

The Christocentric Orientation of Daniel and of Scripture Generally

Copyright © 2004 by Frank W. Hardy, Ph.D.

Christ Central in Scripture

The nature of Christ explains the nature of Scripture by showing that it is not necessary to pit divine and human factors against each other as though they competed for the same space. They do not. Christ was no less divine because He was fully human and the Scriptures are no less inspired because they participate fully in an objective historical matrix of events and circumstances. Both influences are fully present.

Acknowledging the divine element in Scripture is an indispensable prerequisite for finding unity there. But even granting inspiration, it must not be expected that unity can be found at will, wherever one might choose to look for it. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. provides an extended discussion of the issues involved in finding a theological center for the Old Testament.¹

More recently in OT studies, the prestigious voices of G. Ernest Wright and Gerhard von Rad have added their weight to a rising chorus that has decided that there is no unifying center to the OT. G. E. Wright rules out any single theme on the grounds that it would not be "sufficiently comprehensive to include within it all the variety of viewpoint." Von Rad, no less definite, asserts that the OT "has no focal point such as is found in the New." Interestingly enough, as already noted above, even the NT assurance has collapsed and also followed the lead of the OT field.²

Kaiser's position that some type of overall unity can be found within the Old Testament alone is probably not correct. I would agree with Wright and von Rad that none is forthcoming, but for reasons other than theirs and with different implications. There can never be a truly unified theology of either the Old Testament or the New Testament in isolation. The two must be brought together.³

When the Old and New Testaments are combined they form a unified whole, but their unity is not literary in nature. From a literary point of view the Bible is highly diverse, and so are both Testaments by themselves. But in many different and varied ways, all parts of this inspired anthology contain a witness to Jesus Christ--when the references to Him in the Old Testament are recognized as such and when His corresponding claims in the New Testament are taken at face value.⁴ If it is true that in some way "Each of the major themes of the Old [Testament] has its correspondent in the New, . . ."⁵ that is a useful and interesting fact, but the sort of unity I have in mind is not dependent on it. The very diversity of the Scriptural witness to Christ is an evidence of the unifying power He exerts. Christ in His person, and not any purely theological or literary consideration, is the center around which Scripture is unified in the sense proposed here.⁶

Christ Central in Apocalyptic

Prediction and Daniel's emphasis on future events

Kaiser refers to prediction as "the original obstacle for most modern biblical scholars."⁷ Daniel provides the classic case in point. The materials in the book demand that three related assumptions be made by the reader: (1) that God revealed factual information to Daniel, (2) that the substance of that information had to do with the future, including the distant future as seen from the prophet's perspective, and (3) that detailed predictions regarding specified time periods fall within the scope of what was revealed. Each of the above propositions is accepted here; each has been challenged elsewhere. We now review some of the challenges.

The emphasis on specified future time periods (point 3) in Daniel and in later Jewish apocalyptic prompt Baumgartner to write:

Through all apocalyptic there goes a fundamentally false sound. It falls under the judgment of the words of the New Testament: "It is not for you to know time or hour, which the Father has held in reserve by His authority" (Acts 1:7). "But no one knows the day and the hour, not even the angels in heaven nor even the Son, but the Father only" (Mark 13:32). This applies also to the book of Daniel. "It inquires into the clockstroke of world history [dem Glockenschlag der Weltstunde], rather than the eternal will of God."⁸

Trevor challenges a more fundamental assumption by stating that apocalyptic does not have the distant future in view at all (point 2), with or without reference to specified time periods. He writes:

At least the message from the scrolls is clear that apocalyptic literature from ancient times should be re-examined as to its origin and purpose. Such an examination will show that this literature invariably appeared during periods of persecution and supreme testing of religious faith and loyalty. Furthermore, the ancient documents reveal that their authors had no intention of providing blueprints for the far distant future. The relevance of this genre of literature must first be seen in terms of the immediate future from the writer's perspective.⁹

Podskalsky makes the same claim as Trevor, approaching the problem from only a slightly different viewpoint.

Although the historical outlook of the book of Daniel and with it Jewish apocalyptic as such cannot be the object of our investigation, it should nevertheless be affirmed that on this, current exegetical research is united: the succession of world empires and their characteristics are not the proper subject matter of the prophecy, but rather the contrast between human history [Weltgeschichte] in general and God's rulership, in two eras.¹⁰

Even more basic than the idea that apocalyptic deals with events in the future is the question of whether it deals with objective events in any timeframe (point 1). Rice argues largely in the negative. Starting with short range conditional prophecies he extends his argument to include prophecy of all kinds.

Jonah's experience suggests that the real purpose of conditional prophecy is not to provide information about the future. Conditional prophecy is intended to evoke a positive response to God in the present. Indeed, this is the only way to make sense out of it. . . .¹¹

A salient feature of conditional prophecy needs to be applied to prophecy in general. All prophecy is intended primarily to evoke a positive response to God. God wishes to inculcate a saving relationship. Biblical prophecy is never presented as a source of information for the detached or disinterested observer. It always involves a call to decision. It is always an invitation to respond to God in the present.¹²

Thus, Rice places a minimum of emphasis on any objective informational content about future events in prophecy, not to mention detailed specifications as to when those future events would occur.

I submit that the subject matter of Daniel's prophecies--as opposed to that of his later imitators--is indeed the succession of world empires and their characteristics, but not because God has any independent interest in politics or in the future as such. What concerns God is us and His work of saving us through His Son. In Daniel the Holy Spirit's attention follows that work wherever it may lead in time. Thus, because Christ's first coming was future from Daniel's perspective, events leading up to it and providing a basis for understanding it become the legitimate subject matter of his prophecy. And because Christ's second coming was in the distant future when Daniel lived, he was shown things pertaining to the distant future. What we have here is not evidence of Daniel's interest in the future but of God's timeless interest in Christ. As objective, detailed, political events in any timeframe impact on the latter's work, and the human recipients of His work, those events are of genuine prophetic interest and are included.

Apocalyptic prophecy and history

God is constantly and intimately involved with mankind in history--on a global as well as individual level. Such involvement is the rule and not the exception. As Kaufman has put it, God is not "one who suddenly and unexpectedly rips into human history and existence, tearing it open and leaving a gaping wound."¹³ We do not worship an erratic Being who is with us at some times and not at others.

A corollary of this principle is that God is constantly and intimately involved with mankind in prophecy. The two factors are closely related. Through Daniel God promises an active and ongoing participation in human affairs from the time of His encounter with the prophet, through all the seeming disorder created by human attempts to gain power and force the subservience of others, until the time when Michael at last stands up and brings all such efforts to an unsuccessful conclusion.¹⁴ Note that God's act of initially willing such a result did not "destroy human freedom; rather it set the context in which man's freedom would appear and mature, and what its ultimate destiny would be."¹⁵ Thus, prophecy is an expression, not of coercion, but of the divine will to be involved with and close to mankind. It is the natural counterpart of God's involvement in human history, from which He is never absent.

In such a context it would be incongruous to apply Dan 11:21-35, for example, to a very limited span of past time and then apply vss. 36-45 to an even more limited span of future time with deafening silence settling over the two and a half thousand years in between. It might be felt that the history of the mid-second century B.C. is so accurately described in Dan 11 that no other serious historical explanation is available--that history demands the former island of fulfillment and belief demands the latter. This is not the case. An alternative exists which corresponds to the breadth

and level of significance one might expect from an inspired analysis of earth's last 2500 years of history. There is a rich dividend of insight to be gained from making the historicist assumption that various parts of Dan 2, 7, 8-9, and 10-12, in some facet of their bearing on the plan of salvation, have been in process of fulfillment--in their primary significance--during every era of history since Daniel. In this model there is no gap, nor any need for one. God's constant presence with us in history is matched by His constant presence with us in prophecy.

The origin of apocalyptic reconsidered

The role of Christ in Daniel's prophecies is not an incidental matter. His presence here, as elsewhere, has broad implications. We explore one of them below.

Bruce William Jones remarks that "The universality [of apocalyptic] is apparent in that (1) the whole world and not just Israel is included within the story, and (2) that human events from beginning to end are covered."¹⁶ This is only partly true. As the same author points out elsewhere, "Von Rad traced the roots of apocalyptic to wisdom literature rather than to prophecy on the grounds that wisdom and apocalyptic share a disinterest in the past."¹⁷ While Daniel's prophecies take in heaven and earth as regards space (vss. 40-45), they do not include all ages of history from beginning to end as regards time.¹⁸ They look only to the future and not to the past.

Three very significant facts about Daniel are best accounted for by assuming that his prophecies are christocentric, i.e., that they focus on the work of Christ in a later age. The three points are (1) Daniel's breadth of spatial perspective which encompasses heaven and earth, (2) his apparent interest in the future coupled with a lack of interest in the past, and (3) the fact that his visions were conveyed primarily in a written rather than spoken form.

As regards Daniel's breadth of spatial perspective, Christ was to come to earth (9:24-27; 11:22), return to heaven (8:11, 25; 7:13-14), and then come back to earth again (12:1-3). As regards Daniel's one-sided interest in the future, Christ's first coming, priestly ministry, and second coming were all future at the time he wrote. And as regards the fact that Daniel's prophecies were not given orally, since Christ's earthly ministry and later priestly work in heaven would not begin until a time in the then distant future there would be no need to give urgent spoken messages concerning them (8:26; 12:8-10). Christ's first and second comings, as well as His personal priestly ministry in the time between them, were for future generations to experience rather than Daniel's own.

It would be reasonable for a condensed summary of human history, inspired by the God who actively works in history to save mankind, to make some reference to the Saviour through whom that work is carried out. Indeed, such a report could be expected to revolve directly around the Savior's activity and be saturated with implications concerning Him.¹⁹ One example of this is in Dan 11:22 where, at the center of a narrative spanning all of Dan 10-12, there is a reference to Christ as the "prince of the covenant"--swept away by Rome, along with an overwhelming army of others, through a process of judicial murder, on falsified charges of disloyalty to Caesar.²⁰ This reference, though brief, is pivotal to the entire narrative that surrounds it.

In its quiet but pervasive orientation toward Christ Dan 11 is a microcosm of Daniel, and Daniel in turn is a microcosm of Scripture. Note the claim carefully. Daniel is not unusual within the larger body of inspired writings when those writings are taken as a whole. On the contrary, it is representative of their central thrust. And the things that make Daniel apocalyptic are precisely the things that make it representative. The single most important of these is a timeless interest in and focus on the work and person of Christ. That work has a beginning and end. It takes place on earth

as well as in heaven. Its purpose is to defeat Satan, the author of evil. Thus, whereas most of the canonical books are not apocalyptic individually, their cumulative effect is.

Summary

By bringing together the otherwise disparate principles of dependent and independent existence Christ provides a basis for understanding Scriptural unity. It is neither humanity alone nor divinity alone that explains how humanity and divinity can be united, but rather Christ's person which unites them. In the same way, it is not any one of the many literary themes and motifs contained in Scripture that accounts for the underlying unity among them. The solution lies in an entirely different direction. It is Christ Himself, and not any of the literary allusions to Him (much less literary allusions to other things), that ultimately explains how the full spectrum of Scriptural diversity can be said to represent a unified whole.²¹

Daniel's prophecies about distant future events do not illustrate a preoccupation on Daniel's part with the future; they illustrate God's timeless interest in Christ, both of whose advents were still future as Daniel wrote. So Baumgartner, in his concern to emphasize the "eternal will of God,"²² failed to perceive exactly that emphasis in the thing he criticized most violently about Daniel--the latter's willingness to follow Christ as He implemented God's eternal purpose in any timeframe, including the distant future.

The two sets of outlooks and emphases just described are not different from each other, but the same. Daniel gives us in miniature what the entire body of Scripture provides on a larger scale--an overview of God's work to save mankind through Christ.

¹ *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), chap. 2.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

³ See Gerhard F. Hasel, review of *Themes in Old Testament Theology*, by William Dyrness, in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 100 (1981):626. Dyrness sees both Old and New Testaments as a witness to Christ and denies the existence of a theological center within the Old Testament alone. "While there are central themes, no single point can be taken as the center, . . ." (*ibid.*). These positions are correct. It is a separate question whether they have been developed adequately.

⁴ See John 1:1-3 (cf. Gen 1:1; Ps 95:6-7), 1 Cor 10:4 (cf. Deut 32:3-4, 15, 18, 30-31; Ps 95:1), and other similar passages.

⁵ Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Unity of the Bible," *Ministry*, May 1975, p. 9U.

⁶ I take the historical life of Christ as a midpoint rather than an end point in the total Biblical message concerning Him. It was the pre-existent Christ through whom God created the world in the beginning (John 1:1-3), and it was Christ who took the place of fallen humanity on the cross many centuries later (Matt 27:32-56; Mark 15:21-41; Luke 23:26-49; John 19:28-37). But although the canon ends roughly here in history the message of the canon does not. Christ comes again to reclaim those who love Him. "The turning point of all history is the first advent of Jesus Christ. This is the center of the NT's message. It completes the OT's incompleteness and yet moves beyond, to the final eschaton" (Hasel, "Unity," p. 14U). It completes what is past and moves beyond to what is still future.

⁷ Kaiser, *Theology*, p. 30. See Dewey M. Beegle, *Prophecy and Prediction* (Ann Arbor: Pryor Pettengill, 1978), who argues that genuine predictive prophecy does not exist.

⁸ W. Baumgartner, *Das Buch Daniel* (Giessen: Topelmann, 1926), p. 40.

⁹Treuer, *Scrolls*, p. 179.

¹⁰G. Poskalsky, *Byzantinische Reichseschatology*, Münchener Universitäts Schriften, no. 9 (Munich: Fink Verlag, 1972), p. 4.

¹¹Richard Rice, *The Openness of God: The Relationship of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Free Will* (Nashville: Review and Herald, 1980), p. 66.

¹²Ibid., p. 67.

¹³Gordon D. Kaufman, *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (New York: Scribners, 1968), p. 90.

¹⁴Dan 12:1-3.

¹⁵Kaufman, pp. 338-39.

¹⁶"Ideas of History in the Book of Daniel" (Ph.D. dissertation, Graduate Theological Union, 1972), pp. 98-99.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 139.

¹⁸The fragments of 4QpsDan (Pseudo-Daniel) found at Qumran, however, do show an interest in the past. (For a conveniently available reproduction of the text and discussion of the issues surrounding it see A. Mertens, *Das Buch Daniel im Lichte der Texte vom Toten Meer* [Stuttgart, 1971], pp. 42-50.) 4QpsDan exists in three fragments, which were written in Aramaic during the Herodian period. It begins with Noah leaving "the [land of] Lubar" (line 3) and a "tower [whose] height" (line 5) is described in a line now lost. There is a reference to a period of "400 years" (line 10) after which "they all will come forth from Egypt by the hand" of God (lines 11-12)--a clear reference to the exodus. Then after falling under the spell of idolatry Daniel's people are to be given "into the hand of N[e]buchadnezzar king of Ba[b]ylon" (line 17). The four world empires are predicted ("This is the first kingdom," line 23) and we are brought down to the Hellenistic age with a reference to Alexandar Balas ("Balakros," line 25), who made the Hasmonean prince Jonathan high priest and thus completed the process of excluding Zadokite priests from the temple hierarchy (see *ibid.*, p. 47). Finally the writer's attention turns to the eschatological endtime when evil would be destroyed (lines 37-41). Here is apocalyptic in the style Jones has in mind, but note that in regard to the distant past its outlook is radically different from that of canonical Daniel.

¹⁹H. C. Lacey, July 7, 1919, Bible Conference, Archives, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Washington, D.C., p. 54, says by way of apologizing for physical weariness, "This is pretty heavy wading, and I feel it is also heavy for you. . . . Yet I think we ought to remember that this is God's word, and if he has chosen to give us these dry details [in Dan 11], it is because we should learn some lesson from them." I submit that there are no dry details in Dan 11. The chapter deals with major turning points in history and has a pervasive sense of goal direction as it leads to the first advent of Christ in 11:22 and to the second in 12:1.

²⁰See John 18:28-45; 19:12-16.

²¹Consider the following examples: Christ is said to be the Agent of creation (John 1:1-3; cf. Gen 1:1), the great self-existent I AM (John 8:58; cf. Exod 3:14), the One who led the Exodus out of Egypt (1 Cor 10:4; cf. Deut 32:4, 15, 18, 30-31), Israel's rightful Bridegroom or Husband (Matt 9:15; John 3:27; 2 Cor 11:2; cf. Isa 62:5; Jer 2:31-32; Hos 2:16), and the One who brings the present world order to an end (Matt 21:44; cf. Dan 2:44-45). Furthermore, Christ is typified by the entire succession of Davidic kings (Matt 22:41-46) and Aaronic priests (Heb 8:1-2). The broad motifs of rule and of worship are here brought together. The motif of covenant is personified by Christ, who is Himself the basis for God's continued relationship with mankind and of man's right relationship with God (see Col 1:19-20). The motif of promise is also personified by Christ, who inherits on behalf of His people all the good things God has to offer (Gal 3:16; Heb 1:2). In addition the motif of rest is personified by Christ, who had no intellectual or moral points of difference with His Father and offers this same rest or peace to us (Matt 11:28-30; John 14:27; Heb 4:6-11). The motif of restoration is personified by Christ, who by His doing and dying won back for humanity everything Adam had originally lost (1 Cor 15:22, 26). And the list could be extended indefinitely. One further example is

that Christ is the personification of God on the one hand and of all Israel (all mankind) on the other--simultaneously deserving and rendering perfect worship.

No mere literary motif could bring together so many strands of biblical thought as Christ does in the examples listed above.

²²Baumgartner, p. 40.