

December 7, 2003
St. Ambrose of Milan

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The Book of Daniel is a difficult work. Not only is it full of mysteries hard to unravel, but we encounter enigmatic features about the text even before we begin to read it.

First, by calling Daniel a prophet I am contradicting much of contemporary biblical scholarship, which prefers to describe the book named after him as "apocalyptic" rather than prophetic. This distinction, however, introduced as a instrument of literary history, is a bit artificial and, I think, not especially helpful even to that end. In addition, Jesus did call him "Daniel the prophet" (Matthew 24:15), and I am disposed to trust Jesus on the point.

Second, it is a fact that the Book of Daniel is not contained in the prophetic books (*nebi'im*) of the Hebrew Scriptures; it is found, rather, in that canon's final section, the "Writings" (*ketubhim*). Apparently not everyone in antiquity was agreed on the book's authority. Although Josephus says that a copy of Daniel was shown to Alexander the Great (*Antiquities* 11.8.5), Ben Sirach, writing early in the second century before Christ, did not include Daniel with Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve minor prophets (Ecclesiasticus 44-50). The decision to include Daniel in the Holy Scriptures, therefore, was made some time after the canon of the prophetic writings was closed. Thus, to be included in the Bible at all, it had to be placed in the final section, the "Writings."

Third, even to speak of Daniel as part of the Hebrew Scriptures is to stretch the matter a tad, because most of Daniel was written in Aramaic, the ancient language of Syria.

Fourth, the Book of Daniel, as preserved in the traditional Massoretic text of the Old Testament (and Protestant bibles generally), is defective by two chapters. These chapters, the story of Susanna at the beginning of the book and the account of Bel and the Snake at its end, are preserved in the Greek text of Daniel handed down in the Christian Church. In spite of the rejection of these two chapters by the Jews (and later

by the Protestants), they were surely contained in the Aramaic text of Daniel at the time of the New Testament. The strongest evidence for this view is the fact that both chapters were included in the Greek translation of Daniel rendered by Theodotion in the second century A.D. The exclusion of these two sections from the Christian Bible, therefore, is historically unwarranted.

If the Book of Daniel is fraught with difficulties, however, the prophet himself is not. Indeed, the Bible's portrayal of him fairly plain and straight forward. For starts, we know that Daniel lived a good long life. Already active in the year 603 (Daniel 2:1), he was still going strong in 536 (10:1). A fearless man, not intimidated by lions' dens and other petty threats, he served the Babylonian and Persian emperors during that whole period, all the while remaining a loyal, devout and law-abiding Jew.

In this respect Daniel resembled the ancient Joseph, who had faithfully served in the royal court of Egypt. The kings in both cases gave their two servants special clothing to signify their status (Genesis 41:42; Daniel 5:29).

Daniel also matched Joseph in the interpretation of dreams, a gift in which both men were contrasted to the pagan soothsayers (Compare Genesis 41 and Daniel 4). Both Joseph and Daniel, moreover, had revelatory dreams of their own (Genesis 37:5-10; Daniel 7-8).

Although several of the prophets recorded their visions (Ezekiel preeminently), proportionately more of the text of Daniel is taken up with visionary material than is the case of any other biblical writer except the author of the Book of Revelation.

In particular, Daniel was a man of disciplined devotion, who regularly went before the Lord three times each day in prayer and thanksgiving (6:10). Since one of those times was the hour of the evening sacrifice (9:21), we may presume that the other two were at the hour of the morning sacrifice and at noon (cf. Psalms 56 [55]:17). Daniel is thus among our earliest witnesses to the keeping of the "canonical" hours of prayer, a discipline taken over by the early Christians without separation from their Jewish roots (cf. Acts 1:14 with 2:1,15; 3:1; 10:3,9,30).

The contemplative and visionary aspects of Daniel's devotion, though certainly divine gifts, were also the fruit of his sustained application to the discipline of prayer. He set his heart to understand and to humble himself before God (10:12). A man "in whom is the Spirit of the Holy God," a man of "knowledge and understanding " (5:11-12), Daniel did not falter. He was no more likely to omit his daily prayer from fear of the lions than for some more trifling reason (6:11-17). This fidelity was the secret to his life.

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