¹⁴ But even Daniel’s alternative diet would have been ‘government issue’; it would have been impossible to avoid indications of dependence.

We may never know, then, specifically why Daniel longed to avoid the decreed food rations. Which probably means the *defensive* view best explains his decision. What do I mean by this? Well, Babylon was simply smothering Daniel and his friends.¹⁵ Daniel may well have thought, ‘There is a real danger here; I could get sucked up into this and neutered by it all.’ He recognized that if Babylon gets into you, the show is over.¹⁶ Hence he had to draw the line at some point to preserve some distinctiveness, to keep from being totally squeezed into Babylon’s mould. Walton *et al.* sum it up well:

It is not so much something in the food that defiles as much as it is the total program of assimilation. At this point the Babylonian government is exercising control over every aspect of their lives. They have little means to resist the forces of assimilation that are controlling them. They seize on one of the few areas where they can still exercise choice as an opportunity to preserve their distinct identity.¹⁷

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We should pause and note how the story highlights Daniel’s wisdom. For one thing, it suggests Daniel is wise simply in his *recognition* of how critical this moment and matter could be. This episode didn’t have ‘crisis’ written all over it like the raging fire of chapter 3 or the ravaging lions of chapter 6. The circumstances here are far less electrical and so all the more subtle. Sometimes ‘smaller’

¹⁴ Baldwin, p. 83.

¹⁵ Cf. Goldingay’s (p. 22) description: ‘A group of young Israelites, for the moment silent, faceless, nameless, helpless objects for manipulating by the Babylonian state, are to be taken, taught, provided for, trained, and renamed in this alien environment. Trundled off to a foreign land, they are placed in the charge of a foreign official with a foreign name, are called by foreign titles, and are allocated a foreign education, foreign diet, and foreign names for themselves, to prepare them to serve in a foreign court.’

¹⁶ I can’t help but think of Leslie Nielsen’s lines in one of his movies: ‘It’s like drinking Drano – it cleans you out but leaves you feeling empty inside.’ So the impact of Babylon.

¹⁷ John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), p. 731. Similarly, see Sinclair B. Ferguson, ‘Daniel’, in *New Bible Commentary* (Leicester: IVP, 1994), p. 749, and even Calvin, 1:108.

commitments made along the way fortify faith to plant its feet when it has to meet more severe threats.¹⁸

However, we especially see Daniel's wisdom in his *manner* of pressing his request. Daniel broached his request to Ashpenaz (8b). Then we are assured that God caused Ashpenaz to regard Daniel with *favour and compassions* (9). Yet he denied Daniel's request (10)! He apparently felt sympathy for Daniel but did not want to risk the royal rage by countering one of the king's explicit orders. Should – due to unauthorized diet change – the king see Daniel and friends more 'haggard' than others it could be 'curtains' for Ashpenaz.¹⁹

Of course the favour and compassion of verse 9 might go beyond sympathy, for it may be that Ashpenaz's refusal in verse 10 is not a refusal. We can't be sure, because obviously the biblical text conveys no eye movements or tones of voice, but it is feasible to read verse 10 as a veiled invitation rather than a direct refusal, as if to say: 'I cannot issue such an order, but then if you can manage it some other way, have at it!'²⁰ In any case, Daniel went down a notch on the chain of command, proposed a trial run of ten days to the steward who served them (12–13), found him agreeable (14) and – in ten days and beyond – providence favourable (15–16).²¹ The arrangement became ongoing: the verbal forms in verse 16 are participles, indicating continuous action ('kept taking away' and 'kept giving them').

All this to say we should be impressed with how Daniel handled this matter. In the face of Ashpenaz's refusal (10, or at least seeming refusal), Daniel did not throw a religious hissy fit, blowing off about Babylon's heavy-handedness and 'insensitivity'. He simply looked around for the next possible step to take (11ff.) to see where that might land him. Daniel was not one of those people who believe that 'firmness of principle always involves acting stubborn and pig-headed'.²² It's as if Daniel is fully aware that he is under *the Lord's grace*.

That grace is the undertow of the whole passage and here it 'explains' Daniel's success in verses 8–16, verses that serve as the hinge on which the story turns. Note the major flow of Daniel 1:

¹⁸ See Wallace, pp. 40–41; cf. Veldkamp, p. 16: 'We should remember that the devil is an even greater danger in the world's dining rooms than in the den of lions. When we hear the sounds of the king's meal being served, when we hear the glasses clink, we should be even more on our guard than when famished lions open their mouths.'

¹⁹ 'Haggard' comes from *zā'ap*, which usually connotes rage (cf. BDB, 277); here and in Gen. 40:6 it seems to indicate haggard or dejected appearance.

²⁰ See Goldingay, p. 19, for a similar view.

²¹ Though speculative, it could be that the steward was amenable to the request because he could enjoy the food meant for Daniel and friends himself. It may have been better fare than lower bureaucrats received! Cf. Baldwin, p. 84.

²² Veldkamp, p. 19.

Subservience in Babylon (3–7)
Resistance in Babylon (8–16)
Success in Babylon (17–20)

Everything depends on the ‘resistance’ offered in verses 8–16, and the success of that resistance depends on the Lord’s grace, as verse 9 testifies.

We need to ponder this grace. First, note that this grace is a bit surprising.²³ One doesn’t ordinarily expect a Babylonian lackey to care two hoots about the concerns of foreign exiles. *But God gave.* This brings to mind Helmut Thielicke’s story of how he went, on someone’s advice, to the Brown House (the Nazi central office) in Munich to protest his dismissal from his university teaching position (ca. 1940). He was initially unhelpfully rebuffed, but then he noted that a young civil servant there stopped and fixed his gaze on him. He asked Thielicke if he could be of assistance. Thielicke said the young man was so kind and helpful that he told him his whole trouble. The fellow then arranged for Thielicke to see the first bureaucrat he would need to face.²⁴ Even if his quest was eventually futile, what a pleasant surprise this was. We would call it an oxymoron in the highest – a slice of kindness in the heart of Nazidom. How kind God is to lay down the cushions of his compassions amid the harshest of our circumstances.

Observe also that God’s grace is very quiet here. In this section it is hidden away in the one-liner in verse 9. Grace is there and at work but doesn’t create a stir or make a racket. It seems to work so naturally and unobtrusively. Margaret Clarkson uses a phrase that nicely captures this point in her hymn ‘God of the Ages’:²⁵ ‘Quietly sovereign’ – that is part of the beauty of the Lord our God (cf. Ps. 27:4). And he is present in his silent role in Babylon.

3. God is present in his subversive role (17–20)

God continues to act quietly and silently but with an additional twist in verses 17–20. Here God’s work appears subversive. The text breaks down into two parts: divine gift (17), and human recognition (18–20).

Verse 17 is our third ‘grace note’ in the chapter: *Now as for these four lads – God gave them knowledge and skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel himself [emphatic subject] had understanding*

²³ Though perhaps it shouldn’t be; it might be seen as an initial answer to Solomon’s prayer in 1 Kgs 8:46–50; cf. Duguid, p. 14.

²⁴ Helmut Thielicke, *Notes from a Wayfarer* (New York: Paragon House, 1995), pp. 116–117.

²⁵ ‘God of the Ages’ (Hope Publishing/Word Music).

in every vision and dreams. Naturally this does not mean the youths do not study and toil and invest themselves in their studies. They surely do. But it means that God’s goodness attends, surrounds and prospers their work and so explains their success. That success is obvious. At the end of the prescribed (re-)education they meet with the king for their oral examination interview, and he finds that these four far outstrip all the others, and so they enter the king’s service. Verse 20 ratchets their commendation up a notch with a touch of what may reflect royal hyperbole: *And as for every matter of wisdom requiring understanding of which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and conjurers who were in all his kingdom.*

Now if we step back and look at all of Daniel 1, we discover an irony that is almost amusing. At the beginning of the story we find captives from a subjugated kingdom (3–4), but here these very captives stand at the head of the palace royal service corps. In verses 1–2 we read of Judah’s shameful defeat, including the pillaging of her temple vessels, while here we meet the ‘victory’ of Judah’s captives as they serve next the throne. Such a fascinating irony.

Before I moved from Mississippi, I noticed a piece in our local newspaper about a strange turn of events. The article reported that Mississippi State University was to be the recipient and repository of the official papers of General and later President Ulysses S. Grant. Grant, of course, served the north in our War Between the States (which northerners call ‘The Civil War’). He may not have been the most skilled of generals but he did assume a general was to fight (some northern generals didn’t understand that). And fight he did. Some of his fighting was in Mississippi itself – he reduced Vicksburg by siege in 1863. And he brought General Robert E. Lee to surrender in 1865 after beating down southern forces with the north’s superior numbers and resources. Even after 150 years many southerners would still regard Grant as ‘the enemy’. Which makes the irony so delicious: the caretaker and conservator of Grant’s official papers is not the University of Illinois or Michigan but Mississippi State. Of all places. The south may have lost the war but has won the privilege of harbouring the papers of its enemy.

That’s what we see in Daniel 1: the losers have by the twists of God’s providence become the winners. It is God’s subversive work. Yet we must be careful to note that God does not work this way simply to show how clever he is. Rather his work seems intended to prove beneficial toward those in Babylon. When we read Daniel 2 we see that it is because of Daniel and his friends that Nebuchadnezzar’s raft of religious flunkies (magicians, conjurers, etc.) keep their heads. And in chapters 2, 3 and 4 we see how Daniel & Co. speak God’s revelation

and truth into Nebuchadnezzar's life. God's purpose involved more than simply the fate of these Judean exiles – they were to 'stand before governors and kings . . . to bear witness before them'.²⁶

The situation is analogous to that of the little Israelite girl who served Naaman's wife.²⁷ What trauma and horror she must have felt when Syrian raiders wrenched her from her home, and presumably from her parents, in Israel. Serving Mrs Naaman may have placed her in more posh circumstances but the aching heart must have remained. But her natural witness in the midst of her housework exposed her genuine concern for her master's welfare and her confidence in the power of Israel's God working through his prophet. It all leads to a cleansing of disease and a confession of faith. Sometimes God may allow hardship to reach us because he wants his mercy to reach beyond us. And that may be subversive as well.

4. God is present in his sustaining role (21)

We are beyond the *God gave* notes, but one simply cannot pass up this last verse: *And Daniel went on until the first year of Cyrus the king.*²⁸ Sounds harmless enough, but sounds, like looks, can be deceiving.

At verse 21 the writer has obviously punched the 'fast forward' button. Who was Cyrus? He was the king of Persia who began reigning in 539 BC. Nebuchadnezzar then has passed from the scene (kings always seem to die). And what of Babylon? It fell. To whom? To Cyrus and the Persians. Do you see? Mighty Babylon of verses 1–2 (or 1–20) has fallen but God's servant continues. At that time Daniel would probably be over 80 years old.

I've a hunch, however, that the text is more than a statement about Daniel. The text is a sort of parable, as if to say: Kingdoms rise and fall, God's people go on. This text supplies anecdotal evidence of Isaiah's praise of Yahweh:

He reduces princes to nothing,
the rulers of the world to mere emptiness.
Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,
scarcely has their stem taken root in the soil,
than he blows on them and they wither
and the storm carries them away like chaff.²⁹

²⁶ Mark 13:9.

²⁷ See 2 Kgs 5:1–3.

²⁸ The verse does not mean that Daniel's life only reached to the first year of Cyrus; that was not the case (see 10:1). The concern is that he outlasted Babylon, not how much further he got.

²⁹ Isa. 40:23–24, NJB.

So in verse 21 Babylon, the hairy-chested macho brute of the world, has dropped with a thud into the mausoleum of history, while fragile Daniel, servant of the Most High God, is still on his feet.

On 10 December 1958, boxing great Archie Moore, almost forty-three, defended his light-heavyweight title against Canadian Yvon Durelle, thirty. Durelle floored Moore three times in the first round and once in the fifth. But Moore seemed to gain strength as the fight went on while Durelle tired. In the eleventh round, Moore scored his 127th knock-out. He simply outlasted his younger opponent. And that is the little piece of eschatology that Daniel 1 wants you to get a grip on before you proceed to the rest of the book: remember that the servants of God will simply out-endure the kingdoms of this age.

The Hebrew text of verse 21 contains only seven words – seven Hebrew words packed with dynamite.

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