The Book of Daniel and the Twenty-First-Century Religious Bible Student

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The ways of Providence are mysterious, and for this reason I have difficulty explaining how I first came to study the book of Daniel. Nonetheless, for over a decade I have found myself returning repeatedly to this fascinating book and finding within it issues that continue to seize my attention. I believe that the study of Bible, especially the book of Daniel, mandates reference to all the various branches of modern biblical scholarship, in the spirit of the search for “new contextual interpretations that emerge daily” (Rashbam, Gen. 37:2). This scholarship, however, poses a formidable challenge to a reader connected to the world of traditional Jewish exegesis.

I shall begin with a survey of several central themes in the study of the book of Daniel where the religious approach is in conflict with the conclusions of biblical criticism. I will then present the ways in which I have chosen to utilize this encounter and what I ultimately gleaned from it.

A. The Conclusions of Biblical Scholarship on the Book of Daniel

**Chronology and Literary Framework of the Book**

Let us begin with the premise, accepted in biblical scholarship, that the work at hand is not one book, but two: the Book of Tales (ch. 1–6) and the Book of Visions (ch. 7–12),[[1]](#endnote-1) the former of which predates the latter. The literary differences between these two books have given rise to the widespread assumption that several authors of different periods contributed to the formation of this work.[[2]](#endnote-2) The chapters of the *Book of Tales*, which bear a literary similarity to the literature of the early Second Temple period,[[3]](#endnote-3) are believed to predate the *Book of Visions*. Scholars are divided as to when the texts were written, who combined them, and for what purpose.

The documents discovered in the Judean Dessert, which include passages from the Book of Daniel as well as additional texts with similar content, such as *Tefilat Nabunaid* (The Prayer of Nabunaid) (4Q242),[[4]](#endnote-4) and *Sefer ha-‛Anakim* (The Book of Giants) (4Q530),[[5]](#endnote-5) as well as scholarship on post-biblical literature such as *1 Enoch,* pose challenges of their own to the traditional perception of the book. The pronounced mix of parallels and contrasts between these texts has brought scholars to regard them collectively as "Daniel literature" from which the canonical work ultimately emerged.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Studies of post-biblical literature led to a deeper understanding of the apocalyptic genre, a collection of works authored beginning in the third century bce in which the book of Daniel typically is assigned. This categorization reinforces the conclusion that the book is far removed from the Babylonian period that is its setting.

Many scholars have applied linguistic evidence in efforts to date the book, which is written in Hebrew and Aramaic with an assortment of Persian and Greek loanwords. However, scholars who have attempted such an approach have reached differing conclusions. There were those who concluded from the study of the Aramaic passages that the language used was an early form of Aramaic while others concluded that it was a later dialect.[[7]](#endnote-7) Studies of the Persian and Greek loanwords have similarly led to disparate conclusions.[[8]](#endnote-8)

The general scholarly consensus is that the book of Daniel was written before the Hasmonean Revolt and completed no later than 164 bce. There is evidence from the First Book of Maccabees that the content of the book—including the Hebrew names of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (ch. 1), the story of their salvation from the fiery furnace (ch. 3), and the story of the salvation of Daniel from the lions’ den (ch. 6)—was well-known to the authors.[[9]](#endnote-9)

1. Some include chapter 7 in the Book of Tales; see: J. J. Collins, *Daniel:* *A Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, ed. F. M. Cross (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 24–29. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Hartman and DiLella argue that four different authors wrote the four visions, the last of whom, the author of chapter 9, left his mark on all the visions. In contrast, Haran argues that one author wrote all of the visions and reedited the *Book of Tales*. See L. F. Hartman and A. A. DiLella, *The Book of Daniel* (New York: Doubleday, 1978), 13–14; M. Haran, *Ha-ʼAsufah Ha-Mikraʽit* (The biblical collection), vol. 1–2, (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1996), 116. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. E.g., Esther and Tobit. See Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 145–148. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For a discussion of the subject, see: E. Eshel, "Possible Sources of the Book of Daniel," in *The Book of Daniel -- Composition and Reception*, ed. J. J. Collins and P.W. Flint (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 387-393. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For a discussion of the connection between this passage and the Throne vision in chapter 7, see: Ryan E. Stokes, "The Throne Visions of Daniel 7, *1 Enoch* 14, and the Qumran Book of Giants (4Q530): An Analysis of Their Literary Relationship," *Dead Sea Discoveries* 15 (2008): 340-358. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See L. T. Stuckenbruck, “Daniel and Early Enoch Traditions in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in *The Book of Daniel: Composition and Reception*, ed. J. J. Collins and P.W. Flint (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 368–386. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See H. H. Rowley, *The Aramaic of the OT* (London: Oxford University Press, 1929), 138; Haran, *Ha-᾽Asufah*, 106. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The Book of Tales contains twenty Persian words, most of which are titles of royal bureaucrats or articles of clothing. There are two Persian words in the Book of Visions. See Haran, *Ha-᾽Asufah* 106–108. Some scholars see the Greek words scattered throughout the Book of Tales as further proof that the book was written in the Hellenistic period, while others have argued that as these words are few and mostly from the field of music (such as “*psanterin, somphonia*,” denoting psaltery and the bagpipe, in 3:5), they cannot be seen as evidence for a late dating of the Book of Tales. See Haran, *Ha-᾽Asufah* 120; S. R. Driver, *Daniel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), 118–119. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See 1 Maccabees 1:59–60. The First Book of Maccabees is dated to approximately 100 bce. The argument that the author of that book knew the Daniel tales but not his visions was refuted by the findings in Qumran. See Collins, *Daniel*, 72–73; Haran, *Ha-᾽Asufah* 51–121. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)