

THE BOOK OF DANIEL: PART I

A THEOLOGICAL- POLITICAL TRACTATE ADDRESSED TO JUDEAN HASIDIM UNDER SELEUCID-GREEK RULE

NATHAN MOSKOWITZ

INTRODUCTION

Based on a critical textual analysis of the Book of Daniel, it is hypothesized that it was specifically written as a theological-political tractate addressed to the Judean Hasidim during their persecution by Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the Seleucid-Greek occupier of Israel. Out of fear of provoking life-threatening political reprisals at the time of its writing, the book's message was covertly encrusted with Babylonian and Persian time-lines, and the identities of the Seleucid Empire and of Antiochus were explicitly and purposefully omitted.

HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

The Book of Daniel is chronologically the last composition to be included in the Hebrew Bible despite being editorially placed in front of the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah. It is herein hypothesized that Daniel is almost contemporary with the Book of Maccabees which was written in 100 BCE covering events from 170 through 134 BCE, historically unfolding only slightly earlier. The Tanakh takes the Book of Daniel at its literary timeline face-value as occurring predominantly during the Babylonian exile (605-562 BCE), prior to the events of Ezra and Nehemiah.

At first glance, Daniel appears to be a mysterious apocalyptic book. A thoughtful analysis, however, demonstrates that it is actually a splendidly picturesque anthology of consolatory parables, in the form of prophesies and moral tales, providing practical spiritual guidance to the Hasidim during their persecution by Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the Seleucid-Greek occupier of Israel, circa 176-170 BCE.

The Hasidim [The Righteous – not to be confused with contemporary Hasidim] were Jews who non-violently resisted the Seleucid Greeks' attempts at forced assimilation.¹ It is herein suggested, based on textual analysis, that the Book of Daniel is addressed to them, encouraging and consoling them in

Nathan Moskowitz, M.D., Ph.D., is a neurosurgeon in private practice and Assistant Professor of Neurosurgery at Johns Hopkins University.

their martyrdom, and discouraging spiritual compromise even when confronted with violence and death. The book's protagonist, Daniel, despite experiencing and interpreting multiple prophesies, is not accorded the biblical status of prophet. This is because a literary vehicle for parables is not a prophecy.

In all probability, Antiochus' identity and that of the Seleucid Empire were explicitly omitted from the Book of Daniel out of fear of provoking serious political reprisals at the time of its writing. Most likely, the greatest worry was that the Hellenized Jews who were fluent in Hebrew and Aramaic would inform on the non-Hellenized Jews to the Seleucids. Hence, for the protection of the Hasidim, the book's message needed to be wrapped in a riddle, packaged in a prophecy, and crafted to deliver a knock-out moral punch. In essence, it is an ancient, time specific, theological-political pamphlet. Centuries and millennia after its publication, long after its original political context had been lost and forgotten, and because it was purposefully oblique to begin with, many people have scratched their heads proffering wild and colorful interpretations of this book, losing sight of its original historical context.

Nevertheless, there are carefully detailed descriptions of Antiochus' military exploits outlined in the latter portion of the book (for example, kings of the North for Seleucid Dynasty, kings of the South for Ptolemaic dynasty, and so forth), use of Antiochus' well-known Hebrew code name "the little horn" (confirmed by Josephus²); and documented placement of an idol in the Temple termed *an abomination of desolation* (Dan. 11:31) (identical terminology for the Zeus idol mentioned in the Book of Maccabees³). These identify Antiochus IV as the Book's arch enemy almost beyond a shadow of doubt, and allow us correctly to identify the approximate date of Daniel's writing. In addition, Aramaically transliterated Greek words in the book – for example, "*symphonia*"⁴ – could not have been known to Jews during the Babylonian Exile, and thus provide further evidence of the time period in question.

Antiochus IV wanted to destroy the Jews by culturally assimilating them while they remained in their own country. He appointed the Hellenized Jew Menelaus (a Greek Name) as High Priest, placed a statue of Zeus in the Temple, and forced the Jews to bow down and pray to it. He outlawed circumcision, and forced the Jews to eat pig, an abomination to them.⁵ Many

Jews complied, who were enamored with and seduced by Greek culture, and had no difficulty assimilating. Other Jews, loyal to God and their religion, in particular the Hasidim, believed in non-violent resistance and martyrdom over assimilation.

Thus the Hasidim were engaged in a battle against Antiochus, and even more so in a civil war against their assimilated Jewish brethren. Rather than kneel to Zeus or eat non-kosher food, they died horrible deaths, having their tongues, arms and legs cut off, defending their beliefs and way of life. Only a short time later did the Maccabees arise, and with violent resistance defeated the Seleucid Greeks. They won the Jewish civil war and reclaimed the Temple, as well as their religion and country, which were both teetering on the brink of extinction. These acts of daring, and redemption were later commemorated and celebrated with the Festival of Hanukkah.

If we read the Book of Daniel within this historical context, it is evident that its purposes are to console and encourage the Hasidim to continue their valiant struggle with all their might, and to employ martyrdom if necessary to preserve Judaism. Fanciful prophetic parables with potent visual imagery are methodologically employed, transforming the Book of Daniel into a prototypical how-to manual on resisting assimilation, the essentials of which have been applied by practicing Jews not only under Seleucid Greek rule, but also throughout the globe for millennia, with little variation. These details are outlined below.

LITERARY METHODOLOGY

The literary tactic that the book takes is to have the beginning of the prophetic parables take place in the known past, beginning with the Babylonian Exile and continuing up to and including the known present (Seleucid rule). Then, based on what was then known about the past, it prophetically extrapolates further into a future then as yet unknown; for example, How will the Seleucid Dynasty play out? What is "the End of Days"?

Prophesying the future is not too difficult if what is attributed to the future has already come to be in the past. It becomes a very effective tool to uplift and encourage when it is evident to the target audience that the first portion of the prophecy presented to them has already come true. By virtue of inference and extrapolation, the latter portion of the prophecy which has not yet

transpired will most likely come to be. At the time when the Book of Daniel was written, it is unlikely that the Maccabean revolt had yet begun, and thus the true future outcome of Seleucid rule was not yet known. The future needed to be prophesized and optimized.

MORAL MESSAGE

The moral theme at the crux of the Book of Daniel is that great empires that attempt physically and/or spiritually to annihilate the Jews either inside or outside their geographic boundaries, come and go. As surely as they will rise and persecute you, just as surely they will fall, and disappear into the cosmic dust, because God judges them ("Daniel" in Hebrew means "God is my Judge") to be cruel, and hence spiritually illegitimate. Thus, Daniel counsels, continue to resist assimilation, mightily cling to your faith, because only Israel and God, the Supreme Judge, will survive forever outside the boundaries of natural history and normal time.

As another powerful tool of consolation and encouragement, for the first time in the Hebrew Bible, universal resurrection, the concept of a global awakening of the dead, is mentioned. Thus, Daniel maintains that even if you die in martyrdom defending your faith, you don't really die permanently. You, the "Righteous [Hasidim]" are the "*Am Kaddishei Elyonim* [Nation of the holy elevated ones]" and will awaken to glory, and the non-righteous assimilators will awaken to ignominy.

And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall wake, some to everlasting life [the Hasidim], and some to reproaches and everlasting abhorrence [the Hellenized Jews]. And they that are wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and they [the Hasidim] that turn the many to righteousness as the stars forever and ever (Dan. 12:2-3).

The promise of an afterlife allows martyrdom to be hopeful, not hopeless, and grants the Hasidim incentive to continue in the face of impossible odds.

Reinforcing the concept of the conditional assignment of a good or bad afterlife depending on one's good or bad behavior, respectively, extends the Hasidim's moral playing field beyond the grave, and provides the theological anodyne to mitigate the uncomfortable moral disequilibrium and insurmountable paradox exposed when trying to understand why bad things happen to

good people in a purportedly just universe. The message of resurrection grants the Hasidim enormous inner strength to carry on in the face of severe persecution.

The Maccabees, on the other hand, after witnessing the futility of Hasidic non-violent resistance over the course of time, took a more practical and ultimately victorious course. Non-violent resistance in the face of oppression is a concept foreign to most of Tanakh. The Ten Plagues, rather than martyrdom, were applied to escape from the clutches of Egyptian slavery. Non-violent resistance was rarely used as a tool against most biblical oppressors. For good reason; it usually did not work. And in fact this temporary experiment by Hasidim failed as it would for millennia of powerless Jewish exile throughout Europe and elsewhere (for example, the Spanish expulsion, Chmielnicki massacres, and Shoah, to name but a few). Freedom and independence were achieved, fulfilling Daniel's prophecies, by the Maccabees' armed revolt. Nevertheless, the Hasidim must have inspired the Maccabees, and without them they may not have been mobilized into action.

BABYLONIAN AND SELEUCID PARALLELS:
JEWISH SURVIVAL LESSONS IN A MULTICULTURAL WORLD

1. The importance of maintaining Hebrew identity and literacy: The first chapter of the Book of Daniel begins with the conquest of Judah by Nebuchadnezzar, and the exile of the Judeans to Babylonia. Nebuchadnezzar requests that the best and brightest of the captives be brought to his palace, educated and trained for three years in the Chaldean language (Babylonian) at which point they will join the ruling elite. Among these captives were Daniel and his three protégés, Hannaniah, Mishael, and Azariah. In order to assimilate them, and erase their Hebrew-Judaic identities, they are all given new Babylonian names.

Half the Book of Daniel is written in Hebrew and half is written in Aramaic. The Book's beginning and end are both in Hebrew, with Aramaic sandwiched in between. This alerts the contemporary Seleucid Jewish audience that life begins and ends in Hebrew. This literary device also conveys the bi-cultural life of an exiled people successfully straddling two cultures, Jewish and Babylonian, speaking two tongues, Hebrew and Babylonian,

maintaining two identities (names), inwardly Jewish and outwardly Babylonian.

This parallels the Jews' circumstances under the Greek Seleucids, many of whom read and wrote Greek, adopted Greek names, and were on the verge of forgetting Hebrew and Judaism in their own country. They, Daniel's prospective audience, are meant to learn valuable lessons from Daniel and his friends who maintained their identities in Babylon under similar circumstances.

Daniel had two cultural identities/names; Daniel in Hebrew and Belteshazzar in Babylonian (Dan. 2:26), and so did his three companions. Eventually, the Babylonians and subsequently the Persians mostly referred to him by his Hebrew name, and he never let himself – or the Babylonians or Medes or Persians – forget that Hebrew name. The moral of the story to Seleucid Jews is that you may be named Menelaus, but you will always be Moshe.

2. The importance of preserving Jewish dietary laws: In this Babylonian tale, just as the Seleucid Greeks commanded the Jews to eat and drink non-kosher food and wine, so were the Jews in Babylonia, including Daniel and his friends. He and his friends refused. Other Babylonian Jewish captives did not, easily assimilating, like the Hellenized Jews.

Daniel pleads with his palace guard, and requests a trial run for ten days, to bring him and his friends vegetarian (kosher) meals to eat and water (kosher beverages) to drink so that they maintain Jewish dietary laws. The guard agrees to a trial, and, lo and behold, Daniel and his friends who eat kosher vegetarian food look stronger than those who eat non-kosher food (Dan. 1:8-16). The moral of the story to contemporary Seleucid Jews is that you should maintain your cultural identity, eat kosher, and you'll be healthier for it. There is nothing gained by forfeiting your religion which begins with neglecting your dietary laws prescribed in the Torah.

3. Adhering to Jewish identity and traditions despite the threat of physical harm and/or death: In Chapter 3, when Daniel's three protégés are told by Nebuchadnezzar and his guards to bow down to a golden idol, just as the Seleucid Jews are being asked to bow down to an idol of Zeus, they refuse, and are thrown into a fiery furnace which is heated up seven times above

average. They survive unscathed because they are saved by an angel sent by God.

The moral of the story to Seleucid Jews is that no one can force you to bow down to Zeus or any other idol. They will try to kill you. They will even turn up the heat. Do not let this deter you. God will rescue you. Nebuchadnezzar as a result acknowledges and praises God, and promotes the three furnace survivors to a high position in the empire (Dan. 3:28-30). The moral of the story to Seleucid Jews is that if you stand your religious ground, you will not only survive, you will also thrive materially.

In Chapter 6, in the reign of Darius the Mede, Daniel, because of his wisdom, obtains a big court promotion. Envious ministers get Darius to sign an edict that during a certain time period no subject is allowed to pray to any deity or person other than to him. In defiance, Daniel openly and proudly prays to God three times a day facing toward Jerusalem in accordance with Jewish tradition. As a punishment, Darius must throw him into a den of lions as instructed in the edict he signed, even though he is terribly saddened by this. Daniel gets thrown into a den of lions, but the lions do not touch him, because an angel comes and closes their mouths. But his accusers and their wives and children who are thrown in afterwards get mauled and killed right away. Darius, as a result, acknowledges Daniel's God as *the living God, steadfast forever* (Dan. 6:27). The moral of the story to Seleucid Jews is at the threat of death you should continue to pray to God three times a day in the direction of Jerusalem. If you do so, they can't kill you, God and his angels will always save you. Not only that, in the end they will agree that your beliefs are true.

You can have a Babylonian name, or a Greek name, so long as you keep your Hebrew name, eat kosher, do not bow to idols, and pray to God three times a day, facing Jerusalem. In Babylon or in Hellenized Israel, wherever you go, God will protect and save you. Do not give in, because these foreign interlopers are only transient in the scheme of the cosmos. This concept is driven home even more forcefully by all of Daniel's own visions, and those of his regal captors.

4. The permanence of God and Israel, and the transience of all empires: The first prophesy in the book which conveys this concept is foretold via Nebu-

chadnezzar's dream in Chapter 2 in which he sees a very bright statue. Its head is made of fine gold, its chest and arms are made of silver, its belly and thighs are made of brass, its legs are made of iron, and its feet are made of a combination of iron and clay. He then sees a stone cut without handiwork, which is thrown down upon the statue's feet smashing them. Then the other portions of the statue simultaneously break into pieces, becoming like chaff. The wind blows away the broken shards. Then the stone becomes a great mountain, and fills the entire earth (Dan. 2:31-35).

Daniel's interpretation is that each of the five different body parts of the statue made out of different elements represents five successive empires. The uncut stone represents God/Israel who outlives these empires, and will fill the world, and exist forever.

The golden head of the statue represents Nebuchadnezzar (Babylon). The silver torso represents the second empire (the Medes). It is made of silver, a less expensive metal, and hence it is inferior to Babylon. The brass torso and thighs represents the third empire (Persia) that will temporarily rule the world. The iron legs represent the fourth empire (Greece), that is as strong as iron, and breaks everything into pieces. The iron and clay feet represent the fifth empire (Seleucid and Ptolemaic), offshoots of the fourth Empire (Greece), and is a mixture of iron and clay. Part of the kingdom will be strong like Iron, and part will be easily broken like clay. They will attempt to mingle with one another, but they cannot stay together because, after all, they are made of different substances which cannot mix: *And in those days [of the Seleucid Empire] God [the stone] will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed . . . It will break all the other kingdoms, and will stand forever* (Dan. 2:44).

The stone which is cut without handiwork represents the stone which God had hewn Himself (without human handiwork), and with His very own finger inscribed upon it the Ten Commandments. He then presented it to Moses on Mount Sinai; the mountain which fills the earth. The laws inscribed on these stone tablets, and the people who accept them, shall survive successive generations of empires, each of which are made of successively cheaper materials: gold, silver, brass, iron, iron mixed with clay. Quite pointedly, the last empire, the contemporary evil Seleucid Empire, is made of the cheapest material. It also occupies the lowest and least prestigious part of the body; the

feet, as opposed to the head. It also stands to reason if all the more expensively crafted empires have fallen, surely [*kal va-homer*] the most cheaply constructed empire will fall, and the Hasidim and all those that join them will undoubtedly emerge victorious.

CONCLUSION

A methodical textual analysis of the Book of Daniel along with placing its composition in the proper historical context lends support to the hypothesis that the Book of Daniel was covertly written specifically as a political-theological treatise in order to encourage the Judean Hasidim in their existential struggle for individual, community, and state survival, and to morally buttress their courageous non-violent battle waged against assimilationist Hellenized Jews and the Seleucid Greek Empire. Because of the political dangers fraught with the dispensation of such an illicit political-theological agenda, this book was purposefully disguised as a Babylonian/Persian historical exposition. This literary tactic was so successful that its true historical origins and intent have remained mysterious and elusive to this day.

In the forthcoming Part II of this article, the influence of Daniel's prophetic moral lessons on the structure and themes of the Passover Haggadah will be presented.

NOTES

1. Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization: Part II: The Life of Greece*. Chapter XXIV.iv: "Hellenism and the Jews" (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966) pp. 579-584.
2. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, X, 276.
3. I Maccabees, 1:54.
4. Daniel 3:5,10,15.
5. I Maccabees, 1:44-50.

This article was inspired by the meditative creation of the oil painting "The Book of Daniel: Back to the Future" (www.nahumhalevi.com.)