Daniel
1. Who was Daniel?

The name

The name Daniel occurs twice in the Book of Ezekiel. Ezek 14:14 says that even Noah, Daniel, and Job could not save a sinful country, but could only save themselves. Ezek 28:3 asks the king of Tyre, "are you wiser than Daniel?" In both cases, Daniel is regarded as a legendary wise and righteous man. The association with Noah and Job suggests that he lived a long time before Ezekiel. The protagonist of the Biblical Book of Daniel, however, is a younger contemporary of Ezekiel. It may be that he derived his name from the legendary hero, but he cannot be the same person. A figure called Dan'el is also known from texts found at Ugarit, in northern Syrian, dating to the second millennium BCE. He is the father of Aqhat, and is portrayed as judging the cause of the widow and the fatherless in the city gate. This story may help explain why the name Daniel is associated with wisdom and righteousness in the Hebrew Bible. The name means "God is my judge," or "judge of God."

Daniel acquires a new identity, however, in the Book of Daniel. As found in the Hebrew Bible, the book consists of 12 chapters. The first six are stories about Daniel, who is portrayed as a youth deported from Jerusalem to Babylon, who rises to prominence at the Babylonian court. The second half of the book recounts a series of revelations that this Daniel received and were interpreted for him by an angel. The Greek translation of Daniel includes additional material. Two long prayers, the *Prayer of Azariah* and the *Song of the Three Young Men* are inserted in chapter 3. Two additional stories are added as separate chapters. One tells the story of *Bel and the Dragon*. This is a parody of Babylonian image worship. It includes the motif of Daniel being thrown into the lions' den, which is also found in Daniel chapter 6. The other additional chapter

is the story of Susanna. In that story, Daniel appears as judge, as we might expect from his name, but his character is quite different from what we find in the Hebrew Bible.

The character of Daniel in the Hebrew Bible is mainly established in chapters 1-6. Chapter 1 is in Hebrew. The other five chapters are in Aramaic. Again, the first vision report in the book, chapter 7, is in Aramaic, but the rest of the book is in Hebrew. It seems likely that stories about Daniel, in Aramaic, circulated, perhaps orally, before they were collected in the book. Daniel 1 was written as an introduction to the collection, and may have been translated from Aramaic. The visions in the second half of the book can be dated with some precision, since they all deal with the persecution of the Jews by the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes in the years 167-164 BCE. Chapter 11 gives a long account of Hellenistic history, presented in the form of prophecy, that is accurate until the death of Antiochus Epiphanes, which is erroneously said to take place in the land of Israel. Already in antiquity, the pagan philosopher Porphyry, who lived in the second half of the third century BCE, inferred that the accurate part of the chapter was written after the fact, and that the author was not aware of the actual circumstances of Epiphanes' death in late 164. The first vision, chapter 7, was written in Aramaic, in continuity with the tales. After that, however, the author switched to Hebrew, probably because of nationalistic fervor at the time of the Maccabean revolt.

Historical problems

It is unlikely that the figure described in Daniel 1-6 ever existed. Not only are the miraculous episodes in the stories, such as the survival of the heroes in the fiery furnace or in the lions' den, implausible, but the chapters contain several prominent historical errors. The date of the siege of Jerusalem in the opening verse does not accord either with the account in 2 Kings 24 or with

Babylonian sources. The madness of Nebuchadnezzar (chap. 4) is unknown from other sources and would surely not have gone unreported if it were historical. Belshazzar was the crown prince during the reign of Nabonidus, the last king of Babylon, but he was never king. No such person as Darius the Mede is known to history. Three Persian kings had the name Darius. The first of these organized his empire by satrapies, as Darius the Mede does in Daniel chapter 6. But he was not a Mede. The Book of Daniel follows a widespread idea that there was a sequence of four world kingdoms. In pagan (and some Jewish) sources, these are usually identified as Assyria, Media, Persia, and Greece. Daniel substitutes Babylon for Assyria, and makes Darius into a Mede in order to have the Median empire represented. (The first Persian Darius came later, after the reign of Cyrus, who follows Darius the Mede in Daniel 6).

Traditional tales

In light of the pervasive historical problems, it is clear that the stories cannot be considered historical by modern standards. In fact, they belong to a well-known genre of "court tales," stories set at the court of a king, especially of a Persian king. The Greek historian Herodotus provides several examples, involving such characters as Croesus and Gyges. Other Jewish examples are found in the story of Joseph at the court of the Pharaoh of Egypt, and Esther at the Persian court. These stories may have been prompted by historical incidents in some cases, but they are freely embellished. The Jewish stories all depict their heroes as faced with mortal dangers, but prevailing, by the explicit (as in Daniel) or implicit (as in Esther) help of their God. Historical accuracy is incidental to stories of this type. They are essentially works of fiction, even if they include historical elements.

It is likely that the stories in chapters 1-6 evolved gradually over several centuries. We can trace some of this development in the case of chapter 4. It is now acknowledged that the story had its original inspiration in an episode in the reign of King Nabonidus. He was devoted to the moon-god Sin rather than to Marduk, the patron god of Babylon, and he absented himself from Babylon and lived in Teima in the Arabian wilderness for several years. During this time, the New Year's festival (the Akitu festival) could not be performed in Babylon, because of the absence of the king. The priests of Marduk were scathing in their contempt for him. This episode gave rise to the motif of the king gone mad. A Jewish text found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, *the Prayer of Nabonidus*, correctly identifies the king in question as Nabonidus rather than Nebuchadnezzar, and goes on to tell the story of his recovery. A Jewish diviner explains to him that he has been healed by the God of heaven, and Nabonidus proceeds to acknowledge the true God. The story about Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel chapter 4 represents a more developed form of the story, in which Nabonidus has been replaced by a more famous Babylonian king.

It is reasonable to suppose that some such process of development also underlies the other stories in Daniel 1-6, although specific evidence of earlier stages is lacking. In the case of chapters 4-6, the Old Greek translation is quite different from the Aramaic. The wide discrepancy between different forms of the stories suggests that they may have circulated orally for a time. The formulaic and repetitive language, especially in chapter 3, also suggests a period of oral transmission.

The tales in Daniel 1-6 must have been collected and edited some time before the upheavals in the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes, which inspired the visions in the second half of the book. A few features in the stories point to the Hellenistic era. The interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream in Daniel 2 alludes to interdynastic marriage between the Ptolemies and Seleucids (Dan

2:43). The account of the orchestra in Daniel 3 includes at least one Greek word, *symponia*. Most scholars think the stories were edited in the late third or early second century BCE, but the evidence is not very clear, and in any case the stories must be viewed as traditional tales that grew over a long period of time.

Other Daniel compositions

A few other compositions in the name of Daniel have been discovered in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Two fragmentary Aramaic texts contain predictions of the course of history, partially after the fact, attributed to Daniel (4Q243-244, and 4Q245). The original editor of these texts, J. T. Milik, assumed that they were dependent on the canonical Book of Daniel, but this is not clear. All we can say is that they are compositions that resemble parts of the Book of Daniel in form. Another Aramaic composition is more controversial. This is 4Q246, otherwise known as "the Aramaic Apocalypse" or "the Son of God text." This fragmentary text apparently recounts the interpretation of a king's dream. Some commentators have assumed that the interpreter is Daniel, but Daniel is not mentioned in the extant fragments. The interpretation goes on to talk about a figure who will be called "son of God" and "son of the Most High," as Jesus is in Luke 1:32, 35. It is possible that this figure is an interpretation of the "one like a son of man" in Daniel 7, but this is only a possibility that cannot be verified. No fragments of the Greek additions to Daniel, mentioned above, have been found among the Scrolls, although it is widely agreed that the Greek was based on Semitic, probably Aramaic, originals.

Wise man or prophet?

The character of Daniel that emerges from these stories is part wise man, part prophet. He is not a purveyor of proverbial wisdom, but he is skilled in the interpretation of dreams and mysteries, like the Babylonian wise men. While the Babylonians (Chaldeans) use technical means to interpret omens, however, Daniel relies on the inspiration of his God. Since his interpretations often entail predictions, it is understandable that Daniel is often regarded as a prophet. The book is grouped with the prophets in the Greek, and in the traditional Christian Bible, where Daniel is regarded as the fourth of the major prophets. In the Hebrew Bible, however, Daniel is not included in the Prophets, but rather in the Writings, with the Psalms and Wisdom books. Daniel is, however, called a prophet in the Dead Sea Scrolls (11QMelchizedek; the Florilegium, 4Q174). The Jewish historian Josephus called Daniel the greatest of the prophets, because he not only predicted what would happen, but even said when it would happen. Josephus evidently was not troubled by the fact that some of Daniel's predictions were not fulfilled. Some scholars have suggested that the Book of Daniel was originally regarded as prophetic, as in the Greek Bible, and later removed from the Prophets by the rabbis.

While Daniel was regarded as a prophet in Second Temple and New Testament times, his work differs from that of the older prophets in significant ways. Daniel does not speak in the name of the Lord, in oracular fashion. The visions in Daniel 7-12 resemble prophetic visions, especially those of Ezekiel and Zechariah. Daniel does not, however, engage in direct exhortation. He simply presents an alternative view of the world, one where angelic forces play a major role. He seeks to shape human behavior by getting people to see the world in a new way. Already in chapter 1, Daniel and his friends are said to be "skilled (*maskilim*) in all wisdom." The same Hebrew word is used in chapters 11 and 12 to describe those who let themselves be

killed in the time of persecution, rather than break the Law. Daniel has a more strongly sapiential character than earlier prophecy. In fact, it is representative of a new genre that was emerging in Judaism in the second century BCE, the apocalypse. An apocalypse is a revelation to a human recipient, mediated or interpreted by an angel or other heavenly being. Some apocalypses, including Daniel, provide an overview of history in the guise of prophecy. Others describe the ascent of the visionary to the heavens, or descent to the nether regions. The genre is characterized by the affirmation of the judgment of the dead, and that the righteous and wicked experience reward or punishment after death.

One of the features that distinguish apocalypses from older prophecy is the expectation of judgment after death. Dan 12:1-3 contains the only clear example in the Hebrew Bible of individual resurrection, providing different outcomes for the righteous and the wicked. This is one of the ways in which Daniel has enormous importance for later tradition, both Jewish and Christian. Without the belief in resurrection, Christianity as we know it could not have emerged.

Daniel is also important for early Christianity in another respect. Chapter 7 contains a vision of "one like a son of man" coming on the clouds of heaven. Early Christians identified Jesus with this figure, and inferred that he would come again on the clouds of heaven at the end of history. Whether Jesus himself spoke of a "Son of Man," or identified himself with him, is a perennially disputed question in New Testament scholarship.

Questions for reflection

1. Why is it unlikely that Daniel is an historical figure?

2. What are different literary genres in the Book of Daniel?

3. Is it a problem if the stories in Daniel are not literally true?

4. In what ways is Daniel important for later tradition?

Further Reading

John J. Collins, *Daniel. A Commentary on the Book of Daniel*. Hermeneia. Minneapolis:

Fortress, 1993, pp. 24-52.

Carol A. Newsom, with Brennan Breed. *Daniel. A Commentary*. Old Testament Library.

Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014, pp1-32.

Daniel Smith-Christopher, "The Book of Daniel," *New Interpreter's Bible*. Ed. Leander

Keck. Nashville: Abingdon, 1996. Vol. 7, pp. 19-36.