

"Predictive Prophecy" In The Book Of Daniel: The Challenge to Rationalism

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Presuppositions & Prophecy

The issue of "predictive prophecy" has provided a stumbling-block for rationalistic interpreters from the Neoplatonic critic, Porphyry, to German Higher Criticism of the nineteenth century, and even down to the contemporary critic of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. To accept the validity of "predictive prophecy" is tantamount to accepting the supernatural origin of the Scriptures and therefore of Christianity itself. The objection to the Book of Daniel is on this basis.

Pusey comments, "Porphyry's objection to the Book of Daniel, that it contained such definite prophecies of the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes, was consistent in him, if he has become altogether a heathen, and meant to deny all definite prediction. To maintain it, he must have denied the truth of most of the OT, and contradicted the spirit and character of the whole. For the OT is full of definite prophecies. Definite prediction as definite as those in the Book of Daniel, is an essential part of its system;" he continues, "Porphyry's German followers accepted this issue. They rejected the definite predictions of Daniel, but only in common with all other definite prediction of the Old and New Testament."^[1] The Bible is, thus, viewed just as any other human book in which it cannot be granted that God has shown man detailed revelations of the future "beyond the reach of human sagacity."^[2] As Young points out, Porphyry's "work is founded on the presupposition that predictive prophecy is impossible. It is upon the basis of this assumption that Porphyry came to his conclusion that the Book of Daniel was a product of the second century B.C."^[3]

Rushdoony goes straight for the jugular when he describes the Book of Daniel as "one of the most explosive books in all human history in that it assumes at every point a philosophy of history which is anathema to autonomous man."^[4] The revelation of the sovereign God, as seen in Daniel, governing all of history to the last detail is an offense to rebellious and autonomous man. He continues,

The offense of Daniel, ... is the offense of all Scripture, for here are concentrated basic elements of biblical faith in sharp and compelling terms that admit of no 'poetic' reading but require, with harsh urgency, a submission intolerable to autonomous man. ... Daniel is offensive because it sets forth predictive prophecy in its plainest form, unpoetic, blunt, and unmistakable. Written on its claim in the 6th century BC by Daniel, it charts the course of empire for centuries ahead, sets forth the coming of Christ and the establishment of the church, and does all this with a specific and singular confidence that his is not only a revelation from God, but the manifestation of God's normal and continuing government of men and nations.^[5]

Rebellious man prefers to view himself as the master of his own destiny, moulding and shaping his corner of chaos he calls history. However, "predictive prophecy", especially in Daniel, shows the absolute control and predestination of the Creator-God over the nations and government thereof. This calls forth a creaturely response of humility and submission which fallen man, as demonstrated in the critical treatment of this book, is repelled by; and through rationalistic presuppositions of the utter impossibility of predictive prophecy construct false dates (Maccabean period) to support, not only their philosophy of history, but more to the point, their view of God who must be moulded to fit the shape of their thinking and, thus, allow their own ultimacy.

Authorship, Date & Prophecy

As to the authorship and date of the book, Rushdoony notes, "how absurd is the notion of a Maccabean date ... Not only does the book presuppose and require the knowledge of one contemporary with the events, and not only does it reveal on textual grounds its early date [6th Century B.C.], but it moreover is an impossible book for a Maccabean Jew, indeed, any Jew except one under orders from God, to have written."^[6] No Jew of an exclusive, nationalistic fervour, which the Maccabees were, would have been tolerant towards a book declaring "the counsel of God to by-pass Israel,"^[7] let alone author such a work.

Young also, commenting on ch. 11 of the prophecy says, “it might be well at this point to remind the reader that his entire account is described as something that will occur in the future. It purports, therefore, to be prophecy. If it was written after the occurrence of the events described, it must be regarded as a deception for its purpose is to set forth these events as yet future.”[\[8\]](#) This we cannot accept if the canon of Scripture and its veracity as the word of God is upheld. The absurdity and contradiction of a late date is obvious to the clear-thinking biblical Christian.

Conservative scholars and Christian traditions have held to the date of authorship during the sixth century BC.[\[9\]](#) There are, however, a number of arguments that are commonly used for a later date. These may be listed under two heads: *internal* and *external* objections.

Internal Objections

Of an internal nature, it is argued, Daniel is full of historical inaccuracies that an author of the sixth century BC would not have made.

First, ch.1:1 is made out to contradict the testimony of Jer.25:1, 9 and 46:2 as to the date of Jerusalem’s capture. According to Harrison, “this alleged error actually rests upon a scholarly misunderstanding of methods of chronological reckoning in antiquity.”[\[10\]](#) In addition to this Young points out “...that the book of Daniel does not state that Nebuchadnezzar took the city of Jerusalem in the third year of Jehoiakim. All that Daniel asserts is that in Jehoiakim’s third year Nebuchadnezzar came to Jerusalem and laid siege against it. God gave into his hands the king and a part of the temple vessels, and these alone are mentioned as the spoil which the Babylonian king received.”[\[11\]](#) There is no suggestion that the entire city had been taken.

Second, it is objected that the term “Chaldean” is used, as with the OT generally, in an ethnic sense, but in addition to this, to denote a group of wise-men (2:2,4,5,10; 3:8; 4:7; 5:7,11) which is not found elsewhere in the OT or inscriptions. It is usually assumed that this is characteristic of a time much later than the sixth century BC. It would appear there is no legitimate objection to Daniel using the term in both applications as it had already been in use for 200-300 years before the traditional date of Daniel and could have developed by that time to denote both.[\[12\]](#)

Third, it is argued that history knows nothing of Nebuchadnezzar’s madness. The accuracy of this must be evaluated by the ancient view of mental illness and later traditions that substantiate the scripture record. Mental illness in the ancient East was viewed superstitiously as “possession par excellence by demonic powers”. The mentally ill were therefore handled with a degree of fear and actually banished from society. It is therefore understandable that the records of the time would be silent as to this affliction. However, as Harrison points out, “History is ... by no means silent as to the madness of Nebuchadnezzar, despite the understandable reluctance of contemporary writers to record or discuss the matter. It was only some three centuries after the death of Nebuchadnezzar that a Babylonian priest name Berossus preserved a tradition stating that Nebuchadnezzar was taken ill suddenly towards the end of his reign.”[\[13\]](#) He also mentions another tradition recorded by Eusebius and an inscription of the period alluding to a gap when Nebuchadnezzar was non-productive in terms of his kingdom and its building projects.[\[14\]](#)

Fourth, the historicity of the book is objected to on the basis of a confusion between Belshazzar and Nabonidus. Inscriptions have shown Nabonidus as king when Daniel describes Belshazzar’s reign. Archaeological discoveries have, however, resolved this by showing that the eldest son of Nabonidus was Belshazzar who ruled with his father as co-regent.[\[15\]](#)

Fifth, is the dispute as to the identity of Darius the Mede who is not mentioned outside OT narratives. According to Harrison, however, Whitcomb has proposed a solution based on cuneiform sources in which Darius is identified as Gubaru who was appointed in 539 BC as governor of Babylon by Cyrus and then held the position for at least fourteen years.[\[16\]](#)

External objections

As to external objections: *First*, appeal is made to the place of Daniel in the Hebrew Scriptures amongst the “writings” rather than the “prophets”. This only signifies that Daniel was not regarded as one who occupied the prophetic office functioning as “a spiritual mediator between God and a theocratic community”. He was a godly statesman in a heathen court endowed with unusual gifts of interpretation and wisdom, and was not a ‘vocal’ or ‘literary’ prophet, in the conventional sense, who spoke on God’s behalf to his covenant people.

Second, a later date is contended by the exclusion of Daniel in the catalogue of famous people in Ecclesiasticus (180 BC). The

Quran Discoveries, however, undeniably demonstrate the popularity of Daniel in this period. It is noteworthy that Job and Ezra, among others, are also omitted by Ecclesiasticus.

Third, the linguistic arguments commonly advanced have also recently lost their edge due to recent archaeological discoveries. Driver, in 1891, confidently argued that the Persian used in Daniel indicated a date well after the establishment of the empire and that certain Greek words demanded a date after the conquest of Palestine by Alexander the Great in 332 BC. More recent study, however, has shown that Persian words used in Daniel (e.g. ‘satrap’) are of an earlier rather than a later period—Old Persian and not Neo-Babylonian; and that Greek names for musical instruments (e.g. ‘harp’, ‘sackbut’ and ‘psaltery’) rather than indicating a Maccabean date, as previously claimed, can equally indicate the traditional date as it is now well recognised that Greek culture reached the East long before the Neo-Babylonian period.[\[17\]](#)

The God of Predictive Prophecy

In conclusion, Leupold maintains that, “the matter boils down to this: the critical objections have been answered time and again in such a manner as to satisfy those that still believe in the veracity of God’s Word, who also are fully convinced that, on the basis of sound logic, not one valid objection against the historical truth of the Bible can be pointed out.” With great perspicacity, and in the next breath, he lays down an axiom: “They who raise the claim that ‘the historicity of the Book of Daniel is an article of faith’ are correct only when they accept the equally valid claim: ‘The correctness of the crucial position is an article of faith’[\[18\]](#) Certain basic presuppositions as to the nature of God, man, and history inevitably colour the interpretation of the facts.

If God is viewed as neither transcendent nor sovereign over history “predictive prophecy” is a total impossibility and therefore a date of authorship must be found subsequent to the obvious historical fulfilment of these, therefore, fraudulent ‘prophecies’. On the other hand, if God is who the Bible says he is: the determiner and predestinator of princes and their empires, the sovereign ruler of the nations, who through his decrees knows the end from the beginning, not the slightest difficulty is had with the acceptance of “predictive prophecy” nor in the traditional date and authorship of the Book of Daniel.

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References

[\[1\]](#) E.B. Pusey, “Daniel the Prophet”, (Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1885, 1978), p.230

[\[2\]](#) *ibid*, p.231

[\[3\]](#) E.J. Young, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1949), p. 320

[\[4\]](#) R.J. Rushdoony, “Thy Kingdom Come – Studies in Daniel and Revelation”, (Fairfax, Virginia” Thoburn Press, 1978), p.4

[\[5\]](#) *ibid*, p. 5

[\[6\]](#) *ibid*, p.48

[\[7\]](#) Young, *op cit*, p.238

[\[8\]](#) *op cit*, p.238

[\[9\]](#) R.K. Harrison, “Introductions to the Old Testament”, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/IVP, 1969), p.110

H.C. Leupold, “Exposition of Daniel”, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969, p.17)

[\[10\]](#) Harrison, *op cit*, p.112

[11] Young, op cit, p. 207

[12] Harrison, op cit, p. 113

[13] op cit p. 114

[14] op cit p. 115

[15] op cit p. 120

[16] op cit p.342

[17] Leupold, op cit, p.26, 27

[18] op cit

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