7. Daniel 8-9

Daniel 8

Daniel 8, like Daniel 7, is set in the reign of Belshazzar. Also like Daniel 7, it is a symbolic vision, explained by an angel. In this case, however, the vision is in Hebrew.

Daniel sees a ram with two horns, one longer than the other, which runs rampant until a goat appears, with a horn between its eyes. The goat attacks the ram, knocks him to the ground and tramples on him. But at the height of its power its great horn is broken and four others arise in its place. Out of one of these comes a little horn, which extends itself towards "the glorious land." Then it rises up against the host of heaven, and throws some of the stars to the ground and tramples on them. It even challenges the Prince of the host, and takes away the daily sacrifice.

The referential background of this vision is quite transparent. The ram with two horns symbolizes Media and Persia (the longer horn). The goat symbolizes Greece. The ram and the goat were associated with Persia and Greece respectively in the signs of the Zodiac. The four horns that sprout on the goat are the Diadochi, the successors of Alexander, who divided the territories he had conquered. The little horn is Antiochus Epiphanes, as in Daniel 7. The assault on the heavenly host is also developed from Daniel 7. The reference to the suspension of the daily sacrifice slides over into the interpretation of the vision.

In this case, the interpreting angel is identified as Gabriel. He refers to Daniel as "ben adam," "son of man." The prophet Ezekiel is also often addressed in this way. The phrase does not imply any identification with the "one like a son of man" in Daniel 7. It simply means "human being." In Daniel 7, the figure on the clouds was *like* a son of man, or human being. This implies that he was not actually human. There is no such qualification in chapter 8.

Gabriel tells Daniel that the vision is for the time of the end. He identifies the kings of Media, Persia and Greece explicitly, and refers to the four kingdoms that replace Alexander. The little horn, Antiochus Epiphanes is described as devious. He will rise up against the Prince of Princes, but he will be destroyed by no human hand.

Daniel 8 is obviously referring to the same events as Chapter 7, but it depicts them drawing on a different myth. In this case the myth is that of Lucifer, son of Dawn (Hebrew Helal Ben Shachar), familiar from Isaiah 14, who raises himself above all the stars of God, but is struck down to the Pit. This myth in turn is derived from an old Canaanite myth about the star-god Athtar, who tries to fill the throne of Baal but is not adequate to the task. As in chapter 7, the myth is one of rebellion. The sin of Antiochus Epiphanes is that he tries to rise above his human status. This is similar to the sin of *hybris* in Greek tragedy. The one who rises too high ends by losing everything. It is typical of apocalyptic visions that the same events can be depicted in different ways. What is important is not the literal detail, but the underlying pattern.

In this case, the length of the persecution is given as 2,300 evenings and mornings, or 1,150 days. This is an approximation of three and a half years (a time, times, and half a time), the duration given in Daniel 7. “Evenings and mornings” refers to the twice daily sacrifice, which was interrupted during the suppression of the cult. The numbers have often been used by Dispensationalists or Fundamentalists to calculate the end of the world. In Daniel, the numbers referred only to the length of time that the temple cult would be disrupted, starting from the time when the Syrian king profaned the temple. When the numbers are applied to the duration of the world (usually taking a day as a year) it is never certain what the starting point should be, and so it is always possible to come up with a new calculation.

Daniel 9

In Daniel 9 the scene changes to the reign of Darius the Mede. In this case the revelation does not take the form of a vision. Rather Daniel is pondering older scriptures, in this case a passage from Jeremiah. (If Daniel had really been taken captive to Babylon, he would have been a contemporary of Jeremiah, and the latter's oracles would not yet have had the status of scripture).

The passage from Jeremiah prophesies that Jerusalem would be desolate for seventy years. There are two such passages in Jeremiah, Jer 25:11 and 29:10. According to Jer 25:11: "The whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years." Jer 29:10 reads: "For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place." In fact, the first return of Jewish exiles from Babylon took place less than seventy years after the deportation. The building of the second Temple, in the time of Darius took place roughly seventy years after the Fall of Jerusalem. Daniel, however, did not think that Jeremiah's prophecy was adequately fulfilled by the events of the Persian era. In this he was not alone. The *Apocalypse of Weeks* in *1 Enoch*, an apocalypse that divides history into "weeks" (presumably of years) skips over the restoration of the Persian period, as does the Damascus Document, one of the foundational documents of the Dead Sea Scrolls. At a time when the temple had been desecrated by Syrian soldiers, it was very obvious that the restoration of the Persian period was not final or lasting. Jeremiah must have been alluding to a greater restoration.

Daniel's prayer

Daniel then turns to the Lord to seek an explanation. A long prayer follows in Dan 9: 4-19. It is not, however, a prayer for enlightenment. Rather, it is a confession of sin on behalf of the people of Judah, informed by Deuteronomic theology. God was justified in punishing the people because they had broken the Law. This kind of prayer occurs several times in Second Temple Jewish texts, notably in Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9. "The Lord is right in all that he has done, for we have disobeyed his voice." The confession is a prelude to an appeal for mercy. God should let his light shine on his desolated sanctuary for his own sake, for his reputation suffers when the people and city that bear his name are disgraced.

Daniel's prayer might be appropriate if he were asking for the restoration of Jerusalem, but he is only asking for an explanation of Jeremiah's prophecy, which he sees as unfulfilled. Moreover, when the angel Gabriel appears to him, he tells him that the answer had gone forth at the beginning of Daniel's supplications. It is not, then, an answer to Daniel's prayer. In fact, the theology of the prayer stands in sharp contrast to that of the rest of the visions. The premise of the prayer is that prayer may be efficacious, and cause God to change the course of history. The premise of the visions, however, is that the course of history was set a long time ago. Human beings are free to choose how they react to it, but the course of history cannot be changed by human initiative. Moreover, the prayer is written in fluent, traditional Hebrew, while the Hebrew of the surrounding passages is so clumsy that some scholars have suspected that it was translated from Aramaic.

Why then is the prayer included in Daniel 9? We have noted already that two long prayers were added to Daniel 3 in the Greek translation. The Greek of Esther also includes prayers that

were not in the Hebrew. Many scholars think that Daniel 9 is another case where a prayer was added secondarily to enhance the piety of the original.

Alternatively, the person who included the prayer in Daniel 9 may have done so in full awareness of the tension between it and the surrounding passages. It may have been included precisely to show the difference between the traditional Deuteronomic theology and the apocalyptic theology of the visions. In the apocalyptic view, history does not follow a logic of reward and punishment. It serves God's mysterious purposes, with scant regard for human merit. Whether or not the original author intended to highlight the contrast, it is a prominent feature of the canonical text.

Seventy weeks of years

The key to the angel's interpretation of the prophecy is that the seventy years are really seventy weeks of years, or 490 years. Seven weeks of years, or 49 years was a jubilee. Leviticus 25:8-10 prescribes:

> You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. [9] Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month—on the day of atonement—you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land. [10] And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family.

Seventy weeks of years would be ten jubilees. We find a similar division of history in the *Apocalypse of Weeks* in *1 Enoch*, which we have already mentioned. There, the whole course of history is divided into ten "weeks." A crucial turning point comes at the end of the seventh week.

The sabbatical structure of history is more explicit in a text in the Dead Sea Scrolls, known as 11QMelchizedek. There the climax of history comes on the Day of Atonement at the end of the tenth jubilee. Melchizedek was the name of a Canaanite priest-king in Genesis 14 and Psalm 110 (where the king of Judah is told "you are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek"). In the text in the Scrolls, however, he is a heavenly figure, both warrior and priest, who will atone for the men of his lot but execute the judgment of God on their enemies.

These various attempts to calculate the duration of history as a schema of jubilees were not necessarily dependent on each other. This kind of attempt to find order in history was found in different sources and movements in the Hellenistic period.

The interpretation of history given to Daniel is not as overtly priestly as 11QMelchizedek. There is no mention of the Day of Atonement. Yet the goal of history is to put an end to sin, atone for iniquity, seal both vision and prophet and anoint a most holy place. Essentially it is concerned that the desecration of the temple be rectified, and that in the process visions and prophecies be vindicated. Unlike the Apocalypse of Weeks or 11QMelchizedek, Daniel is concerned, not with all of history, but with the course of history from the destruction of the first temple by the Babylonians. After seven weeks, we are told, Jerusalem would be rebuilt in the time of an anointed prince (most probably the High Priest Joshua, who was active about 518 BCE; possibly his contemporary, the governor Zerubbabel, who collaborated with him in building the temple). The next 62 weeks are passed over quickly. At their end, an anointed one will be cut off. It is generally agreed that this is the High Priest Onias III, who was murdered during the Hellenistic "reform" that led to the persecution by Antiochus Epiphanes and to the Maccabean revolt. (Neither of these two "anointed ones" is a messiah in the eschatological sense of the word. They are simply anointed High Priests). Then "the troops of the prince who is to

come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary." This refers to the suppression of the Jewish cult by Antiochus Epiphanes. This is dated to the middle of the last week of years. For the last half week (= three and a half years, or a time, times and half a time) "he shall make sacrifice and offering cease" and set up "the abomination that makes desolate" (most probably a pagan altar, superimposed on the altar of the Jerusalem temple).

Daniel, then, is not interested equally in all periods of history. Rather, his interest is focused on the last half week of the seventy weeks (of years). The message, essentially, is that the end is near. The time that has elapsed is much greater than that which remains. Those who are suffering in the throes of persecution only need to hang in there a little longer, until "the decreed end" comes, and everything is set right.

Questions for reflection

1. What is the mythic background of Daniel 8?
2. Why is the duration of the persecution expressed in terms of mornings and evenings?
3. Is Daniel's prayer appropriate for its context?
4. Why does Daniel find Jeremiah's prophecy puzzling?
5. What is the message implied by the interpretation?

Further Reading

Collins, *Daniel*, 326-60;

Newsom, *Danie*l, 252-319;

Smith-Christopher, "The Book of Daniel," 108-130.