INTRODUCTION TO DANIEL 7 – 12

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Last year we read the opening six chapters of the Book of Daniel. Mostly in Aramaic, they describe the story of Daniel and his companions, exiled in Babylon as children, hand-picked for their physical beauty and intellectual gifts, educated for a special role in the royal court, 'to stand before the king.' Daniel rises to a special place in this arena, not only because of his mastery of the language and diplomatic skills, but because of his ability to interpret the dreams of successive Babylonian rulers.

This year we will be dealing with the last six chapters, a first-person account by Daniel about the apocalyptic visions he himself experienced, with significance for the future unfolding of history. But among the difficulties for readers of the book is how best to understand the role of Daniel himself, and how his book should be classified.

In *Matthew 24:15* Jesus refers to Daniel as a prophet and he is so listed amongst other prophets in Christian Bibles. Also Josephus in his *Antiquities* (*10.11.7*) classified him in this way. But the Babylonian Talmud in a discussion about prophets, recorded in two separate places, distinguishes Daniel from contemporary prophets. (*b Sanhedrin 93b; b Megillah 3a*) The discussion is based on *Daniel 10:7* 'And I, Daniel, alone saw the vision, and the men who were with me did not see the vision; and a great trembling fell upon them, and they fled to hide.' The Talmud asks who were these men? And responds that they were Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, the last of the prophets listed in the Hebrew Bible. The discussion suggests that in some ways these prophets were greater than Daniel, but in other ways Daniel was greater than them. How so? They were greater than him because they were prophets, who were charged with bringing the word of God to the people, but they were lesser than him because they could not see the vision that Daniel could see but could only feel the dread evoked by its presence. Here the prophets are distinguished by the fact that their task was to bring the word of God directly to the people, as envoys from God and sometimes as intercessors with God on behalf of the people. Perhaps the seeming absence of this direct interactive role played by Daniel was one of the considerations that kept the Book of Daniel out of the list of prophetic books in the Hebrew Bible and instead included him amongst the third section, the *Ketuvim*, the Writings.

There may be historical reasons why the Book was located here. Daniel is a very late book, and one suggestion is that the list of Prophets may already have been canonised. However, because of this surprising location of the Book of Daniel, I thought it might be helpful to remind us of the difference between the three divisions of the Hebrew Bible, *Torah*, *Nevi'im*, *Ketuvim*, and their

respective significance. The initial letters produce the acrostic 'TaNaKh', pronounced 'Tanach', which is commonly used today to stand for the Hebrew Bible as a whole.[1]

The Torah, in the first instance, refers to the Five Books of Moses. Later the term will be expanded to include the whole of the Hebrew Bible, then gradually all the teachings and debates, legal and midrashic material that derive from the study of Torah. But regarding the first five books, they have a unique significance in traditional Jewish thought. They represent the unmediated word of God, spoken directly to Moses and transmitted unchanged to us. Such is the unique nature of this divine origin that even things that we might consider to be contradictions, inconsistences or evidence of different editorial additions had to be understood, traditionally, as challenges to the interpreter to try to discover the true dimension and intention of God's word. The rabbinic tradition includes discussions amongst prominent rabbis about just how far one should go in seeking to understand and interpret the text. A famous debate centres on two great teachers Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael. For Akiva not only every noun and verb but even grammatical particles like '*et*'[2] and '*gam*'[3] suggest that one should discern some additional, even legal, meaning, because of their presence. His opponent Rabbi Ishmael is closer to what we might prefer to think of as a more rational scholarly approach. His principle was '*Dibra Torah kil'shon b'nei adam*' (*Bava metzia 31b*) 'Words of Torah are expressed in human language', that is to say: even God is forced to work within the constraints of Hebrew Grammar!

One of Akiva's students, in the time-honoured way of students, decided to go through the entire Torah and explain every '*et*' and '*gam*' according to Akiva's teaching. But he had to give up when he got to *Deuteronomy 6:5* and the verse '*v'ahavta* ***et*** *Adonai Elohecha*', 'you shall love '***et***' the Lord your God'. He could not discover what one could love more than God. So he gave up and argued that all the spiritual credit he had acquired for the task he had undertaken, he would have even more credit for admitting that he had been wrong. When Akiva heard this, he said: 'The solution is obvious. You should also love the teachers who bring you to the love of God!'

But however they addressed the Torah, the underlying principle was that it represented the direct, unmediated self-revelation of God to human beings.

That issue of mediation in the transmission of God's word, becomes of particular importance when we contrast the second section, the *Nevi'im*, the Prophets, with the Torah itself. Here too there is a rabbinic phrase that reflects an important principle guiding how we are to understand their message. '*Ein sh'nei nevi'im mitnab'im b'signon echad*', 'No two prophets prophesy in the same style.' (*Sanhedrin 89a*) One understanding of this is that the words of God, spoken by the prophets, are influenced by the experience, language skills, personal history and specific identity of the prophet. That is to say, unlike the pure, direct divine word of the Torah, prophecy is always affected by the nature of the vulnerable human being 'who mediates the word of God'. That is why, for example prophets can make mistakes when their personal feelings, assumptions or motivations affect the expression of their message. An example is when King David informs the Prophet Nathan of his wish to build a Temple to his God. Nathan's immediate response is to say 'Everything which is in your heart, go and do it for the Lord is with you! (*2 Samuel 7:3*). But, the very next verse begins: 'That night ...' and then there is an interruption in the text, followed by '... the word of God came to Nathan saying: Go and tell my servant David "Are you going to build a

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1 This term was first used in the mediaeval period work of the Masoretic tradition, which standardised the Biblical text. It was helpful for cross-referencing similar words or grammatical forms in different Biblical books. In earlier periods the Hebrew Bible was commonly referred to as *Miqra*, a religious term for 'scripture' that was 'read'. It may be that the modern preference for '*Tanakh*', reflects the preference for having a 'secular' term, rather than a religious one, for scholarly or general use.

2 '*et*' is a grammatical marker that signals that the following word is the specific object of a verb.

3 '*gam*' is a Hebrew word that indicates that something, a word or a topic, is included in addition to something else. So it can be translated as 'also' or a whole range of English terms like 'even', 'too', 'moreover', 'indeed', depending on the context.

house for Me to dwell in?!"'[4] David's enthusiasm and Nathan's personal loyalty have to be put on hold because they do not reflect God's intention. Or consider Samuel's willingness to choose Jesse's firstborn son as the new king to replace Saul, till God had to remind him to stop looking at outward appearances, because God looks to the heart!' (*1 Samuel 16:7*)

Presumably some degree of self-awareness, or self-purification, was an essential part of the Prophet's responsibility so as to ensure that he or she adequately represents the words of God. Failure to do so leads all to easily to the examples in the Hebrew Bible of so-called 'false prophets'. Some of them, as shown by Jeremiah, have become reinforcers of naïve popular hopes or fantasies, for example, that the Temple will never be destroyed as it is God's 'house'.[5] Others simply become propagandists for those in political power.[6] The point about this central section of the Hebrew Bible is that the prophet experiences the meeting place between divine revelation and human interpretation and action, and the inevitable tension to be found there.

The third section, the *Ketuvim*, appears to be a somewhat miscellaneous collection, perhaps of things that could not be easily located elsewhere. But they are all considered to come under the category of 'inspired by the *ruach ha-kodesh*, the holy spirit'. That means that each of the writers or composers has within him or herself an intimation of the divine, perhaps experienced as the otherness and importance of feelings; as the drives and aspirations within, longing to find expression. This spirit may be addressed to God, in distress or supplication, as in the Psalms and the Book of Lamentations; it may reflect the hunger for understanding, knowledge and wisdom as in Job and Ecclesiastes, (*Kohelet*); or the urges of passion and the desire for physical union with the other, of the Song of Songs; or even the pious hope of correcting mistakes or sins of previous generations by seeking to re-imagine history, as in the Books of Esther and Ruth. All of these in their variety have something in common. If the Torah represents the self-revelation of God to human beings; the *Ketuvim* represent our human self-revelation to God.

So, perhaps *Ketuvim* is indeed the home for life-experience recalled over time; for visions revealed even if never fully understood; for discipline and duty steadfastly undertaken; for personal integrity and service to others during a lifetime endured in an alien world. If that is the case, perhaps these are the kind of human dimensions or qualities that help make *Ketuvim* the place where Daniel belongs.

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[4] *Psalm 132:1-5* makes a delightful comment on David's dangerous willingness to get carried away by his enthusiastic vows!'

[5] *See Jeremiah 14:13; 21:16-18.*

[6] *1 Kings 22:5-36.*