

# **THE BOOK OF DANIEL: A GUIDE FOR JUDAISM IN EXILE**

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The Book of Daniel was canonized without any reported opposition. While the inclusion of some other books of the Hebrew Bible was contested,<sup>1</sup> no such controversy seems to have existed about the Book of Daniel. It was, however, denied a place among the Prophets and was placed instead among the books of the Hagiographa. Rashi, in his commentary to the Talmud,<sup>2</sup> offers an explanation for this; namely, that Daniel did not share his visions with the Jewish People as the prophets of his and earlier generations had done. The criterion of prophecy, according to this statement, appears to be the dissemination of the prophetic insight to the public. Daniel, so the sages of the Talmud suggest, was not charged with the task of doing so. Indeed, after one of Daniel's visions, this non-prophetic reaction is demonstrated in his own words: *'And I, Daniel, felt very weak and then arose and performed the work of the king'* (8:27).

If Daniel was not sent as a prophet to the people, why was his book included in the Bible? The Talmud teaches: "Prophecy that is needed for the generations was written down; that which is not needed for the generations was not written down."<sup>3</sup> The sages who canonized the Book of Daniel must therefore have seen a permanent value in the record of Daniel's life and his visions.

I propose that the value of this book lies in its historic setting, and in the fact that it describes the conversion of the Jewish religion from one that was directed and taught in the First Temple of Jerusalem to a creed that functioned after the destruction of the Temple and until this very day.

The significance of such a conversion can hardly be exaggerated. It is not suggested that Judaism underwent any drastic changes, only that its mainstay changed from a state religion to one accepted and perpetuated by its adherents as individuals. The fact that the Jews never regained geographic unity gives a clue to the effect of this change and to the success of the Book of Daniel which carries this message. Even when the Second Temple was built and

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during the centuries when it functioned, a very substantial part of the Jewish people continued to live in exile outside Judea. In spite of this dispersion, Judaism not only survived, but also fathered two of the other major religions of the world. This survival, in spite of the dispersal of its adherents, is called a "historically unique phenomenon" by Elias Bickerman. He describes the ensuing period, including the epoch of the Second Temple, as "A unique and rewarding plurality; on the one hand the Jerusalem Center and, on the other, the plurality of centers in the Diaspora."<sup>4</sup>

The Book of Daniel, with the life and visions of its protagonist, manifests the emergence of the post-First Temple religion, while adhering to the conviction of a return to the Temple creed. As such, the two parts of the book, the story of the hero's life (Chapters 1-6) and the report of his visions and prayers (Chapters 7-12) become one unit, despite their differences in language and style.

#### JUDAISM DURING THE FIRST TEMPLE EPOCH

Prior to its destruction in 586 BCE, the Jerusalem Temple, built by King Solomon, was the center of religious observance and teaching. Its importance for the maintenance of the Judaic religion can easily be taken for granted. Its significance can be gleaned from the erection of similar temples when Judean citizens settled outside their homeland. The oldest such community, the one in Elephantine, Egypt, found it necessary to build a replica of the Jerusalem Temple, and to perform the Temple rituals as best as their memory permitted.<sup>5</sup> This temple "was planned to be as close an imitation of the Temple Hill as could be arranged on a small scale," according to the findings of Flinders Petrie.<sup>6</sup> Another such temple, built by Onias in Leontopolis, Egypt, was built on the model of the one in Jerusalem, according to the report by Josephus.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, we find no such construction in Babylon during Daniel's time. There seems to have been a plan to do so, but it was squelched by the prophet Ezekiel, who emphasized that a Jewish Temple could only stand in Jerusalem.<sup>8</sup>

#### THE CONVERSION TO POST-TEMPLE RELIGION

An interesting manifestation of the confusion created by the sudden absence of the Temple is found in the introduction to the Passover Haggadah. It

is the only part of the Haggadah written in Aramaic instead of Hebrew, and reads as follows:

This is the bread of affliction which our forefathers ate in the land of Egypt. Whosoever is hungry come and eat, whoever is in need come and celebrate Passover. This year we are here, the next year (we hope to be) in the land of Israel. This year we are enslaved. The next year we will be free.

At first glance it appears to be a rather clumsy last-minute invitation to indigent passersby. Should not such an invitation have been extended much earlier in a more generous manner?

The *biurim* in the Amsterdam Haggadah<sup>9</sup> date this introduction to the time when the first post-Temple Passover celebrations came about, and explain it as follows: During the time of the Temple, the Passover lamb was slaughtered in the Temple courtyard during the afternoon preceding the Seder. This slaughtering was by itself a preparatory ceremony and was ordained to be continued in the evening by an exactly defined group of participants. Only those who had been identified as belonging to the group during the afternoon ceremony were permitted to take part in the consumption at night. It was, therefore, impossible to extend the kind of invitation we find here. When the preparatory service could no longer be carried out, a doubt seems to have arisen whether a Passover Seder was still possible. The religious leaders of the time decreed that it should and must be observed in all respects, not depending on the Temple. The Bread of Affliction (matzoh) has to be consumed as before, but the meal was no longer confined to a pre-determined group, limited to the participants in the afternoon preparation. For this reason, the Seder is now introduced with the declaration in Aramaic – the common language of the time – that anyone can join this meal. The part dependent on the Temple was temporarily suspended, but all other parts of the Seder were to continue.

The apparent confusion about the Passover Seder, which we find so clearly expressed here, more than likely also existed in many other aspects of religious life of the time and called for re-orientation.

This adjustment was further complicated by the fundamental difference between Jewish monotheism and the polytheism of the surrounding cultures with which the transplanted Jewish groups were now to be so closely con-

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nected. This theological contrast was not only the plurality of gods to whom prayers were addressed. The polytheistic deities were, by their very nature, limited by geographic and/or functional boundaries. The city-god of a locality no longer exercised any power when his adherents were removed from their habitation, nor could the god of fertility save his worshippers from a flood. The co-existence of gods was therefore axiomatic. The Jewish God, in the eyes of the conquerors, should have ceased to function, either because His adherents were defeated on the battlefield and His Temple destroyed, or because His people were removed from the territory over which He had ruled.

The Book of Daniel itself includes a vivid picture of these polytheistic beliefs. In verses 2:46-49 and 3:26-33, the king accords to Daniel and his God the greatest accolade imaginable. Yet the ensuing events bear witness to the fact that a monotheistic belief is not accepted by the king once the excitement of the moment had worn off. Indeed, immediately after the king's praise of Daniel's God in Chapter 2, the beginning of Chapter 3 reports the installation of an impressive idol, which precipitates the famous scene of the cauldron. Even the seemingly unequivocal acceptance of the Jewish God in 7:26 is not followed by a historically recorded mass conversion.

Obviously, the praises did not translate into a monotheistic belief. There is evidently surprise that Daniel's God had survived the misfortune of His people, but that apparently made Him, at best, one among the gods in existence and did not impose any adherence by the King of Babylon. Daniel, the servant of this God, gained great stature, but, as the ensuing events show, this did not obligate the king or his people to show this God any obedience. Not even the spectacular events of the cauldron and the lions' den could persuade them to give the Jewish God full recognition. The time for the belief in one God was still far away.

This very belief – the total submission to monotheism – saved the Judean captives from disappearance. The ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom of Israel had not achieved it, but the captives from Judah did. The underlying philosophy and theology which brought this about are spelled out in the Book of Daniel.

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### FROM STATE RELIGION TO INDIVIDUAL BELIEF

Daniel and his three friends were not resettled as a sizeable, organized group who could take its religious orientation with it. They depended on their inner, personal faith and convictions to hold on to their monotheistic beliefs. No longer could they count on the spiritual support of the Temple cult and on the teachings of the priests who served there. It had to become a faith of the individual, a religion for which Daniel and his companions had to rely on the anchor of personal creed.

This belief included a multitude of rituals and prayers. The refusal to eat the food that was improper, according to the tenets of their religion, is the symbol of belief in rituals which is so essential a part of Judaism to this very day. The choice of rejecting non-kosher food as the symbol of Jewish rituals in general, parallels the report in I Maccabees. 1:63 and II Maccabees. 5:27 and 6:18-20.

In the Book of Daniel it is not specified how many children had been kidnapped with Daniel, but it is insinuated that many more were involved. The unnamed others did not take the vital step of refusing the king's food, as evidenced in 1:13 and 15, and they appear to have gotten lost.

### REJECTION OF THE PAGAN CONCEPT OF CO-EXISTING GODS

The second tenet developed in the Book of Daniel is the rejection of the polytheistic concept of deities. The refusal of Daniel's followers to bend down to the idol and their salvation from the cauldron is a clear demonstration of their conviction. Daniel's dream interpretations, his visions and the reading of the Handwriting on the Wall have this same rejection in common. None of the powers, or their gods, are able to survive; all of them are destined to be replaced and to disappear, except for the monotheistic God who will emerge in the end.

The importance of the visions of Daniel does not lie in the announcement of specific future event. As such his predictions are nebulous and none would have any significance to the reader of later years. What makes this book "needed for the generations" is the repeated assertion that the Jewish God is the only one who survives, even when His adherents are temporarily exiled from their homeland. The symbolic story in Chapter 4, in which the mighty Nebuchadnezzar is reduced to the most primitive existence until he acknowl-

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edges the power of the Creator, is one allusion to this tenet. Similarly, the Handwriting on the Wall predicts the downfall of a powerful ruler. The other visions that follow have this concept in common. The mighty are defeated and replaced until the triumph of the ultimate Ruler.

#### THE UNINTERRUPTED CONNECTION WITH JERUSALEM

The third tenet so vividly described in this book is the strong and unbreakable bond with the homeland. Daniel accepts high positions in the land of exile. He performs seemingly important work for the kings of his temporary home. In spite of having found such prestige and acceptance in the exile, he prays in Chapter 9 for the return of the Jews, as prophesied by Jeremiah. In Chapter 6, Daniel is reported to have openly and provocatively prayed facing Jerusalem, as if to emphasize publicly his emotional bond with his homeland. The famous episode of the lions' den is directly attributed to this unbending belief. What an accurate condensation of the history of the exile.

As a guide for Judaism in exile, the stories of the miraculous survival in the cauldron and the lions' den are no longer just a report of the survival of individuals. They become a prophetic interpretation of Jewish history. They point to the many disasters in the course of the exile of the Jews and to their guaranteed survival.

Daniel as the symbol of religion in the Diaspora must remain there, even when his fervent prayer for return to Jerusalem was granted to those who chose to go. This is so well explained by David Mirsky, who quoted Rabbi Soloveitchik as follows:

According to Rav Soloveitchik's midrash, Daniel was about to leave the exile and return to Jerusalem as a prince of the Jews -- in fact, the principal Jew of Babylonia -- when he understood that he must stay behind. Why? It was not only for mighty deeds, for advice, counsel, to protect the Jews in Israel and abroad through his patronage, for his paramount influence with the throne of Persia, his weight in the role of the Court Jew (of which he is one of the prototypes). No, said the Rav, he was told to remain for what seems like small things. He gave gifts to the poor, he showed charity. When there was a Jewish wedding he went. To cheer the bride, he did a little dance.<sup>10</sup>

He remained as the leader of those whose religion was maintained by the seemingly small deeds, in comparison with Temple rituals. This was Daniel's

role which he performed as long as needed. No wonder the Talmud quoted one of its great sages, Rav, equating Daniel’s name with the Messiah.<sup>11.</sup>

NOTES

1. Proverbs, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes and Esther were questioned. See Mishna Eduyot 5:3; Yadayim 3:5, TB Megilla 7a.  
2. TB Megilla 3a  
3. TB Megilla 14a  
4. Elias Bickerman, *From Ezra to the Last of the Maccabees* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972).  
5. Bezalel Porten, *Archives from Elephantine* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968) Part II, Chapter 4.  
6. W.M. Flinders Petrie, *Egypt and Israel* (London: 1911).  
7. Josephus, *The Jewish War*, I 1,1:35; *Antiquities of the Jews*, XII 9,7.  
8. Ezekiel 20  
9. Photo Edition of Amsterdam Haggadah (1712) (Jerusalem: Makor Publishing Ltd., 1972).  
10. *Congregation*, ed. David Rosenberg (New York: Harcourt Bruce Jovanovich, 1987) p. 438.  
11. TB Sanhedrin 98b

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