

Three Approaches to the Interpretation of Daniel

INTRODUCTION

INTERPRETATION OF THE BOOK of Daniel can be easily divided into three groups. Those who date the composition of the book from the Babylonian exile, those who date the composition of the book from the Maccabean era, and those who see evidence that spans the two time periods. Of those in either the early or later era there is a similarity of approach, namely an apologetic for their respective dating of the book. Further, those who have an early date normally view the text of the book as representing actual historical events from the lives of Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Those who opt for a later date normally view the book as fiction. Those who see evidence spanning the two time periods find material that has come from an earlier time period and has been interpreted for a later time period. This position may be identified more as historical texts but not in reference to historical events. One may well note how deeply tied the interpretation of the book of Daniel is to its theorized development.

In the following a series of introductions, whether from articles or commentaries, will be followed in relation to these trends in interpretation. Introductions have been chosen because of their summary nature and the fact that “decisions about the way a biblical book originated, developed, and achieved final form” are found in their pages.¹ After moving through a survey of these particular approaches to the interpretation of Daniel, a clear case will be made for the book of Daniel as a case in point for canonical intertextuality, where the development of the text is

1. Seitz, *Prophecy and Hermeneutics*, 41, makes this claim in relation to introductions of times past, but the statement seems also to be applicable to recent introductions.

tied to a series of intertextual relationships. As important as the question of authorship is, especially in the realm of apologetics, this is a study in interpretation.

BABYLONIAN ERA

R. Dick Wilson in his article on “The book of Daniel” in the *ISBE* devotes only a paragraph to the “Divisions of the Book.”² He understands the book to be broken into two main sections. The first section represents a series of historical events in relation to “Daniel and his three companions” in chapters 1–6. The second section is comprised of “some visions of Daniel concerning the great world-empires, esp. in relation to the kingdom of God.”³ Strive as one might to find further clues into the interpretation of the book of Daniel, the rest of the article is devoted to an apologetic for the early date and authenticity of the book of Daniel, defending the predictions, the miracles, the text, the language, and the historical statements of the book.

Gleason Archer in his *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* devotes a three-page outline to his interpretation of the book of Daniel.⁴ The book is a series of units and “represents a collection of his memoirs made at the end of a long and eventful career which included government service from the reign of Nebuchadnezzar in the 590s to the reign of Cyrus the Great in the 530s. The appearance of Persian technical terms indicates a final recension of these memoirs at a time when Persian terminology had already infiltrated into the vocabulary of Aramaic.”⁵ The rest of the material is devoted to an apologetic for both the early date and authenticity of the book of Daniel. He sees chapters 2, 7, and 8 as agreeing in a symbolic way that the kingdoms being identified are “Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome.”⁶ In connection with this diachronic observation he further states, “There can be no doubt that the description given in Daniel 11:40–45 relative to the latter end of the little horn does not at all correspond to the manner in which Antiochus Epiphanes met his death; there is a definite break in the prophetic relation beginning at

2. Wilson, “Book of Daniel,” 783.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, has an outline that extends from 377 to 379, although the chapter as a whole extends from 377 to 403.

5. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, 379.

6. *Ibid.*, 397.

11:40.”⁷ The book is then interpreted not to support the Maccabean era focus but a further push into a time past the Maccabean era.

R. K. Harrison in his *Introduction to the Old Testament* notes, “While the narratives and visions are set in general chronological order, the visions commence before the stories come to an end. This general arrangement would suggest that if the work was not actually written by Daniel himself in the sixth century B.C., it was compiled shortly thereafter, and in the view of the present writer it was extant not later than the middle of the fifth century B.C.”⁸ These comments allow for a similar interpretation that combines Wilson’s and Archer’s understandings of the book. The historical material is found in the first six chapters and “the remainder of the book deals with visions that emphasized the destiny of the Hebrews in relationship to Gentile kingdoms.”⁹ With this said the majority of the chapter, like Wilson and Archer, is dedicated to an apologetic for the early date and the authenticity of the book.

What one may well note is that the interpretation of the book of Daniel is tied in a key way to the events to which they are connected. This is to say that the primary purpose is to recount the historical events that are contained within the book. The visions represented in the second half of the book are to be seen as foretelling with a decided shift from the Maccabean Era as the focal point. Through the sheer volume of the apologetic in each presentation there is a need to understand these positions as against the Maccabean Era position.

MACCABEAN ERA

Norman W. Porteous in his commentary titled *Daniel* makes a standard presentation of an opposite position from the forgoing discussion. The breakdown of the book differs little from the previous discussion: “The book of Daniel contains twelve chapters, the first six containing stories about a Jewish captive, Daniel, and his three young compatriots at the court of Nebuchadnezzar and his successors Babylonian, Median and Persian, and the last six containing a series of visions which came to Daniel and were interpreted to him by angelic agency. The first of the visions (ch. 7) has its parallel in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream (ch. 2) and

7. Ibid., 400.

8. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1127.

9. Ibid., 1106.

links the two parts together.”¹⁰ He further sees that “[t]he only element of genuine prophecy relates to the anticipated death of Antiochus and the expected intervention of God in the establishment of his kingdom.”¹¹ Though he does not explicitly connect his position with ancient witness he makes the simple observation that Daniel is found in the Writings and not in the Prophets in the “Palestinian Jewish Canon,” all of which is in distinction to the place that Daniel has in “the Latter Prophets in the Greek Canon, which . . . was determinative for the early Christian view of the book.”¹² The former position is supported by Josephus who “makes it clear by implication (*Antiq.* XII.7.6) that the reference in the Book of Daniel was to something that happened during the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes in the second century BC.”¹³ All this is in distinction to the Christian position where Matthew 24:15 and the “so-called ‘abomination of desolation,’ of which Daniel spoke” refers to “something that is still future in the time of Christ.”¹⁴ The assumption is that by putting Daniel in the Writings, it was not to be viewed as prophetic (foretelling?) and in connection with the details from Josephus it must be from the contemporary era of which the visions speak. This position, he asserts, goes all the way back to “the neo-Platonist Porphyry, as we know from Jerome” and maintains “the modern critical view that the Book of Daniel was Maccabaeae.”¹⁵ With this distinction the Book of Daniel is to be viewed as apocalyptic and as having similar characteristics with other “books like Enoch, the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, Baruch, the Assumption of Moses, II Esdras and even Christian Apocalypses like the Ascension of Isaiah and the Book of Revelation.”¹⁶ Daniel, like other Jewish Apocalyptic, is to be viewed as a work of pseudonymity.¹⁷ He agrees with Rowley that the author intended the book (at least the Aramaic sections) “to encourage those who were suffering under the persecution of Antiochus Epiphanes.”¹⁸ The possible affinities with

10. Porteous, *Daniel*, 13.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, 14.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, 17.

18. *Ibid.*, 18.

Daniel in Ezekiel (14:14, 20; 28:3) “cannot be an exilic figure, though he may have suggested a name for the latter.”¹⁹ An important comparison is made between chapters 1–6 and the Joseph narratives in Genesis “as illustrating the pride of the Jew that members of his race were able to play an important part at foreign courts and even win recognition for their religion from pagan potentates.”²⁰ In any case chapter 7 is what binds the whole of the book together, linking narrative and apocalypse together.²¹ The interpretation of the book is tied with a heavy apologetic for the Maccabean dating of the book. The book is then interpreted as an apocalyptic book similar to others from the same era, including pseudonymity. It is a work of literature given as an encouragement to those who are suffering persecution from Antiochus Epiphanes.

W. Sibley Towner in his Daniel commentary outlines the book as a series of court scenes in chapters 1–6 and 7–12, which offer “[t]hree distinct apocalypses and a lengthy prayer with angelic response, all presenting slightly different scenarios of the coming End” that “culminate in the terrifying prospect of divine intervention and the resurrection of the dead.”²² The simple outline is accompanied by five assumptions from which he operates for the rest of his book. The first assumption is that “Daniel is a non-historical personage modeled by the author(s) of the book after the ancient worthy who is linked in Ezekiel 14:14, 20 with righteous Noah and righteous Job, and who is described (Ezek. 28:3) as a wise man.”²³ The second assumption is that the book is the work of several authors, representing two main time periods. The opening six chapters “are assumed to have come down from the third century B.C. or even somewhat earlier” and “[t]hree apocalypses and the prayer vision . . . can be dated rather more precisely to the first third of the second century B.C.”²⁴ The third assumption is that the authors of the text of Daniel “acted and thought like its heroes, Daniel and his three friends” and they should be identified as Hasideans that are witnessed to in 1 Maccabees 2:42 and 7:13–17.²⁵ The fourth assumption is that

19. *Ibid.*, 17.

20. *Ibid.*, 19.

21. *Ibid.*, 20.

22. Towner, *Daniel*, 1.

23. *Ibid.*, 5.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*, 6–7.

“[t]he *hasidim* who completed the Book of Daniel drew from the wisdom tradition of their people for the stories about Daniel and his fellow heroes” that included literature from “the canonical Book of Esther, and in the apocryphal novelettes of Judith and Tobit, in the tales of the three young courtiers of 1 Esdras 3–4, as well as in the beloved international tale of Ahiqar.”²⁶ Daniel in this wisdom tradition is pictured as the new Joseph.²⁷ The fifth assumption is that apocalyptic is a sub-type of eschatology.²⁸ Apocalypse is distinguished from realistic eschatology in that it “has been dramatically amplified in a cosmic direction.”²⁹ This form of apocalyptic can be found also in Isaiah 24–27; Zechariah 9–14; Joel 2:28–3:21; and Daniel 7–12.³⁰ The whole interpretive scheme supports the goal of giving encouragement to “observant Jews in the days of Antiochus IV Epiphanes.”³¹ As with Porteous, the book is interpreted as an apocalyptic book with similar characteristics to other works of the same era, giving encouragement to the *hasidim* suffering persecution from Antiochus Epiphanes.

Werner H. Schmidt in his *Old Testament Introduction* begins his chapter on Daniel with this statement, “There is probably no piece of OT literature that has elicited so great a response as the book of Daniel with its teaching on the four empires (2; 7) and its expectation of the Son of man (7:13f.).”³² The book is divided into the two main sections of stories and legends in chapters 1–6 and visions in 7–12.³³ The author is someone from “the beginning of the Maccabean period” who connects the name Daniel with “a figure who had from time immemorial been regarded as righteous and wise.”³⁴ Confirmation of this date is found in the Hebrew canon placing Daniel in the Writings and not the Prophets due to its late date.³⁵ He claims that “the visionary or historical presentation repeatedly has in mind Antiochus IV Epiphanes (2:4ff.; 7:8, 20ff.;

26. *Ibid.*, 8.

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*, 10.

29. *Ibid.*, 11.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*, 15.

32. Schmidt, *Old Testament Introduction*, 289.

33. *Ibid.*, 290.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*, 289.

8:9ff., 23ff.; 9:26ff.; 11:21ff.), who did away with the cult in Jerusalem in 167 B.C. (8:12f.; 9:27; 11:31, 36f.) and tried to hellenize Judaism by force.”³⁶ These claims are somewhat tempered by the recognition that the overall composition is somewhat uneven due to the author “making extensive use of old narrative material that knows nothing yet of the tribulations in the time of Antiochus IV.”³⁷ In chapters 7–12 “[t]he dating of the imminent end-time, which is to dawn about three and a half years after Antiochus’s desecration of the temple, become clearer in the course of the visions (7:25; 8:14; 9:24ff.; 12:7), until it undergoes a slight correction (by the author himself? by a third party?) in the light of the actual historical course of events (12:11f.)”³⁸ Though Antiochus IV meets his demise in a different way than Daniel 11:40ff. suggests, it still “marks the beginning of the end-time, and the punishment of the evildoer signals the reversal of Israel’s tribulation.”³⁹ Though some of the materials are seen as predating the Maccabean era, they are still to be understood as being crafted in their present form from and for this era.

In distinction to the Babylonian era position, the text and its historical referents are almost reversed. The Babylonian era position sees the whole of the book tied to the events with which they describe; chapters 1–6 have particular historical events to which they are associated. The visions from this perspective that are described in chapters 2 and 7–12 are future and had no historical event with which to tie it. The Maccabean era position views the whole situation opposite. Chapters 2 and 7–12 have their reference in the particular historical events that are past and present. Chapters 1–6 do not have a historical referent but are literary devices used to encourage those who are suffering under the apocalyptic visions represented by chapters 2 and 7–12.

SPANNING THE TIME PERIODS

Gerhard von Rad in his *Theologie des Alten Testaments Band 2* subtitled *Die Theologie der prophetischen Überlieferungen Israels* prefaces his treatment to the book of Daniel with an overview of apocalypse.⁴⁰ Apocalypse

36. Ibid., 289.

37. Ibid., 290.

38. Ibid., 291.

39. Ibid., 296.

40. Von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, 2:316–31.

speaks “von einer Art Fernerwartung” and “Erstaunlicherweise hat sich die religiöse Hoffnung Israels aber doch noch einmal und zwar unter ganz anderen Voraussetzungen und in Konzeptionen von einer bisher noch nicht erreichten universalen Weite ausgesprochen, in der Apokalyptik.”⁴¹ He gives a more precise definition just a sentence later: “Am sichersten ist es, wenn man sich auf das beschränkt, was wissenschaftlich greifbar ist, nämlich auf ein bestimmtes literarisches Phänomen innerhalb des Spätjudentums, also auf jene Gruppe pseudepigraphischer ‘Apokalypsen’ von Daniel bis zur syrischen Baruchapokalypse.”⁴² With these distinctions from prophetic literature and this definition, von Rad argues that apocalyptic literature has its background in two earlier forms of literature, namely prophetic and wisdom literature. The connection with prophetic literature is traced to the preoccupation with the “Eschata.”⁴³ However, the key distinction is to be found in the picture of YHWH. The plans of YHWH in earlier prophetic literature were moveable “weil Jahwes Pläne beweglich waren.”⁴⁴ This is in distinction to apocalyptic literature where God has already counted and numbered everything.⁴⁵ The connection with wisdom literature is seen in the descriptions of the key characters as “höfischen Weisen” (Daniel), “Schreiber der Gerechtigkeit” (Enoch), and “Schreiber der Wissenschaft des Höchsten” (Ezra), who deal with proverbs and interpretations.⁴⁶ This detail explains the aforementioned difference between prophetic and apocalyptic literature. The roots in wisdom literature add these concepts of “Beschaffenheit” and “Ordnungen” that are so prevalent in apocalyptic literature.⁴⁷

With this background von Rad makes this statement in relation to the book of Daniel: “Die Danielforschung hat es uns doch gelehrt, was für ein langes und kompliziertes Wachstum hinter den apokalyptischen Stoffen liegt, die weit in die vorapokalyptischen Zeit zurückreichen.”⁴⁸ This seems to differ from the previous Maccabean era positions in that the material from the chapters 1, 3–6, and 9 all represent material

41. *Ibid.*, 316.

42. *Ibid.*, 317.

43. *Ibid.*, 320.

44. *Ibid.*, 322.

45. *Ibid.*, 322–23.

46. *Ibid.*, 317–19.

47. *Ibid.*, 318.

48. *Ibid.*, 324.

that does not come from this (late) period in which apocalyptic material was so prevalent.⁴⁹ Further even with the parallels between chapters 2 and 7, chapters 1–6 are thought to represent “den relativ ältesten Überlieferungsstoff des Buches.”⁵⁰ Chapter 2, coming from a later period than the rest of the material from this section, is viewed as having more in common with “das Alexanderreich” than with “Antiochus Epiphanes.”⁵¹ However, with this nuance the difference is made clear. Chapters 7–12 represent the latest material in the book with chapter 7 serving as a pivot point between the first section of legends and the second section of apocalyptic material. Chapter 7 is the oldest material from this complex and renews the material for a new situation.⁵² Chapters 8–12, the youngest of the material, serve to give “die Dauer der Notzeit und den Beginn der Wende zum Heil zeitlich zu fixieren.”⁵³ This scheme of reinterpretation of older material is seen within the book of Daniel as it interprets itself but is also found in its reinterpretation of the Joseph narratives and the seventy years from Jeremiah.⁵⁴ Von Rad’s position views the text as having significantly older material than is represented in the Maccabean era position. By no means does he attempt to identify Daniel as a historical person as in the Babylonian era position, but some of the material does date from this time period. The book then is viewed as a series of texts from particular time periods that grows through further interpretation.

Brevard Childs in his *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* moves out from this already quoted premise: “I am now convinced that the relation between the historical critical study of the Bible and its theological use as religious literature within a community of faith and practice needs to be completely rethought. Minor adjustments are not only inadequate, but also conceal the extent of the dry rot.”⁵⁵ By this he does not mean that earlier tools and observations are worthless, as he in fact uses them all, but that the foundation from which these tools and observations flow needs to be replaced.⁵⁶ His key critique of critical

49. Ibid., 324.

50. Ibid., 332.

51. Ibid., 334.

52. Ibid., 328, 334, 336.

53. Ibid., 336.

54. Ibid., 325, 336.

55. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 15.

56. Ibid., 17.

scholarship in relation to the book of Daniel is found in the assertion that “the final redactional stamp on the entire book was almost universally regarded as Hellenistic.”⁵⁷ To challenge this he is “interested in exploring how the book of Daniel was heard by Jews in the post-Maccabean period,” which of course relates to the questions of “how did the book of Daniel originally function in its Maccabean context” and “how was this original function altered by its new canonical role.”⁵⁸ Childs’s breakdown of the book should not be surprising at this point: “In terms of its structure the book falls into two clearly distinct parts. The first 6 chapters present stories about Daniel and his friends in a style in which the third person narrative dominates. In the last 6 chapters the visions of Daniel are offered, chiefly in a first person style.”⁵⁹ The opening six chapters are apparently in reference to an actual Daniel from the Babylonian era who had at least one vision in chapter 2. However, the book itself then has subsequent material that “bears a clear Hellenistic stamp” in the vision of chapter 7 in which “[t]he Maccabean author had received the ancient prophecy of Daniel [found in chapter 2] which spoke of the rise and fall of the four world empires before the end.”⁶⁰ This “same exegetical move” is seen in chapter 8, where the focus is “on the last two within the original vision.”⁶¹ Chapter 9, with its reinterpretation of Jeremiah from seventy years to seventy weeks of years, is the hinge that connects 10–12 with the rest of the book. “Finally, the last vision in chs. 10–11 with an epilogue in ch. 12 once again explicitly develops the themes of ch. 2 along with the interpretation of chs. 7–9.”⁶² Though Childs claims there is this “Hellenistic stamp” in the latter half of the book, he makes clear, “It should be remembered that nowhere did the original author actually identify Antiochus by name with the evil one. The Maccabean author continued to work within the framework of Daniel’s prophetic vision and carried on the same idiom. The vision was a mystery, hidden from the human mind, which only God could reveal.”⁶³ Further, even the numbers that appear so often in the final half of the book “were allowed

57. *Ibid.*, 613.

58. *Ibid.*, 613–14.

59. *Ibid.*, 614.

60. *Ibid.*, 616.

61. *Ibid.*, 617.

62. *Ibid.*

63. *Ibid.*, 620.

to stand uninterpreted without a clear indication of their significance.”⁶⁴ This respect of “Daniel’s prophetic visions” through not naming in particular Antiochus and leaving the numbers uninterpreted allows for the book “to be read as scripture in the post-Maccabean age.”⁶⁵ Antiochus, though the historical referent, becomes a type “but he himself was not the fulfillment of the vision.”⁶⁶ Childs essentially takes an eclectic approach to his interpretation of Daniel. The early material found in chapters 1–6 has at least its origin in the Babylonian era. Chapters 7–12 are placed in the Maccabean era. Like von Rad, he views the book as growing through interpretation of earlier material that he identifies as “revelation of scripture.”⁶⁷ In essence his argument is an apologetic for how “[t]he Maccabean dating of the book does not undercut the validity of the witness when it is properly understood.”⁶⁸

Herbert Niehr describes the structure of the book of Daniel in different terms using the Hebrew-Aramaic-Hebrew structure to interpret the book. From this scheme the first section would be the introduction in 1:1–2:4a, which is in Hebrew. The second main section would be the main portion of the book found in 2:4b–7:28, which is in Aramaic. The third and final section is a group of expansions based on the visions of chapters 2 and 7 in chapters 8–12, which are in Hebrew again.⁶⁹ In this schema chapters 2–7 form the heart of the book that is chiastically shaped, with 2 and 7 having a dream/vision and an interpretation, 3 and 6 contain stories that end in a doxology, 4 and 5 have a dream/appearance and interpretation, and at the center of it all is the confession of Nebuchadnezzar in 4:31–32, recognizing God’s sovereign rule.⁷⁰ The visions in chapters 8–12 only serve to underscore the central message of God’s sovereign rule. Though Niehr outlines five different approaches from the present time to the development of the book of Daniel, they are all some form of this present category, where Daniel is understood to have an extended *Entstehungsprozess* (509–11). His own assessment is, “Die entscheidende Zeit für die Herausbildung des Danielbuches stellt

64. Ibid., 621.

65. Ibid., 620, 619.

66. Ibid., 619.

67. Ibid., 616.

68. Ibid., 618.

69. Niehr, “Das Buch Daniel,” 508.

70. Ibid., 508–9.

die erste Hälfte des 2. Jh.s v. Chr. dar. Diese Zeit ist gekennzeichnet durch die Hellenisierung Vorderasiens und damit auch Palästinas, welches zur seleukidischen Machtsphäre gehörte.⁷¹

SUMMARY

Through a survey of these different perspectives, one notes the importance of especially diachronic issues in relation to the interpretation of the text. It is only in relation to the third perspective that synchronic issues play a significant role. For the Babylonian era position the most important interpretive issue is that the book is actually connected with the historical persons and events described within its pages. The book then is a collection of biographical and autobiographical texts strung together along a historical timeline. The book becomes primarily prophetic in perspective, but is certainly filled with admirable examples. For the Maccabean era the most important issue is that the book is actually connected with the events in the Maccabean era. The stories in the opening section certainly give an example of how to live in such an apocalyptic time, but they also serve to give credence to the message in the latter half of the book.

The views of von Rad and Childs represent something of a different nature. These views have elements that stem from the Babylonian era and the Maccabean era and even beyond. Further, the book represents a text that has grown through a convergence of reflection on earlier material found in the Old Testament as well as in its own pages, where one can actually locate this convergence of diachronic and synchronic tension. What is interesting is that, though this perspective actually represents a break from both previous positions, both authors give a strong apologetic for connection with the previous positions, including Childs's comments from his preface. The reality of this new phase of understanding is seen in the present state of Daniel research as outlined by Niehr that shows only varied forms of this approach.⁷²

71. *Ibid.*, 512.

72. *Ibid.*, 509–11.