

Daniel: The Basic Issues

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There is a great gulf between the simple conservative view of Daniel and the liberal understanding of the book. The one holds that its stories tell of real events in which God's power was demonstrated and real prophecy disclosing his knowledge of the future: the other that its stories are parables, perhaps with a historical core, and that its prophecies are by and large interpretations of past history. The conservative believes that the book was written by a real Daniel living in the sixth century BC; the liberal by an unknown writer using Daniel as his pseudonym. In interpreting the book the two sides differ on various issues: the most important being, the identity of the four kingdoms in chapters 2 and 7. Does the last kingdom (*i.e.* the clay feet of the image, 2:41ff.; the fourth beast, 7:19ff.) represent

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the Greek empire founded by Alexander (the liberal view) or the Roman empire (the traditional view)?

The articles by Gurney and Goldingay represent attempts to bridge the gulf between naive conservatism and liberal scepticism. Gurney argues that the fourth kingdom is indeed Greece, but that the book of Daniel was written in the sixth century and is therefore true predictive prophecy. Goldingay admits virtually the whole liberal position, but denies that this affects belief in the inspiration or canonicity of the book. How far do they succeed?

The issues surrounding the book of Daniel are certainly more complex than the uninitiated realize, and it may be helpful to set the Gurney/Goldingay proposals in a wider context. What are the arguments for a sixth-century date, and for a second-century date? And what are the difficulties with each view?

Arguments in favour of a sixth-century date

(1) *The book's claim to be predictive prophecy.* This is made on many occasions (2:29ff.; 4:24; cf. 31ff.; 5:24-30; chapters 7-12). Several times Daniel is told to write his visions down and seal them up (8:26; 12: 4, 9). This old prophetic custom was designed to demonstrate to sceptical audiences that God was indeed speaking through the prophet. When later something happened, they could check the sealed prophetic records to see what the prophet had said beforehand. If his word proved accurate that would suggest he was inspired (Is. 8:16; 29:11; 30:8; Je.30:2; 32:14; 36; Hab. 2:2ff.; cf. Dt. 18:22). Daniel explicitly compares his work to that of Jeremiah (9:2ff.).

(2) *The book's claim that the chief character and author lived in the sixth century BC.* Daniel was a contemporary of Nebuchadnezzar (605-562), Belshazzar (556-539) and Cyrus (539-530) (2:1; 5:1; 10:1 *etc.*).

(3) *The author's knowledge of Babylonian history is unequalled by later authors.* Dougherty wrote: '*the fifth chapter of Daniel ranks next to cuneiform literature in accuracy...* The total information found in all available chronologically-fixed documents later than the sixth

century BC... could not have provided the necessary material for the historical framework of the fifth chapter of Daniel.¹

Difficulties with a sixth-century date

(1) *Language*. Despite his famous dictum quoted by Goldingay, S. R. Driver admitted that linguistic evidence did not absolutely compel one to accept a late date for Daniel.² The study of K. A. Kitchen,³ endorsed by the famous Aramaic scholar E. Y. Kutscher,⁴ disposed of the linguistic argument for good.

(2) *Historical inaccuracies*. For example, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego were supposedly Babylonian names (1:7) but no suitable etymologies could be suggested for them. But now a satisfactory explanation has been offered.⁵

Another problem is that contemporary texts know nothing of Darius the Mede ruling as king in Babylon (5:31; 9:1; 11:1). Various suggestions have been made: two have some plausibility. One is that Darius is an alternative name of Gubaru, the governor of Babylon appointed by Cyrus.⁶ The other is that Darius is an alternative name of Cyrus himself (cf. 6:28).⁷ Neither seems wholly satisfactory, and this is one of the weaker points in the conservative view.

(3) *The apocalyptic character of the book of Daniel*. It is argued that since most works of apocalyptic date from the second century BC onwards, Daniel should be dated then too. This does not necessarily follow. First, Daniel is not pure apocalyptic. Second, the apocalyptic style may be partly inspired by Daniel and therefore the other works could be later than our book. Third, some other OT passages, e.g. Isaiah 25-27 and Zechariah 9ff. have apocalyptic features yet can hardly be dated as late as the second century.

(4) *Daniel 11*. Verses 21-39 describe the career of Antiochus Epiphanes in some detail, but the following verses (40-45) appear less accurate. Therefore it is argued that chapter 11 was written during the life-time of Antiochus. Up to verse 39 is retrospective historical narrative, but the closing verses are unfulfilled prophecy.

This is the most telling point against a 6th century date. But it rests on the assumption that the same people are being spoken of in verse 39 as in verse 40 and that there is no change of personnel (such as between 11:2 and 11:3, where there is a gap of some 130 years presupposed, between Xerxes and Alexander). Gurney believes that verses 40ff. refer to the exploits of the Romans in the East.

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¹ R. P. Dougherty, *Nabonidus and Belshazzar* (New Haven: Yale, 1929), pp. 199f.

² S. R. Driver, *Introduction to the Literature of the OT*⁹ (London: T. and T. Clark, 1913), p. 509.

³ K. A. Kitchen, 'The Aramaic of Daniel' in *Notes on Some Problems in the Book of Daniel*, ed. D. J. Wiseman (London: Tyndale Press, 1965), pp. 31-79.

[On-line at http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/daniel_kitchen.pdf]

⁴ E. Y. Kutscher, *Current Trends in Linguistics* 6 (1970), pp. 399-403.

⁵ See A. R. Millard, 'Daniel 1-6 and History', *Evangelical Quarterly*, forthcoming.

⁶ J. C. Whitcomb, *Darius the Mede*² (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974).

⁷ D. J. Wiseman, *Notes on Some Problems in the Book of Daniel*, pp. 9-18. [On-line at http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/daniel_wiseman.pdf]

Traditional exegetes believe these verses must be linked with chapter 12 and therefore refer to the last times. There does not seem to be enough information in these verses to decide between the various proposals.

Arguments in favour of a second-century date

These have already been eloquently expounded by John Goldingay, so it is hardly necessary to restate them in detail. Furthermore some of the difficulties facing a sixth-century date serve as arguments in favour of the second-century date, and conversely arguments in favour of a sixth-century origin are objections to a second-century date. Again I shall just pick out three arguments in favour of and four against the second-century date.

(1) *The emphasis on the Greek period in the prophecies.* All agree that the deeds of Alexander and his successors are described quite fully in chapters 8 and 11, but that the Romans are not discussed in detail unless the fourth kingdom refers to them. The prominence of Greece has been explained by Gurney. The Greek empire was the true precursor of Christ's coming: the Roman empire was contemporary with it. Incidentally to accept the Greek view together with a sixth-century dating is not a new view; it was held by various conservative Christians, including the Westminster divines, long before the Greek view became the hallmark of liberal orthodoxy.

(2) *The Maccabean age is the ideal Sitz im Leben for Daniel.* The book is designed to encourage men to remain faithful to the law even when persecuted. Few would doubt that Daniel proved very popular in Maccabean times, for it does record some remarkable deliverances in the face of oppression. It is not so clear, however, that it wants people to take up arms against godless rulers as the Maccabees did: Daniel and his friends seem to be passive resisters, not freedom fighters. For this reason von Rad⁸ argued that Daniel was written by opponents of the Maccabees, not their supporters. One may ask whether Daniel would have provided much comfort to those suffering Antiochus' wrath, if it was not believed to be old and authentic. A book of new parables would have carried less conviction.

(3) *Prophecy is not long-range.* This is generally true but not a universal rule. While most prophetic teaching does deal with the immediate situation facing the people of God, more distant visions cannot be ruled out. Otherwise Isaiah's prophecies of Christ's birth and ministry or even our Lord's remarks about his second coming have to be explained away.

Difficulties with a second-century date

The historical Antiochus Epiphanes was unlike the Nebuchadnezzar and the Darius described in Daniel. Yet on the second-century view these figures should reflect the character of the great persecutor Antiochus. Whereas Antiochus deliberately attempted to root out the Jewish religion, Nebuchadnezzar and Darius persecuted faithful Jews only inadvertently and they were both converted after they had discovered their mistakes (see chapters 2, 3 and 6). Perhaps, though, the author of Daniel was more sanguine about Antiochus' salvation than appears from his prophecies.

⁸ G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* II (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1965), p. 315.

(2) *The closing of the canon.* A recent study⁹ has concluded that the OT canon was closed in Maccabean times, not at the end of the first century AD as is often asserted. Should this view win scholarly acceptance, it will become the more difficult to explain how Daniel was ever accepted into the canon if it was written in the second century BC. It is a surprise to find an allegedly pseudonymous work being accepted as holy Scripture at all; it would be startling if it were accepted as Scripture as soon as it appeared, when everybody would at least have realized its novelty.

(3) *The prophecy of the 70 weeks (9:24-27).* It is impossible to squeeze in 490 years between the decree of Cyrus (538 BC) and the Maccabean period, c. 170 BC. Messianic interpreters argue that if the decree of Artaxerxes in Ezra 7 (458 BC) is the starting point, this prophecy gives a fairly accurate date for Christ's crucifixion c. AD 32. But more probably 490 is a symbolic number, equal to ten jubilees (Lv. 25).

(4) *Theology and pseudonymity.* Goldingay makes a case for supposing that pseudonymity is not incompatible with inspiration. Conservative theologians might accept this if it were proved that pseudonymous writing was an accepted convention which deceived none of its original readers. What worries me is not so much the alleged pseudonymity but the claim that Daniel's God, unlike the gods of Babylon, knows and reveals the future (2:27ff.). The idea that God declares his future purposes to his servants is at the heart of the book's theology. If, however, Daniel is a second-century work, one of its central themes is discredited, and it could be argued that Daniel ought to be relegated to the Apocrypha and not retain full canonical status as part of OT Scripture.

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Conclusion

A brief summary cannot do justice to the complexity of the problems associated with the book of Daniel. If these articles have highlighted some of them, and saved conservatives and liberals alike from defending their pet theories with unjustified dogmatism, they will have served their purpose. They are a reminder that in many areas the 'assured' results of criticism need rethinking. In formulating his critical views the evangelical scholar must take with equal seriousness the explicit claims of the biblical writings (*e.g.* when they say they were written) and the implicit indications of a different date of authorship (*e.g.* historical imprecisions or late words). Simple-minded conservatives pay attention only to the former and forget about the implicit data, while naive liberals disregard the explicit claims of the biblical writings and base their theories solely on the latter. Those who believe that all Scripture is inspired by God should listen both to what Scripture says about its composition and to what it implies about its origins.¹⁰

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⁹ S. Z. Leiman, *The Canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1976).

¹⁰ I have discussed the theological implications of critical study in 'History and the Old Testament' in *History, Criticism and Faith*, ed. C. Brown (shortly to be published by IVP).