THE BOOK OF DANIEL: PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY OR ESCHATOLOGICAL FICTION?

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Master of Arts in Philosophy

by

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Argument

This master's thesis argues that the canonical Book of Daniel is an example of post-exilic Jewish priestcrafts' falsification of Jewish and world history through the development of a new Biblical genre, namely, apocalyptic. Friedrich Nietzsche would very likely have taken this to be an example of the sort of falsification he refers to in the Geneology of Morals as growing out of a morality of resentment.¹

The canonical Book of Daniel purports to be a theological philosophy of history received as divine revelation. This master's thesis argues that it is a literary forgery redacted from an earlier, pre-existent literary work celebrating the passing of world sovereignty from Babylon to Persia which marked the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophesy. The canonical Book of Daniel, it is argued, contains historical and scholarly inaccuracies that were deliberate in order to satisfy the revisionist purpose of the redactors.

All Biblical quotations and references that appear in this thesis are from The New English Bible.
Introduction

A distinction must be made between prophetic eschatology and apocalyptic eschatology. Eschatology per se is a consideration of the "last things" of history. Ancient Jewish prophetic eschatology was concerned with the outcome of specific historical circumstances of the Jewish people relative to Gentile powers. The prophecies of Jer. 51:33-35, Isa. 14:12-15, Ezek. 37:1-14, which point to the fall of Nebuchadnezzar's world empire culminating in the repatriation of the exilic Jewish people in Jerusalem and the restoration of the temple in the sixth century B.C. (2 Chron. 36:20-23, Ezra 1:1-2), are examples of prophetic eschatology.

On the other hand, Old Testament apocalyptic eschatology is the purported prophesy of world history once and for all. This type of Jewish eschatology is a surrealized conception of world history begat by a defeated and subjugated people of the post-exilic era of ancient Israel. This is the intended point made by Friedrich Nietzsche, in his work titled The Antichrist, regarding the Jewish priesthood of the post-exilic period:

The Jews are the strangest people in world history because, confronted with the question whether to be or not to be, they chose, with a perfectly uncanny deliberateness, to be at any price: that price was the radical falsification of all nature, all naturalness, all reality, of the whole inner world as well as the outer.
The instinct of resentment had turned into genius in the Jewish priesthood of the post-exilic period. They ". . . had to invent another world from whose point of view the [noble morality] affirmation of life appeared as evil, as the reprehensible as such."\(^3\)

**Theories of Interpretation**

In a commentarial literature so vast as that which has been gathered in two millennia around the interpretations of the canonical Book of Daniel, this writer cannot have read more than a fragment of the materials. However, this writer has tried to acquaint himself with the positions of the various branches of thought on Daniel.

There are two main positions held when interpreting the Book of Daniel. The first may be called the critical approach which holds that the Book of Daniel, as found in the canon, is the product of the Maccabean age (late second century B.C.). The second approach, the anticritical, holds that the Book of Daniel originated from the pen of Daniel himself in the sixth century B.C. Of course these two main delineations of interpretation are not monolithic but contain diverse interpretations as well.

The earliest proponent of the critical approach is the Pagan scholar Porphyry (third century A.D.), who held the Book to be a pseudo-prophesy written after the success of the Maccabean forces.\(^4\) A twentieth century A.D. scholar,
H. H. Rowley, is a proponent of the critical approach. However, unlike Porphyry, who found no factual errors in Daniel, Rowley found several. The most significant factual errors he identified concerned the fictitious Darius the Mede and the historically incorrect interposing of a Median kingdom between the fall of the Neo-Babylonian empire and the rise of the Persian empire of Cyrus the Great.

The anti-critical approach that defends the sixth century B.C. date for the origin of the entire canonical Book of Daniel finds among its earliest defenders some of the Christian writers such as Jerome. A modern proponent of this approach is J. D. Wilson (1906), in his work titled Did Daniel Write Daniel?

There is a third tradition of scriptural interpretive theory that is based upon the Zohar and Kabbalah. In Isaiah Tishby's work titled The Wisdom of The Zohar, he states that according to the Zohar

... the physical cosmos is seen as a battleground in the war between the divine forces and the powers of "the other side." Sometimes evil triumphs over good, and according to the most extreme interpretation this world is the actual domain of "the other side."

This combat motif permeates the Book of Daniel not only at the political level but at the theological and personal levels as well.
According to Arthur Green, editor of Jewish Spirituality From the Bible Through the Middle Ages, "... multiple interpretation of scripture leaves each level of interpretation intact. And this is indeed in complete harmony with what reading or practicing allegory is all about."\(^9\) In this third interpretive approach to scriptural texts there is presupposed an exoteric husk that conceals an esoteric kernel. The devout student of scripture seeks the kernel(s) within. However, the author of this thesis has not included this third interpretive approach to the canonical Book of Daniel because its intent is primarily devotional rather than analytical.

The approach of this thesis writer to the canonical Book of Daniel is one of continual pondering not only over the text of Daniel but over the commentarial literature as well. Although this thesis writer can definitely be placed in the critical tradition, he believes his approach is more inclusive than any others found in the commentarial literature.

The uniqueness of this thesis is that it proposes a pre-existent literary work dating back to the late sixth century B.C. that was used as a scion to rework a new text (the canonical Book of Daniel) as a response to the political and theological crisis of the Jews in the
second century B.C. under the persecution of the Syrian prince Antiochus Epiphanes IV. The notion of a pre-existent eschatological literary work is the imaginative requirement (explanatory theoretical model) which best explains and accounts for a variety of anomalies in the canonical Book of Daniel.