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What is the message of the book of Daniel?

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Abstract

The Old Testament book of Daniel is most well-known as the source of Sunday school stories such as Daniel in the lion's den and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the fiery furnace. However, for the original readers, exiled Jews deported from Jerusalem to Babylon, the text is full of meaning. For a community struggling to believe that God continues to be in control, Daniel encourages believers to steadfastly put their trust in him. In the first six chapters, this is done through clear narratives that demonstrate God's participation in the lives of his followers, and in the final six chapters, the meaning is hidden within apocalyptic visions and dreams. This essay demonstrates the predominant theme of God's sovereignty by examining firstly the motif of fervent prayer and faithful worship of the one true God; secondly, how God is revealed to be in control both in the lives of his people and in his foreknowledge of future events; and thirdly, the themes of salvation, judgement and restitution throughout the book.

Introduction

The Old Testament book of Daniel is most well-known amongst believers for its moral-rich narratives in Chapters 1-6, and its apocalyptic visions in Chapters 7-12. However, amongst biblical scholars, it is the cause for much debate for a variety of issues, such as authorship, dating and historical accuracy. However, despite these issues, there are several concurrent themes throughout the book which ultimately emphasise God's sovereignty. Daniel 1-6 uses narratives which demonstrate God's active participation on behalf of his servants and in Daniel 7-12, God's purposes for the nations and the establishment of his kingdom are revealed through Daniel's visions.¹ In order to identify the key themes in Daniel, this essay will examine firstly, the importance placed on faithful prayer and worship of the one true God; secondly, the use of the narratives to demonstrate that God is sovereign over kings, nations and creation, and the apocalyptic chapters to offer believers hope for the future; thirdly, that God is the bringer of salvation, judgement and restitution. Each of these themes is intended to encourage the Jewish believers exiled in Babylon that God is sovereign even amidst their deportation from the Promised Land and the dominion of foreign kings. The encouragement of this message likewise inspires believers in contemporary society to trust in God's faithfulness to come through on their behalf.

Prayer and Worship

Firstly, the book of Daniel highlights God's sovereignty by emphasising the importance of faithful prayer and worship of the one true God. Prayer is an instigator of hope and the catalyst for change, and causes believers to fix their attentions and hope upon the

¹ "Daniel, Book of," *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas *et al*, third edition (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 255.

sovereignty and ability of God.² The book illustrates that although the temple in Jerusalem, which believers knew as Yahweh's house of prayer, is destroyed, God is still faithful to hear and answer prayers.³ This was particularly relevant for exiled Jews who at first lamented the loss of the temple, but were gradually influenced by the rituals and sacrifices of the Babylonian religious system.⁴ The abandonment of God by the deported Jews is contrasted by the fervent and consistent prayer life of Daniel and faithfulness of his companions, which are at least in part reminiscent of cultic times.⁵ Though the temple in Jerusalem is destroyed, Daniel continues to pray towards it (Dan. 6), specifically concerning the holy mountain and sanctuary (Dan. 9), and fasts (Dan. 10).⁶ Winfried Vogel notes that the tradition of praying towards Jerusalem originated with King Solomon's dedicatory prayer in 1 Kings 8, where he both establishes the temple as a focal point for prayer and as symbolic of God's heaving dwelling place.⁷ Daniel therefore exemplifies "the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man" (Jas. 5:16),⁸ likely praying towards Jerusalem as a declaration of his assurance that Yahweh would respond.⁹ Solomon's prayer also asks that God would hear and forgive his people during times of exile when they repent and return to him (1 Kings 8:46-53).¹⁰ Daniel models a prayer of confession and repentance which affirms the faithfulness, mercy and righteousness of Yahweh (Dan 9:4, 7, 9, 14), and

² "Daniel," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary Daniel--Malachi*, ed. Tremper Longman and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 36.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Winfried Vogel, *The Cultic Motif in the Book of Daniel* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2010), 217.

⁵ Ibid, 218.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid, 140.

⁸ Gerhard Pfandl, *Daniel: The Seer of Babylon* (Maryland: Herald Publishing Association, 2009), 30.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ James Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgement: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 331.

God responds.¹¹ Believers are encouraged to follow Daniel's example of prayer by trusting that God will come through, and holding prayer as the fundamental factor by which restoration may be received.¹²

The book of Daniel also emphasises worship of the one true God. As the Israelites were living in a foreign land amidst a culture that worshipped many gods other than Yahweh, Daniel does not emphasise the style or practice of worship, but rather "the essence of worship as an expression of loyalty to a particular deity."¹³ The focus is therefore on *whom* one worships.¹⁴ This theme is particularly predominant in the first half of the book, in which Daniel and his companions remain faithful to the Jewish requirements for food (Dan. 1); the wise men are unable to interpret the king's dream but God reveals it to Daniel (Dan. 2:23); Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refuse to worship any god but God and are miraculously rescued from a blazing furnace (cf. Dan. 3:17); Nebuchadnezzar recognises and glorifies God through the fulfilment of a dream (cf. 4:34); Belshazzar is killed for setting himself against God (Dan. 5:23, 26); and Daniel is kept alive in the lion's den because he continually serves God (cf. 6:16). In each instance, people are required to take responsibility for whom their actions glorify, such that those who worship God are exalted and rescued, but those who refuse to acknowledge Yahweh are humiliated or brought to ruin.¹⁵ This is seen in Daniel 3 where Nebuchadnezzar commands that people of all nations and languages worship his statue, a representation of imperial power and authority.¹⁶ The story concludes, however, with the king issuing a decree that all people honour the God of

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² "Daniel," 36.

¹³ Vogel, 217.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ "Daniel," 36.

¹⁶ M. C. Thomas, "The Book of Daniel: The Apocalypse with a Distinct Charter for Liberative Praxis and Theological Vision," *Asia Journal of Theology* 19, no. 2 (2005), 294.

Israel (3:29). As Daniel 7:13-14 demonstrates, there is only one deserving of worship, and this from “all nations and peoples of every language.” Thus, for contemporary believers, the book of Daniel demonstrates the importance of remaining faithful to God even in the face of societal pressures, and also offers encouragement that God comes through for those who steadfastly trust in him.

God is in Control

Secondly, God’s sovereignty is demonstrated through his rulership over kings, nations and creation. From the very beginning of Daniel, Yahweh is presented as the King above all kings through the contrast between the house of God and the “house of his [Nebuchadnezzar’s] god” (Dan. 1:2), who is the Babylonian god Marduk,¹⁷ and Daniel and his friends are represented as a servant of God, through whom God reveals his active participation on behalf of his people.¹⁸ James Boice suggests that God sovereignty is demonstrated in how he appropriately equips Daniel with wisdom and understanding in Daniel 1 in such a way that his will may be outworked in subsequent events.¹⁹ His sovereignty is further revealed in Daniel 5, Daniel explains to Belshazzar that although King Nebuchadnezzar’s “sovereignty, greatness, glory and splendour” (Dan. 5:18) was granted to him by God, pride and arrogance resulted in his deposition “...until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and sets over them anyone he wishes” (Dan. 5:21). God’s sovereignty is revealed throughout Daniel, as God bestows knowledge and understanding (1:17), possesses wisdom and power (2:20), deposes and appoints kings (2:21), reveals deep and hidden things (2:22), knows the future (cf. 7:17-18; 8:19; 10:14), exercises

¹⁷ Vogel, 213.

¹⁸ Douglas Connelly, *Daniel: Spiritual Living in a Secular World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 6.

¹⁹ James Montgomery Boice, *Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 27.

everlasting dominion (4:3; 7:14), intercedes on behalf of individuals (cf. 6:23), performs signs and wonders (cf. 5:5; 6:22), rescues and saves (3:28; 6:27), and keeps his covenant of love (9:4).²⁰ Thus, for the Jewish exiles in Babylon, Daniel encourages a community struggling to believe that God is still in control to continue looking to him for the ultimate deliverance.²¹ Even the position of a king is granted by God, so although the Jews were under foreign authority, God remains sovereign and in control, as he continues to today.

The second half of the book of Daniel further carries the message that God is in control by providing hope for the future for exiled Jews through certainty of events that will come to pass and, for believers today, the knowledge that the events have indeed happened as God foretold to Daniel. Old Testament apocalyptic literature likely uses symbols borrowed from Canaanite myth and mythology found in the Eastern Diaspora and Hellenistic Palestine in order to depict dreams and visions.²² Consequently, many people find the apocalyptic material in Daniel 7-12 fascinating portions of Scripture, yet encompassed in mystery as the descriptive, unrealistic and fantasised language seems as fiction or myth.²³ Alternatively, apocalyptic material can be interpreted as literal depictions of the End times to come, though it is more likely that apocalyptic authors are rather using vivid and symbolic imagery to “portray a future salvation which transcends historical experience.”²⁴ In the case of Daniel, it is argued that the imagery parallels true historical events relating to the rise and fall of kingdoms in the Ancient

²⁰ “Daniel,” 35.

²¹ Jacqueline Grey, *Them, Us & Me: How the Old Testament Speaks to People Today* (Chester Hill: Australasian Pentecostal Studies, 2008), 236.

²² “Apocalyptic,” *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas *et al*, third edition (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), 53.

²³ Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, revised and expanded (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 275.

²⁴ “Apocalyptic,” 53.

Near East. Scholars argue, for example, that in Daniel 7 the winged lion represents Babylon; the bear aptly alluding to the great size and fierceness of the empire of Medo-Persia,²⁵ which conquered Lydia (547 BCE), Babylon (539 BCE) and Egypt (525 BCE), but was defeated by the Greeks at Marathon (490 BCE), Salmis (480 BCE) and Platea (479 BCE);²⁶ and the leopard with four heads symbolises Alexander the Great and the four kingdoms his predecessors separated his empire into; and the dreadful beast and ten horns represents Rome and ten states emerging from it, with the little horn symbolising the Roman Catholic Church which arose from the ruins of political Rome.²⁷ The fulfilment of these prophecies thus demonstrates God's sovereignty, as they demonstrate his foresight and verifies the truthfulness of the Word of God.²⁸

Salvation

Lastly, the book of Daniel provides hope for believers that God will always come through for them, making a way for salvation. Grant Osborne notes, the visions in Daniel, as in Revelation, portray a dominant theme of restitution, highlighting the promise of salvation and restoration throughout the text.²⁹ James Jordan argues that one prominent motif within the apocalyptic section of Daniel is that God's "son of man" must die and rise again in order for his established kingdom to come again.³⁰ For Jewish exiles, this would have presented the message that if they remain faithful to

²⁵ Some scholars argue that the lopsidedness of the bear indicates one side was larger than the other, though most scholars tend to believe the legs of the bear were partly raised either poised for springing forward or paused to devour a mouthful. Stephen B. Miller, *The New American Commentary: Daniel*, Volume 18 (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 1994), 198.

²⁶ Alexander C. Flick writes, "Out of the ruins of political Rome arose the great moral Empire in the 'giant form' of the Roman Church." Pfandl, 62-63.

²⁷ Ibid. Miller suggests the ten horns could represent the Antichrist's empire of exactly ten kingdoms (or nations), or may indicate completeness, power, sovereignty etc. and will rule the whole earth by force (cf. Rev. 13:3, 7-8, 12). Miller, 203.

²⁸ Pfandl, 66.

²⁹ Osborne, 281.

³⁰ James B. Jordan, *Handwriting on the Wall: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Powder Springs: American Vision, Inc., 2007), 79.

God like Daniel, they can anticipate resurrection and salvation with eschatological hope, even in the face of persecution.³¹ Furthermore, although the dreams and visions contain warnings of persecution to come, this is overshadowed by the assurance that the people of Israel can rely on supernatural protectors, such as “Michael, the great prince who protects your people” (12:1; cf. 10:20). In Daniel 11, a situation of conflict arising from the enemies of Israel casts doubt as to whether God’s people can survive against such strength and evil brutality (cf. 11:44).³² Although the situation seems desperate, “God is so fully in control as to be able to disclose the sequence of events before they happen,” emphasised by the reference to the divine Book of Truth, upon which the events of past, present and future.³³ As Winfried Vogel point out, God appoints time, controls history and directs it to its consummation at the end of time. Thus, the prophecies encourage believers to hope for a good future and the establishment of “an everlasting kingdom in which Christ will reign supreme,”³⁴ for no matter what obstacles will arise in the meantime, God is a faithful protector.

The book also presents salvation in terms of judgement. The original audience likely interpreted their present suffering as punishment from God, but the book of Daniel encourages the Jews that the “time of distress” (12:1) is only temporary and that deliverance will come (11:32).³⁵ M. C. Thomas notes that the discourse of apocalyptic literature sets earthly kings and kingdoms under the power of God who is the sovereign judge.³⁶ Hence, the Jews may anticipate receiving the salvation of an eschatological

³¹ Ibid, 83.

³² “Daniel,” 186.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Pfandl, 66.

³⁵ “Daniel,” 36.

³⁶ Thomas, “The Book of Daniel: The Apocalypse with a Distinct Charter for Liberative Praxis and Theological Vision,” 388.

return from exile through God's judgements on those responsible for the exile.³⁷ This theme is also seen in the parallel accounts of deliverance in Daniel 3, where Daniel's friends are rescued from the fiery furnace, and chapter 6, where Daniel is saved in the lion's den. In these occasions, God delivers his faithful servants through the judgement of their enemies.³⁸ In Daniel 4 and 5, God also brings judgement on Nebuchadnezzar through his insanity and Belshazzar through the handwriting on the wall, which brought to power those who would bring restoration to the people of Israel.³⁹ J. L. Helberg observes that although Daniel presents God as sovereign over the heavens and earth, he also grants personal responsibility and freedom for humanity, that they may choose to repent.⁴⁰ Belshazzar, who knew that Nebuchadnezzar's own pride against God was his downfall, refused to humble himself before and honour "the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways" (5:23) and was slain as a consequence. Conversely, Nebuchadnezzar recognised the sovereignty of God and glorified him, and subsequently had his sanity, honour splendour returned to him. This indicates that whilst God is sovereign and over all things, humans have the obligation to accept the responsibility for their own actions.

Conclusion

The book of Daniel is richly full of meaning, the most common of which are often used as stories of morality in Sunday school. For Jews exiled to Babylon in the fifth century BCE, however, Daniel offers encouragement to continue believing in God's sovereignty and participation in the lives of his people in every circumstance. Having been removed from the Promised Land, the Jews were struggling to believe that God

³⁷Hamilton, 325.

³⁸Ibid, 326.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Vogel, 209.

was still for them, but the narratives in Daniel 1-6 provide clear examples of how God works on behalf of his people, and the apocalyptic visions and dreams in Daniel 7-12 are intended to encourage them to hope for the future. This essay argues that the predominant theme in Daniel is God's sovereignty by firstly examining the importance placed upon fervent prayer and worship of the one true God, and how God rewards the faithful and humbles the proud; secondly, exploring how the narratives demonstrate God's sovereignty over kings, nations and creation, and the apocalyptic chapters use prophecy to provide hope for readers; and thirdly, demonstrating that God is the bringer of salvation, judgement and restitution. The essay therefore concludes that the book of Daniel highlights God's sovereignty over all things and in all circumstances, for even when his people lose faith, he remains a faithful protector and provides them with hope for future glory.

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