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Daniel's Response to World Religions

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The dispersion of Abraham's descendants around the turn of the 7th and 6th centuries BC precipitated major changes for the ancient faith of Israel. The people of Judah became exposed in greater ways than every before to the religions of the world. This is not to say they remained isolated before. Their location at the crossroads of commerce and military aggression between Mesopotamia and Egypt, along with their connections to the Mediterranean world, caused them to interact with a variety of cultures and beliefs prior to the 6th century. But with the exile to Babylon, the people of Judah found themselves in the midst of a much more diverse religious milieu. At the same time this happened, they were desperately seeking to reconnect with their own religious traditions.

In this paper, I will explore some of the theological responses of the Jewish community to competing religions in the years following exile. In particular I propose to focus upon those ideas found in the book of Daniel that respond to other religions. Following two preliminary comments, the first part of the paper will survey the religious environment of the ancient Middle East during and following the Israelite exile to Babylon. Particular attention will be given to the dominant religious system of the Babylonians and the Persians. While many things might be noted as characteristics of these religions, two key features emerge: determinism and dualism. The second part of the paper will describe how the book of Daniel in particular responds to these religious perspectives. It will show that the book takes some decisive stances contrary to prevailing religious notions. In particular, Daniel confronts the worldviews espoused in these religions by arguing strongly for both free will of humans and the absolute sovereignty of Yahweh.

The Date of Daniel and the Present Study

The issue of dating the composition of Daniel is one of the more difficult problems of Old Testament studies. Scholars hold two basic positions on when the final form of Daniel appeared. One group places this moment in the late 6th century BC and another in the 2nd century. These dates differ considerably and might appear to impact a study such as the one undertaken in this paper. But, in fact, they do not.

Those who argue for a 2nd century date typically recognize early material in Daniel coming out of both the Babylonian and Persian periods. The Aramaic section of chs 2-7, or at least parts of it, is often posited as the earliest layer of material in the book, with other parts becoming attached later (Collins 1987, 24-38). So one might expect responses to Babylonian and Persian religions in the so-called "early" material of Daniel. Further, we know that the influences of Babylonian and Persian religious thought do not cease with the Greek conquest of the 4th century BC. Religious ideas rarely succumb to political takeovers. In fact, they often become stronger. The evidence of the continued influence of both Babylonian and Persian religious ideas in subsequent centuries is considerable (see Boyce 1992, 1171-1172, Grayson 1992, 773-777 and Skjaervo 2009, 451-457.).

A study of Daniel's interface with Greek religions might also hold special interest since the book speaks into that time frame and makes reference to some of their practices (for example, Dan 11:37-39). But such a study must wait for another time and place.

Daniel's Interaction with Culture

A second preliminary comment needs to be made regarding the nature of cultural interaction found in the book of Daniel. This paper will focus upon how Daniel confronts the belief systems of dominant religions of the time. One should note, however, that this is not the only approach toward culture found in the book. Daniel displays a variety of strategies for engaging Babylonian and Persian cultures. The book reveals tactics such as affirming, relativizing, and transforming elements in culture, as well as confronting them (see Flemming 2005, 125-151). Which approach might be taken depends on the specific issue at stake

Within the first chapter of the book, for example, we can see several of these approaches illustrated in the life of the hero Daniel. He affirms some of the highest values of Babylonian culture by receiving training in its literature and languages as well as acknowledging the authority of those placed over him (Dan 1:4). At the same time he relativizes his own culture by accepting a Babylonian name Belteshazzar. His new name is listed, along with those of his friends, without protest, even though it can be viewed as diminishing his Jewish heritage (1:6). This simple act of receiving a name that identifies him with the current culture acknowledges the value of keeping a foot in both worlds. Daniel avoids absolutizing certain cherished norms of his culture in order to engage others.

At one point though Daniel draws the line and rejects the values of the dominant culture. Partaking of royal food represents a level of accommodation he is not willing to make. Daniel confronts that which could disrupt his relationship to his God and chooses to separate himself from it. As Daniel 1:8 says, "Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine." Significantly the text does not reveal why such food might render him unacceptable to God. It only states that eating the food of the king's table would violate his relationship with God. For that reason alone he takes his stand over against the dominant culture.

In the end though, Daniel's confrontation with Babylonian culture provides a means for transforming it. Nebuchadnezzar takes note of the achievements of Daniel, the one who challenged the Babylonian value system, and puts him in a position of influence within his realm. This point is reinforced numerous times in later chapters when various kings offer honor to the God of Daniel following other confrontations over religious ideologies (see 2:47-48, 4:37, 5:29, 6:26-28).

Determinism of Babylonian Religion

Now we turn to examine some key elements in Babylonian and Persian religions. The military and political successes of both these empires during the 6th and 5th centuries BC extended the influences of their religious systems. The Babylonian worldview gained significant exposure as Nebuchadnezzar invested heavily in temple building during his reign (Beaulieu 2004, 171). Babylon alone boasted over fifty temple complexes with the impressive ziggurat of Etemenanki and the adjacent temple Esagila, both dedicated to Marduk, overshadowing them all.

While many features of Babylonian religion could be discussed, the concept of human destiny is of greatest interest to this paper. From the time of the Sumerians, Mesopotamian religions held to the idea that the gods determined human destiny. The Akkadian term *shimtu*, which is typically translated destiny or fate in Mesopotamian texts, refers to "a predetermined share of fortune or misfortune, which determines the direction and configuration of the whole of life" (Ringgren 1973, 109; see also discussions in Oppenheim 1977, 201-206 and Bottero 2001, 92-93). The significance of this concept within Babylon is highlighted during the annual New Year (Akitu) Festival. On the eleventh day of rituals the gods pronounced the destiny for the king and his people for the year, which they had determined in counsel together (see Saggs 1964, 382-383 and Bottero 2001, 158-164).

The authority of Marduk, the patron god of Babylon, to make such a determination is legitimized in the *Enuma Elish* myth. There, we are told, the gods invested Marduk with the power to pronounce destiny when he accepted the gods' request to fight Tiamat. According to the myth, the gods decreed:

> From this very day your command shall be unalterable,
> To exalt and to bring low, this is verily in your hand,
> What comes forth from your mouth shall come true ...
>
> (translation from Saggs 1962, 413-414)

To further underscore this concept the myth tells how Marduk took the "Tablets of Destiny" from Kingu, one of Tiamat's divine allies in the great battle of creation. These tablets inscribed the will of the gods concerning their designs for things to come. Whoever held these tablets exerted control over the destinies of both men and gods (see Leick 2003, 120 and Saggs 1962, 422).

This Babylonian concept of destiny explains why divination was such an important activity. The fundamental purpose of the various divining techniques was to discover the predetermined will of the gods. It was understood that once the gods decided future events they might also communicate them through stars, sheep entrails, dreams, or some other omen. Prayers, sacrifices, exorcisms, and magical incantation rituals might redirect the fate, but it was never fully averted (see Leick 2003, 125, Bottero 2001, 192-202, and Grayson 1992, 775-776). The words of a god were unalterable except by proclamation of the god who spoke it (Bottero 2001, 92). So a kind of theological determinism was deeply imbedded in the religion of the Babylonians.

Dualism of Persian Religion

On October 12, 539 BC the Persians conquered Babylon and added some alternative religious ideas to the Mesopotamian mix. The Persians showed an expansive tolerance for a variety of cults found throughout the empire. The decree by Cyrus in 538 BC, for example, encouraged rebuilding of temples by a variety of former Babylonian captives who returned to their homelands. In spite of such religious tolerance though, the religion of Zoroastrianism rose to a place of prominence under the Achaemenid rulers of the Persian Empire .

Scholars are divided over whether Persian rulers officially ascribed to and preferred the Zoroastrian cult (Yamauchi 1996, 419-433). Yet it is clear that the religion found a greater foothold throughout the ancient Middle East during the time of the Persian Empire (Boyce 1992,

1171-1172). Certainly Persian emperors acknowledged the role of Zoroastrianism's chief god Ahura Mazda in their achievements. On the Behistun Inscription, for example, Darius the Great confesses: "By the favor of Ahura Mazda I became king; Ahura Mazda bestowed the kingdom upon me." Thirty-nine times Darius announces that he is under the protection of Ahura Mazda in this inscription (Yamauchi 1996, 424).

Zoroastrianism grew out of the religious traditions of ancient Vedic India, but took its own distinctive course at several points. One significant concept put forth in Zoroastrianism was that of a dualistic cosmology. This is the idea that, of the many gods that exist, two compete on equal ground for dominion in this world. The one, Ahura Mazda (Lord of Wisdom), calls humans to all that is good, upright, and true. The other, Angra Manyu (Spirit of Darkness), champions all sorts of evil. The daily struggle between light and darkness (that is, between day and night) is evidence of the battle between these two gods. Ahura Mazda leads a host of gods who affect blessing upon creation and humankind. Angra Manyu, however, directs an army of demons (*daewas*) that evoke chaos, darkness, disease, drought, and death (see Boyce 1992, 1168-1174 and Yamauchi 1996, 438-439). Zoroastrianism projects a hope for the end of time that includes the armies of Ahura Mazda eventually defeating the forces of Angra Manyu and creating a new age of peace and wholeness. At that point the struggle between good and evil will cease.

Daniel's Response to Persian Dualism

As we turn to examine the response of Daniel to these elements in Babylonian and Persian religions, I have chosen to do so in reverse historical order. The reason for this approach is that the book itself seems to emphasize these issues according to this priority. That is to say, the arguments mounted against dualism receive the greatest attention in the book. These then lay the foundation for grappling with the issue of determinism. So we will look at Daniel's response to Persian dualism before examining its response to Babylonian determinism.

Daniel takes on the issue of Persian dualism on two fronts. On the one hand the book focuses upon evil within the human sphere. On the other hand it highlights the incomparable nature of Judah's God, Yahweh.

The book of Daniel locates evil primarily within the sphere of human activity. It gives special emphasis to the evil of human arrogance by returning to the theme numerous times. Kings such as Nebuchadnezzar (ch 4) and Belshazzar (ch 5) serve as prime examples

of the folly of human hubris early in the book. Their stories within the Aramaic section of the Daniel (chs 2-7) form the fulcrum of a chiastic arrangement of this unit (see Edlin 2009, 63-64). The point emphasized by this structure is that the evil of human arrogance destroys Yahweh's created order and brings judgment from the Creator.

The bookend chapters of the Aramaic section also highlight evil within the human sphere. The visions found in chs 2 and 7 both deal with the rise of evil empires within this world. Chapter 7, in particular, highlights the horror of the evil that human kingdoms perpetrate with its images of grotesque beasts. This vision culminates with the appearance of another arrogant leader, "the little horn" (7:8). Whoever this "little horn" may be, whether Antiochus Epiphanes IV, Belshazzar, or some other archetypical human figure, he is the source of evil in this world and not some deity.

One might argue that the chaotic "sea" (Aramaic *yamma'*) out of which the beasts arise in Dan 7:3 could represent the Canaanite god of the sea Yamm or Tiamat in Babylonian religion. If so, then this might suggest that evil finds its locus in this goddess of the primeval salt waters. Though Dan 7 clearly draws upon ancient Middle Eastern imagery at this point (see discussions of Collins 1993, 286-289 and Lucas 2002, 169-171), it does not indicate that the sea is divine (Goldingay 1989, 185 and Steinmann 2008, 332-334). Significantly it does not use the term *tehom* (deep), which might better evoke reference to Tiamat. The language employed here makes no argument for evil embodied in a divine personality. It simply acknowledges the existence of disorder within the human experience symbolized by turbulent oceans. This is consistent with the way the rest of the Old Testament uses the sea and waters imagery to signify chaos (see Gen 1:2; Job 26:12-13; Ps 89:9-11; Is 17:12-14; and Ryken, Wilhoit, Longman 1998, 765).

Even if an allusion to Tiamat were imagined in the text of Dan 7, the goddess does not champion evil by herself. In the creation myth of *Enuma Elish* Tiamat leads the forces of chaos that oppose Marduk. Though this struggle leads to the momentous event of human creation, it is only one of many battles between "good" and "evil" gods. The gods constantly fight among themselves, taking turns representing that which is good and that which is evil (Hooke 1963, 58-72).

While Daniel focuses primarily upon evil within the human sphere, it also acknowledges the existence of evil within a realm beyond this world. In chapter 10 a

heavenly being explains his delay in responding to Daniel's prayers by mentioning "the prince of the Persian kingdom" who resisted him (10:13). He further explains that he will return to fight against this prince and mentions another personality called "the prince of Greece" (10:21). These princes are patrons of the kingdoms with which they are identified and their engagement with the messenger from Yahweh affects affairs on earth.

In Mesopotamian theology, gods served as protectors of particular people groups. Marduk was the patron god of Babylonia and Ashur of the Assyrians, for example. The book of Daniel, however, does not identify the princes of ch 10 as deities. They are angelic beings, not gods. Michael, who is also called a "prince," is described as an angel that fights for and protects the Jews (10:21 and 12:1). So a cosmic battle between good and evil forces seems implied in Daniel. But this takes place between heavenly beings and not the gods. The dualism of Zoroastrianism is avoided.

The other way Daniel confronts Persian dualism is by affirming the absolute sovereignty of Yahweh over the entire cosmos. This idea forms the foundational theological point of the book. According to the great Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, the God of Daniel has no equal. Daniel's deity is "the God of gods and the Lord of kings" (2:47). This title affirms that the dominion of Yahweh's reign extends over both heavenly and earthly realms. Thus God can do "as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth" according to Dan 4:35.

Heaven submits to the rule of Judah's God because he is "the King of heaven" (4:37), "the Lord of heaven" (5:23), and "the God of heaven" (2:18, 19, 37, 44). Heaven is not just Yahweh's abode. It is his realm of command. Such absolute control over the heavens establishes the foundation for Yahweh's dominion over earth. Daniel's God "sets up kings and deposes them" (2:21). As the visions in the book make clear, in the end, all earthly rulers will stand before the throne of Daniel's God to be judged. Every human kingdom will be accountable to this God (7:9-13).

What is more, the dominion of Yahweh never ends. In contrast to the kingdoms of this world that come and go, "his kingdom is an eternal kingdom; his dominion endures from generation to generation" (4:3). It "will not be destroyed" and "will never end" (6:26). When that kingdom passes under the authority of "one like a son of man" who comes riding

on the clouds of heaven, it will continue to be "an everlasting kingdom that will not pass away" and "will never be destroyed" (7:13-14).

Thus, the God of Daniel is designated "the Most High God" four times (3:26; 4:2; 5:18, 21) or simply "the Most High" another nine times (4:17, 24, 25, 32, 34; 7:18, 22, 25, 27) in the book. Within Daniel these terms do not necessarily argue for monotheism, but rather assert the profound dominance of Yahweh over all other entities. Use of these terms to designate Yahweh is particularly interesting because they represent an example of accommodating to culture while, at the same time, confronting it. By designating Yahweh as the Most High God, Daniel allows for a polytheistic worldview familiar to Persians. But, concurrently, the term affirms the supremacy of Yahweh rather than Ahura Mazda (or Marduk for that matter).

So Daniel confronts the dualistic worldview of Zoroastrianism. The book acknowledges the presence of evil in the world, but does not tie it to any deity of equal standing to Yahweh. No other god is even expressly admitted in Daniel, let alone given rank with Yahweh. Evil is located primarily within the human sphere, perpetrated by arrogant kings and their kingdoms, not gods. Daniel alludes to a battle between good and evil in the heavenly realms. But this engagement is not between deities. It is a war between angelic beings who serve as patrons of peoples on earth struggling with good and evil.

Daniel's Response to Babylonian Determinism

Daniel's strong affirmation of the absolute sovereign rule of Yahweh might suggest a predetermined world. Such sovereignty could be so controlling that all of human history and destiny would be decided by divine command, just as Babylonian theology asserted. But Daniel does not affirm such a fatalistic determinism. Final human destinies are not predetermined. The God of Daniel allows people to decide the direction of their lives within the boundaries of his overarching sovereign will.

While the book of Daniel portrays a world of evil rulers exacting all sorts of suffering upon faithful believers, it also asserts that humans are not mere pawns in the course of events. They are free to choose the final outcome of their lives and their world. The constant challenge to be faithful followers of Yahweh sounded throughout the book underscores this point. Within the early chapters of the book, the stories urge believers to

choose wisely like Daniel and his three friends in the midst of an unfriendly world. The faithful must decide "not to defile" themselves (1:8), to remain steadfast even if "thrown into the blazing furnace" (3:17), and to continue "praying and asking God for help" though forbidden by earthly authorities (6:11). Those who choose well are "willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God" (3:28).

Likewise, in the latter chapters of the book, the visions urge believers to remain steadfast in the midst of persecution. They are called to "firmly resist" compromise with the world around them (11:32). They are reminded that heaven responds to the prayers of the faithful and reveals God's interest in them (9:23; 10:12-14). In the midst of the suffering portended in these visions, those who choose to remain steadfast receive reward. They are "purified, made spotless and refined" (12:10).

The point of human free will is made particularly clear in ch 9. There we find Daniel confessing that the people of the covenant "have sinned and done wrong" (9:5). Abraham's descendants "have not obeyed the LORD" or "kept the laws he gave" (9:10). Because of these choices, Daniel confesses that God permitted the exile and "did not hesitate to bring the disaster" upon them (9:14). Further, Daniel asserts that continued disobedience has brought on a period of "extended exile" that could last up to "seventy sevens" (9:24). The point of the vision of "seventy sevens" is not that world history will continue for another 490 years or any other set calculation of time. Rather, exile will continue for God's people for an indefinite time, until people "finish transgression," "put an end to sin," and "atone for wickedness" (9:24; Edlin 2009, 228). The choices people make determine how human history will unfold.

All the while that Daniel emphasizes free choice, it also purports to describe events in the future. Yahweh knows things about the future that he reveals in visions. Some things are very general, while others are quite specific. The general pattern of arrogant rulers rising up to produce all sorts of suffering for God's faithful emerges time and again in both the stories and visions of the book. The visions of four kingdoms found in chs 2 and 7, for example, portray all the kingdoms of world history. From an earthly perspective these kingdoms look like dazzling precious metals (ch 2). But from heaven's view they resemble ferocious, destructive beasts (ch 7). These images portray the typical nature of human kingdoms and not specific ones. Only Babylon, the kingdom contemporary with each vision,

is being represented in particular. The other three kingdoms symbolize all the rest of the world empires to come throughout human history (Edlin 2009, 181).

The visions of chs 8 and 11, on the other hand, identify some very specific personalities of history. In 8:20-21 Persia and Greece are identified by name. Further, the "stern-faced king" described in 8:23-25 undoubtedly refers to the Seleucid monarch Antiochus Epiphanes IV. Then the vision of ch 11 lays out a history of Persian and Greek Empires from about 530 to 164 BC in remarkable detail (see Edlin 2009, 253-259). These are very precise descriptions of historical events that the book of Daniel indicates were known to Yahweh ahead of time.

Regardless of whether one might believe this vision of history to be a pseudo-prophecy or a real one does relieve the theological tension created by it. The book reports these details as something revealed to Daniel in the 6th century BC, long before they took place. Daniel is told that these are things that "will happen to your people in the future, for the vision concerns a time yet to come" (10:14). The theological point of these predictions is that Yahweh knows certain particulars about human history before they happen. They also affirm that Yahweh controls the course of human history and its ultimate outcome.

At the same time though, one must notice that the book of Daniel never asserts that Yahweh prescribes every detail of history. Yahweh knows particular details about the future, but not every last one. Further, the book does not declare or imply that human choice is without consequence. In fact as the prophecy of chs 10-12 closes out, it emphasizes the significance of human decisions throughout the history just rehearsed. Whether or not people choose to remain faithful to God in the midst of the horrific persecution described in ch 11 is important.

In its final chapter the book makes very clear that human decisions matter a great deal. Those who choose to be faithful "will be delivered," either within this world or the next (12:1). Daniel admits that God may not rescue within this present world as he did from the fiery furnace in ch 3 or the lions den in ch 6. Some will perish in times of distress and persecution. They "will fall by the sword or be burned or captured or plundered" (11:33). But a final resurrection and judgment is coming when some will awake "to everlasting life" and "others to shame and everlasting contempt" (12:2). "Those who are

wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens . . . like the stars for ever and ever" (12:3). Wise choice receives its reward.

So Daniel ends on a powerful note of the significance of human choice and deals a fatal blow to Babylonian determinism. This is a note sounded throughout the book as believers are urged to remain faithful. By choosing faithful living they will bring an end to the extended exile of God's people. Details about the future in certain visions create tension about the meaning of human free will in the course of things. But the final chapter makes it clear that what people decide does ultimately matter.

Conclusion

This study has shown that Daniel confronts two dominant worldviews associated with religions of the 6th century BC. The book directly targets determinism of the Babylonian religion and dualism of the Persian religion. Daniel shows elements of accommodation to culture by affirming some of its values and relativizing others. But the book is not shy about confronting divergent ideas, especially those that form a significant challenge to faithful living with Yahweh. The final aim of such confrontation is undoubtedly the transformation of cultural perceptions so that people might freely choose to follow Yahweh, trust in his absolute sovereignty over this world, and put an end to exile. In the end, the books hopes that many will join Daniel in finding "rest" and receiving an "allotted inheritance" in the kingdom of Yahweh (12:13).

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