

Daniel 1:1-2, No. 1**“A Well Known Book or Is It?”****October 30, 2016****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

I have not preached through the book of Daniel since 1983, when very few of you were in the church and many of you were not yet in the world! It is time to consider this book together. The times have changed since 1983 and in a direction that makes Daniel speak with even greater relevance and power to Christians today. In some special ways Daniel is a tract for our times! According to one fine commentator on the book, its core message is “In spite of appearances, God is in control.” [Tremper Longman, *Daniel*, in the NIV Application Commentary, 13] Surely that is something Christians are struggling to believe in our day when our civilization is crumbling and, so it often seems, the Christian church with it; at least the church in the western world. Here were Jewish believers living in exile in Babylon. Their homeland was a ruin. The once great people of God were now a mere footnote in the imperial history of the near eastern world. They now lived at the beck and call of the very empire that had destroyed Jerusalem and its temple and ground what was left of their country into the dust. They were, because they had no choice, settling in for the long haul of living far from home amidst people who had no sympathy for their most cherished convictions or their way of life. Their temple was gone; their famous capital a ruin; their nation no longer existed in any identifiable form. But God was in control? Could this be true? Yes; it was true; it is true. And Daniel is the demonstration of that truth. It makes that demonstration in two very different ways, two ways that represent the two halves of the book – chapters 1-6 on the one hand, chapter 7-12 on the other. What Daniel shows us, in the first place, is that the God of Judah’s sorry exiles was the living and true God for whom the imagined gods of Babylon and Persia were no match. The Babylonians, of course, did not imagine this to be so. They thought, according to the worldview of the Ancient Near East, that having defeated Israel they had defeated Israel’s God. But they were to learn better! And do we not need the same encouragement today? Do we not need to be reminded and even from time to time again convinced that the God of the Bible, that Jesus Christ himself, is the sovereign ruler of the world, that the ascendant culture of our time, seemingly triumphant over our ancient faith, pouring public scorn on God’s law, his rule, his people, even his very self, is living an illusion?

What we also find in the visions of the book is

“a succession of kingdoms that conveyed to the Israelites that it was not yet time for the kingdom for which they had been waiting. Certainly this would have been a disappointing message for the exiles to hear. The main significance, however, is the fact that in God’s agenda, the mighty empires of the world come and go, and they will be superseded by the kingdom of God that will never be destroyed. This would give reason for continued hope.” [Hill and Walton in Ralph Davis, *The Message of Daniel*, 25]

Surely we need the same insight and the same encouragement today as western Christendom collapse, as secular states with increasing hostility to Christian convictions multiply, and as we witness the end of one period of history and the beginning of another? Something else we will learn from Daniel and, in particular, from the visions.

“It is a very necessary warning in advance to people who will find themselves living in momentous times not to think that they are already living in the time of the end and that the End is at hand, simply because their own times show certain features that will mark the time of the end as well.” [Gooding in Davis, 26]

Before we embark on Daniel, paragraph by paragraph, we need to make a reconnaissance of the book as a whole; need to get an idea of what the book is and how it works. In many ways, Daniel is a highly unusual book among the books of the Bible. Famous and inspiring as some of its narratives are, stories most of us have known since we were children in Sunday School – think of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and the fiery furnace or Daniel in the lion’s den – the prophecies that make up the latter half of the book are some of the most difficult passages to interpret in the entire Bible and the cause of unending disagreement among Christians through the ages. *Though, to be sure, those prophecies have the same point as the stories: in spite of appearances, God is in control!*

It is a book that divides very neatly into two parts. It is the first part that we know and love, Daniel 1-6 with its account of Daniel and his friends living in exile in Babylon and ending with Daniel, now an old man, surviving a night in the den of lions. We are treated to one incident after another of faith being severely tried and sorely tested and of faithful men rising to the challenge. Daniel and his friends were living in exile, in a strange land, in a land inhospitable to their convictions, but their faith did not waver. They are an example for us. *Their God was God in Babylon as surely as he was God in Jerusalem!* Believers through the ages have found themselves emboldened, found reasons for a more steadfast faith in these same stories, not least in the way in which the sovereignty of God was demonstrated in the lives of his faithful servants.

Chapters 7-12 are a different matter. Visions presented in the apocalyptic genre – in fact, for all we know, Daniel may have been the origin of apocalyptic genre in biblical or Jewish writing – with beasts cobbled together from the parts of various animals, rams, goats, angels and the like are found in the several prophetic visions that are highly specific predictions of future events (no one doubts that they do in fact describe events that took place in the ancient world). In fact these visions predict the future in greater detail and with greater precision than any other prophecies of the future elsewhere in the Bible. These visions have made the second half of the book a battleground of interpretation, both between liberal and Bible-believing scholarship and between various schools of evangelical interpretation.

As you may know, the character of these prophecies of the last half of the book, as detailed and exact predictions of events in the Levant from the fifth to the 2nd century B.C. as they are, has led many biblical scholars, including evangelical ones, to date the book to the 2nd century, to the time *after* the events prophesied actually occurred. They are simply too specific, too detailed to have been predictions made beforehand; or so it is thought. The visions of chapters 7-12, therefore, are more literary device than historical fact. Daniel may be said to have been given the visions, but we know that could not be true. Rather the visions are written into Daniel’s experience as a literary device. The technical term for such a literary device is *vaticinium ex eventu*, prophecy after the fact. The events had already happened, that is how the 2nd century author knew what to write, but he wrote up recent history as if it had been predicted in visions

given to Daniel in the 6th century B.C., centuries before these events occurred. Daniel, thus, was written not in the 6th century B.C. but in approximately 165 B.C.

In the case of many biblical scholars, of course, the reason for dating the book after the events it describes is their assumption that no one can predict the future, especially no one living centuries beforehand. They don't believe that any divinely given prophecies of future events can be found in the Bible, except perhaps, events that any intelligent person could see coming a mile away. Isaiah may argue that the ability to predict the future is the power God has and that such accurate prophecies are proof of the authority, the divine origin of God's Word, but these scholars deny that *any* such predictions were made and then fulfilled many years later. All of the prophecies in the Bible, in their view, either don't actually describe events that took place later or were written after the events themselves came to pass. But in other cases, even men of evangelical faith argue that the very nature of *these* prophecies, so unlike most biblical prophecies of the future, suggests that what we have in these latter chapters of Daniel is something else than the straightforward predictions of future events that they appear to be. The problem for us is that, while the book does not say when it was written, or even that it was written by Daniel, it does say that the visions were given to Daniel in the 6th century B.C. and so the prophecies were his. Daniel died shortly before or after 530 B.C., centuries before 165 B.C!

Perhaps no book of the Bible so starkly presents the challenge of biblical prophecy as does Daniel. As early as the third century after Christ, one of the most able Greco-Roman critics of the Christian faith, a man named Porphyry, made a special point of attacking the book of Daniel. He argued that no one could believe that Daniel was actually a record of prophecies made centuries beforehand. The book was instead a history of events that occurred before or during the author's lifetime. Daniel was, said Porphyry, in the language of modern biblical criticism, a second century *pseudepigraph*, that is, a book written by one man but said to be written by another. Porphyry touched a nerve. The early Christians loved Daniel because it was a book about deliverance from the persecution of wicked rulers, and they had a lot of experience of persecution by wicked rulers. Indeed, the scenes of Daniel in the lion's den and the three men in the fiery furnace were among the earliest and most frequent representations of biblical stories to appear on the walls of the early Christian catacombs. [Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 138] Porphyry's criticism was, therefore, a matter of great importance to defenders of the Christian faith and a number of them wrote major works on Daniel, defending the book against Porphyry's attacks. Jerome wrote an entire commentary on Daniel and responded to Porphyry throughout.

Christians then as now used the fulfillment of prophecy as one of their principal *proofs* that Jesus was the Messiah. Remember, for example, the Covenanter pastor Richard Ganz, a Jewish psychiatrist, who became a Christian at L'Abri when he learned that Isaiah 53 had been written 700 years before the birth of Jesus Christ! For the early Christians Daniel was a chief source of those prophecies of Christ's coming, so obviously an attack on the prophetic nature of Daniel's visions was an attack on the nervous system of the Christian faith. Porphyry, as an educated man, was sure that it would not have been possible to write such an accurate account of events in the 2nd century B.C. unless those events had already occurred. And so it has been argued ever since. There is much to be said about this, of course, and I don't want to turn this into a lecture on the 6th century B.C. origin of Daniel's prophecies. But I do want to give you just an idea of what

may be said in defense of the integrity of Daniel as a record of visions given to the great man in the 6th century B.C., long before the events described actually came to pass.

First, there are problems with this view of a late date for Daniel based on the language found in the book. In sum, the Aramaic found in Daniel, so far as the evidence goes at present, reflects an earlier date than the Aramaic of mid-2nd century B.C. Palestine. For that matter, so does Daniel's Hebrew. For example, the Hebrew of Daniel is noticeably different from the Hebrew of 2nd century writings found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. That ought to bother liberal scholarship more than it does, but they're so sure that Daniel could not have been written before 165 B.C. that such things as the character of Daniel's Hebrew and Aramaic trouble them not at all.

Second, eight partial copies of the book of Daniel were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, the oldest of which is dated to somewhere between 120-115 B.C. These copies reproduce the same text of the book that we have. But in the writings of the Essenes at Qumran it is clear that they viewed Daniel as a biblical prophet on the same level as Isaiah or Ezekiel. They certainly did not take Daniel as a book of history written by a virtual contemporary. It is almost certain that the Essenes, as most Jews of the time, regarded Malachi, in the 5th century B.C., to be the last prophet; there is no evidence whatsoever that they imagined that another prophet, like Isaiah, had arisen in their own day. But taking Daniel to have been written some 45 to 50 years before the time of these manuscripts of Daniel found at Qumran requires us to believe that the Essenes at Qumran took Daniel, a book very recently written, to be part of the canon of Holy Scripture and that Daniel himself was a prophet like Isaiah, unless, of course, they had been fooled into thinking that the book was in fact much older than it was. But the Jews knew very well what books belonged to their Scriptures. So did the translators of the LXX, who included the book of Daniel as part of what the Jews call the *Tanakh*; what we Christians call the Old Testament. It strains credibility to think the Essenes took Daniel to be Holy Scripture when it had been written just a few decades before. There were, to be sure, pseudonymous prophecies – that is, books purported to have been written by biblical figures – among the Jewish books of the period, but they were not regarded as part of the *Tanakh*, or as we would put it, part of the Bible. There is overwhelming evidence for the assumption, almost universal in the Judaism of that time, that the living voice of prophecy had ceased long before the second century B.C. [Wallace, 24]

Josephus, for example, speaking on behalf of mainstream Judaism, says that the Jews believed that the canon, what we would call the OT, was closed in the days of Artaxerxes, that is, in the middle of the 5th century, the time of Ezra, Nehemiah, Zechariah and Malachi. That canon, he says, was composed of 22 books, which everyone accepts are the same as our 39 in a different form of counting (e.g. the twelve Minor Prophets are one book, the so-called book of the Twelve, in Josephus' numbering; Kings and Chronicles are each one book, etc.) That is, the 22 books included Daniel. In other words, according to Josephus, and his viewpoint is confirmed by much other material, the Jews did not believe that there were books recently added to the canon; in large part they didn't believe that because they didn't believe that there had been any prophets after Malachi either to write or to authenticate them.

Third, Daniel was not written as it would have been written if it were a tract for the times of the 2nd century B.C. The Maccabean rebellion against the oppressors of the Jews, armed and violent as it was, was nothing like the faithfulness demonstrated by Daniel and his friends in 6th century

B.C. Babylon. Daniel worked within the system, he and his friends did not take up arms against it; they were willing to die for their faith but did not resist with violence the pagan emperor of their day. Daniel acted to save the Babylonian practitioners of magic arts and obviously demonstrated some real sympathy if not affection for the pagan king he served. But there was none of this among the Jews in the mid-2nd century B.C. Daniel simply does not read like a book written by an anonymous Jew in the mid-2nd century B.C. [Ronald Wallace, *The Message of Daniel* (BST), 20-21]

Fourth, to take Daniel as a pseudepigraph, a book written by someone else at another time but passed off as Daniel's work, requires us to believe certain things hard to believe: either that it was a ruse that would have been acceptable to his audience or that they would have been taken in by the deception. It has been argued by some scholars that *pseudigraphy* – calling the book Daniel and putting words into Daniel's mouth that he never actually spoke – was an accepted literary convention that the audience would have fully understood and appreciated; readers would have known that history was being rewritten as prophecy and would have read the book or listened to it with that understanding. And there were certainly Jewish pseudepigraphs written in that general period. There were those supposed to have been written by Enoch, Baruch, Moses, and Abraham. None of which, of course, was considered canonical by the Jews. There are great problems with the assumption that people would have accepted Daniel as a pseudepigraph. The first is that we do not know and have reason to doubt that anyone would have or did accept such a literary convention as harmless if the point was to present such a book *as the canonical Word of God*, as equivalent in authority to Isaiah or Jeremiah. Judaism obviously did regard Daniel as part of the Bible and, if Daniel were written in the mid-2nd century B.C., accepted it to be so almost immediately. The second is that the convention would undermine the usefulness or authority of the book. People aren't different today than they were then. The psychology of the troubled soul is today as it has always been. If everyone knew Daniel didn't really receive those visions, what good would anyone get from a story that he had, a story everyone knew to be untrue? Why would suffering saints find comfort in stories they knew had been made up and weren't true? In the mid-2nd century B.C. the Jews were in dire straits, they were suffering indeed. It was a terrible time for them. They did not need advice on coping with the ordinary challenges of life; they needed help to enable them to continue holding on by their fingernails. Who would have thought that a made up story, a collection of legends that everyone knew were legends, that the quasi-prophecy of Daniel would be of any help at all? It is claimed by some that what we have in Daniel is theological truth, not historical truth. But readers of the Bible know only too well that such a distinction is not biblical, is fundamentally unbiblical. God acts in history, he teaches his people to believe by an account of his work in history. Human nature and biblical faith are not different today than they were in the second century! Put it this way: to believe that Daniel was written in or about 165 B.C. requires believing a number of things to be true that we do not know are true and assumes several things to be true we have good reason to believe are not true.

There is more to be said, but that is enough for now. We have good reasons to think, more than enough good reasons to believe that Daniel is as it appears to be: the record of events and visions that occurred in 6th century B.C. Babylon. [Much of the above argument from Ralph Davis, *The Message of Daniel*, 16-20] Still more definitive for Christians is the fact that the Lord refers to

the book of Daniel as Holy Scripture and to Daniel himself as a prophet (Matt. 24:15). He clearly did not think of Daniel as a pseudonymous work that originated in the mid-2nd century B.C.

There is something more here of importance. One of the problems scholars find with Daniel *as a 6th century B.C. work* is its focus on the suffering of the saints in the mid-2nd century B.C. Why that time in particular? Unless the author was someone who was going through, or had just gone through, those bad times himself, why would he concentrate on the troubles the Jews had a century and a half before Christ? There is no doubt that the focus of the visions is on the events of the persecution of the Jews by Antiochus Epiphanes in the mid-2nd century B.C. That is true of all the visions in general and of the vision of Daniel chapter 11 in particular. Why would God, communicating to a 6th century prophet, pay so much attention to events in the 2nd century? But the fact is, that was a time of terrible danger for the people of God, perhaps the most terrible crisis through which the church has ever passed. The great Princeton Old Testament scholar, Robert Dick Wilson, wrote that the persecution of Antiochus Epiphanes was one of the most important events in the history of God's people, on a level with the call of Abraham, the giving of the law, the Babylonian captivity, and the incarnation of God the Son itself. Remarkable! This may be one reason why this history is the only piece of non-biblical history to which reference is made in the hall of the heroes of faith in Hebrews Chapter 11. To compare this time in Jewish history with the call of Abraham or the incarnation is astonishing until you realize what was happening at that time. Antiochus ordered the cessation of circumcision, stopped the temple services, instituted pagan worship in their place, set up idol altars in every Jewish city, and commanded the Scriptures to be destroyed. His program was to wipe believing and observant Jews off the face of the earth and their religion with them. Those who refused to conform to these new laws and practices were ruthlessly exterminated, whole families for the guilt of one member. The chosen people, in other words, were on the point of annihilation. As Wilson put it, "There never was, before or since, such a period of desperation...in the history of the church." Only when one grasps how threatened with extinction God's people and their faith had become can the visions of Daniel be fully appreciated. No wonder God devoted so much attention to this crisis beforehand, to prepare his people for what was to come and to assure them that it was not and would not be *the end*. [Davis, 21] Once again we are reminded of the core message of the book: "in spite of appearances, God is in control."

I have spent time on the question of the date of the book – note that we don't know for a certainty precisely when it was written – or for that matter – precisely who gave the book its final form, though it appears obvious the material it contains came from Daniel himself – but, I say, I've spent time on this question of the book's date precisely because as Porphyry long ago realized, if the material came from Daniel in the 6th century B.C. the book is one thing; if it didn't, the book is quite another.

But that doesn't mean that all will be obvious and simple in our reading and consideration of the contents of this remarkable book of the Bible. Daniel addresses us from a different world. All the books of the Bible do that, of course, but in some ways it is even more strikingly the case with Daniel. He not only lived at a time two and a half thousand years removed from our own, in a culture vastly different from our own and, for that matter, vastly different from Israelite culture as we know it from the earlier books of the Bible, but he speaks to us in languages very different from ours. In fact, he addresses us in two different languages: Hebrew from the 1st verse of

chapter one to the first half of the 4th verse of chapter two; Aramaic from 2:4b to the end of chapter seven; and Hebrew from that point to the end of the book. The two languages are certainly similar to one another. A typical Aramaic grammar, such as I used in seminary, is a small book because the author fairly assumes that the student has already learned Hebrew and needs only to know how Aramaic is different. Still, it is striking that half of the book is in a different language than is used for the rest of the OT, apart, that is, from two sections of Ezra (in chapters 4 and 7). Most literate Jews in that time and place who read Daniel would have been able to read the Aramaic better than the Hebrew, but could have understood both; but if you and I knew Hebrew and began to read Daniel, very soon it would be akin to finding that the author had moved from English to French or, if that is too great a change, from modern English to very old English with a number of old words we know longer know. To make matters more complicated, the break between Hebrew and Aramaic occurs within the narrative portion of the book and continues into the visions. So some of the stories are in Hebrew and some in Aramaic and so too the visions. *And no one has the faintest idea why!*

We are aware perhaps of the danger, now more clearly recognized than it was forty years ago, of failing fully to appreciate the redemptive/historical character of biblical revelation. In Sunday School, for generations, the stories of Daniel 1-6, especially the fiery furnace and the lion's den, were taught as moral lessons. We were taught by them to stand firm like the three men who were cast into the fiery furnace and to "dare to be a Daniel, dare to stand alone." There is no doubt whatsoever that such lessons were fairly taught from such accounts; *they are meant to inspire us to faithfulness to God and his Word*, but taking that to be the primary lesson, that approach tended to miss the main point: namely that *God was at work* saving his faithful people, that he was preserving the faith in a foreign land, and that he was bearing witness to his own power and faithfulness in delivering his people from their oppressors. It was, after all, the Lord who met the men in the furnace and God himself who stopped the mouths of the lions. We will find in both the narratives and the visions and from beginning to end that *Daniel is first about God and what God was doing and will do*, only then about his people and what, by faith, they were called upon to do and then did. You will notice this in the opening lines of the book:

"In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. *And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand...*"

And what a story of God and of God's power and faithfulness Daniel provides! In both the stories of the first six chapters and the visions of the last six, there are demonstrations of the intervention of God in human history as dramatic as anywhere in the Bible. What Daniel will give us is a philosophy of history, a way of looking at what is happening in our world, a perspective on troubled times for the people of God, and hope for the future. We will need all of this in the days, months, and years to come. We've always needed it, but now we American Christians are more acutely aware of our need.

The Babylonian captivity was a terrible crisis in the history of the people of God. It shook the faith of the covenant people of God to its foundations. They had, by and large, rejected him and he had visited upon them all the threatened punishments of the covenant. They had been forced to leave the Promised Land. The nation of Israel had ceased to exist. It is not surprising then that

extraordinary events would occur and extraordinary revelations would be given to confirm to the remnant of God's people that the covenant was still in force, that Yahweh still loved and cared for his faithful people, and that the future of the people of God, their promised vindication and their eventual triumph at the end of history were still guaranteed by God's promise and power; in spite of all appearances. God, Yahweh, Israel's God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was still in absolute control of the whole world.

We need to be convinced anew and afresh of the same things and we need to live in the conviction of them. That is what Daniel is intended to do for God's people and, God willing, will do for us.