

Describe some of the difficulties that are involved in the interpretation of Daniel. To what extent do these problems remain for contemporary scholars and Bible readers?

The biblical book of Daniel poses a range of problems for those who would understand it, interpret it or apply from it. These problems in some ways mirror the challenges of biblical interpretation in general but, in some ways, Daniel poses difficulties of interpretation that are formulated in an unparalleled manner. Together, these general and specific problems of how to interpret Daniel span theological, historical, epistemological and literary fields of expertise. This essay considers some of those various problems and attempts to categorise and explore them, rather trying to resolve them. As such, I have divided difficulties of interpretation into three: how may the text be approached, what is contained within the text, and what can we understand the text to mean. Whilst these three categories must be acknowledged as not being mutually exclusive, they can serve as a useful framework to help tackle the multifarious difficulties facing the reader of Daniel. The concluding section of this essay considers the significance and durability of these problems.

The Problems of Interpretation

(i) Approaching Daniel

An immediate question confronting a reader of the book of Daniel is this: *how* should the book be read, i.e. what style or genre is it? Whilst the question is a straightforward one, it has no simple answer, and there is strong disagreement between scholars as to how to understand Daniel. Daniel has a unique combination of complications which has led to this lack of consensus (a plurality of styles, languages and possibly authors and redactors) but its reading is also subject to contrasting theological, and literary, approaches.

Daniel, whether in its entirety or in part, has been variously described as court tales and stories,¹ prophecy (whether before² or, more curiously, “after the fact”³), apocalyptic,⁴ midrash,⁵ legend,⁶ historical fiction⁷ and wisdom-style dramas.⁸ Since its acceptance into

¹ Coogan (1998), Wilson (1999), Goldingay (1989), all *passim*.

² Dillard and Longman (1994), p.333f.

³ Coogan (1998), p.453.

⁴ Blunt (1932), Drane (1987), Dillard and Longman (1994) and Baldwin (1978), all *passim*.

⁵ Goldingay (1989), p.6.

⁶ Driver according to Baldwin (1978), Goldingay (1989), p.6.

⁷ Wade (1951), p.28.

⁸ Baldwin (1978), pp.46-7.

canon,⁹ Daniel had been generally accepted simply as a historical narrative containing (apocalyptic) prophecies, until at the beginning of the twentieth-century Driver challenged this belief on three fronts: historical, linguistic and theological.¹⁰ Since then the balance of opinion has shifted in favour of those who agree that the book was primarily written at the time of the Maccabean revolt (167 to 163BC),¹¹ and not in the 6th century BC.

The style of any text obviously matters – one reads a fairytale differently to a tax statement – and the style an author chooses (whether deliberately or subconsciously) affects its meaning. Once we observe that Jesus at times used illustrative parables rather than actual histories, and that the Old Testament contains a variety of writing styles (poetry, law writings, history, narrative), we can appreciate the richness and legitimacy of differing communicative forms. More than any other canonical work, Daniel presents us with difficulty in deciding what genre or genres it belongs to. It is by no means evident how the author himself wished the text to be understood, whether as a contemporary message of encouragement based on a legendary figure or historical figure,¹² a recording of the life of Daniel, an example of God’s sovereign power or part of a history of the Jewish people during the Babylonian Exile. Ultimately, however, one must make an informed decision as to what the style or styles are, and to use this decision as a guide to analysing the book further. This decision should be influenced by an appreciation of other canonical and non-canonical works, an awareness of the literary culture of the times, and evidence contained within the text itself.

(ii) Analysing Daniel

When attempting to analyse Daniel, scholars face a barrage of complications, and Baldwin acknowledges that parts of Daniel have “defeated the most skilled expositors,”¹³ a view echoed by Drane who claims that Daniel is “an obscure and complex book.”¹⁴ The two chief sets of problems of analysing the content of Daniel may be categorised as follows:

Linguistic – does the language (including grammar, syntax and etymology) of Daniel belong to the 6th century or the 2nd? Perhaps surprisingly, this has proven to be one of the most contentious issues, and is complicated by the fact that Daniel is written in more than one language. Hinton argues that “the Aramaic used... has been identified as ‘official Aramaic’

⁹ Baldwin (1978), p.42 claims that “the earliest interpreters, both Jewish and Christian, took the prophecy at its face value, and accepted it as a product of the period immediately following the exile.”

¹⁰ The contribution of S.R. Driver is discussed in Baldwin (1978), p.18f.

¹¹ The suggestion being that the author wrote to encourage the Jewish people in response to their suffering under the Syrian ruler Antiochus IV.

¹² As per Drane (1987), p.199.

¹³ Baldwin (1978), p.17.

¹⁴ Drane (1987), p.195.

which was in use in the region from approximately 700-300BC”¹⁵; Lowther Clarke contends that the style of Hebrew is late, with a mixture of Aramaic, Persian, Babylonian and Greek words; with Driver having claimed that those Greek words had to be post-332BC. Goldingay argues that Daniel could date from anywhere between the late 6th century BC and the early 2nd, and finds it difficult to be more precise since “the spelling may have been updated... in the of light of the ongoing development of the living language.”¹⁶ Whilst some have argued there is evidence of successive authorship, Pfeiffer and Rowley, amongst others, maintain the book has, in Baldwin’s phrase, “a unity of purpose and design.”¹⁷

Historical – do Daniel’s ‘facts’ support or undermine the book’s claims? This has again proven to be a contentious area, with some finding historical references in Daniel to ‘prove’ its Exilic authenticity, whilst others cite the same evidence as proof of its late composition. Specifically, there is debate surrounding the conflicting references to Darius the Mede and Cyrus the Persian as king, as well as the chronology of succession to the throne, and debate over the relationship between Belshazzar and Nebuchadnezzar. Dillard and Longman offer a compromise, which recognises that “the Bible, while set in history, is not a history textbook, concerned to answer all our modern questions.”¹⁸ Bartlett goes further by saying it is wrong to ask what happened – which he claims is a trait exhibited by English theologians – preferring instead to ask what ideas are communicated, as favoured by many German scholars.¹⁹ There is a lesser but still significant debate over what light archaeological evidence can shed on the theory that Daniel contains historically accurate references.

(iii) **Understanding Daniel**

Having asked how we may approach Daniel, and what we may claim to find there, as readers we must seek to conclude what the book can be understood to be saying, whether the speaker be thought of as Daniel, one or more other authors, or God Himself. A range of provocative philosophical and theological questions arises, and the most important of these are considered below.

Firstly, does the meaning of a text depend upon its factuality? I.e., if we agree with Coogan that “[in Daniel] there are several deviations from the historical records,”²⁰ does this invalidate any claims to meaning the text might have? Or, in this religious context, does it nullify any

¹⁵ Hinton (1988), p.97.

¹⁶ Goldingay (1989), p.xxv.

¹⁷ Baldwin (1978), p.39.

¹⁸ Dillard and Longman (1994), p.335.

¹⁹ Bartlett (1990), p.253.

²⁰ Coogan (Ed., 1998), p.452.

claims to be scriptural, if scripture is considered to be inspired by a God of Truth? It might be possible to argue for a middle ground whereby Daniel, if historically inaccurate, still has meaning but should not be regarded as Holy Scripture, although this leads to further complications in turn. Wade argued that “its worth must be sought in the sphere of religion, not of history,”²¹ and interpreters of Daniel must decide whether the truths they are interpreting uphold their value if they are based on error or distortion.

Secondly, one cannot avoid the postmodernist challenge of where meaning lies – is textual meaning defined by authorial intention, by the text itself, by the reader’s perception, or by a combination of all these things? And in this Christian context, what role does the Holy Spirit play when it comes to revealing scriptural meaning? Some would suggest that the very notion of a text having a definable “meaning” as flawed, and the biblical interpreter must be wary of proclaiming absolute meanings, even though his is an absolute God.

Thirdly, is it possible for the text to have multiple layers of meaning? For example, there are passages in Daniel that it has been suggested point to the coming of Jesus Christ.²² Could the book have been written to communicate different truths to different peoples at different times, and, if so, are these different truths equally valid? And if Daniel contains different truths, what becomes of the need to root it a specific historical and cultural context? Thompson has pointed out that the Bible “deals with what was thought, written and transmitted within an interacting intellectual tradition,”²³ – but one must decide whether that tradition must necessarily be recognised and appreciated in order to interpret a biblical passage.

We are faced with other difficulties of interpreting Daniel – too many to discuss here – but there is one other conundrum which is particular to Daniel: of the purported prophecies of Chapters 7-12, must these have been written before they occurred in order to hold any value or demonstrate any principle? Or, if they were written with hindsight during the second century BC, can they still speak of God’s sovereignty? The difficult and obscure genre of apocalyptic prophecy does not yield its meaning easily, and the reader of Daniel might need to concede that some of its more mysterious writings may actually evade him.

²¹ Wade (1951), p.28.

²² For example, Daniel 7:13-14 refers to “one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven... He was given authority, glory and sovereign power...” and Alexander (1999), p.476 and many others infer this is a clear reference to Jesus. As an interesting aside, it is interesting to note that Jesus seems to have considered Daniel an authentic prophet, as did the first-century Jewish historian Josephus.

²³ Thompson (1999), p.34.

The Significance and Durability of Problems of Interpretation

In recent years, one author has proclaimed that “biblical interpretation is in crisis!”²⁴ Whether or not we agree with that diagnosis, it is undeniable that the would-be interpreter of Daniel (or any other biblical book) faces a number of problems. The significance of these problems depends to a large extent on whether one believes that scripture need be historically accurate to impart meaning, and also on how much one believes genre to be important when determining what a text is saying. Even if postmodern critics persuade us that texts have no absolute, or independent, meaning, that is not to say there are no criteria we can apply to discern what is a valid meaning and what is not.²⁵

Contemporary scholars and Bible readers are still – and will continue to be – troubled by problems of interpretation. The nature of these problems, which, as we have seen, cross historical, theological, philosophical and literary fields of expertise, means that it is extremely unlikely (if not impossible) that the debates identified here could come to a conclusion. Whilst some scientific disciplines may benefit from provable or disprovable hypotheses, these four academic areas lend themselves much more rarely to that type of definitive testing and hence proof or refutation. Granted, an archaeological artefact might persuasively shed new light on when Daniel was written, but this scenario is unlikely; and even if physical proof were obtained, there would still be the issue of how to decide upon the text’s meaning.

Whether or not we agree with Goldingay that the various solutions to difficulties posed by Daniel make “surprisingly little difference to the book’s exegesis,”²⁶ these difficulties remain. The three (interdependent) types of interpretative problem I have identified – how to approach a text, how to analyse it, and what can we justifiably claim it to be saying – will continue to trouble and challenge readers of Daniel as long as it is studied. We would do well to heed McConville’s warning that “the idea of a commonly agreed, final interpretation of the Old Testament is fundamentally false.”²⁷

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²⁴ Alexander (1999), p.59.

²⁵ For example, Ford (1999) lists ten guidelines for interpreting texts.

²⁶ Goldingay (1989), p.xi.

²⁷ McConville (1996), p.144.

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