

Reformation History

8. Daniel

The Protestant reformers had different strategies for reading the book of Daniel, as we shall see. Some focused more on the moral qualities of the young man who preserved his faith while in exile, while other writers looked to the book to explain the unfolding of divine history. One of the most influential of the Reformed tradition was the Basel reformer Johannes Oecolampadius, who died in 1531. Following the patristic and medieval traditions, Oecolampadius divided Daniel into two parts, the historical and the prophetic. The interpretation was by no means new, but reflective of most approaches taken by the Protestant reformers, including Martin Luther. The historical assessment of the book sought to understand the events described in the book, but this proved no easy endeavor and there was considerable disagreement among interpreters. Protestants were not wholly in harmony, for example, on questions such as the existence of a second Nebuchadnezzar, who Cyrus was, and the reign of Darius the Mede, to name just a few points of discussion.

Early in his career, Martin Luther had little time for the eschatological books of the Bible, reflected in his negative attitude towards Revelation. However, by the late 1520s, as he looked on the course of the Reformation and the Turkish invasions of Europe, themes concerning the end times increasingly took his attention. Luther turned to the book of Daniel as a way of understanding the events that were unfolding around him. As the Turks lay siege to the city of Vienna in 1529, Luther associated the Ottoman forces with the little horn of Daniel 7. For the Wittenberg reformer, the advance of the Turkish forces, which many believed would overwhelm

the German lands, was God's scourge of the unfaithful, just as God had punished the errant Jews. The role of antichrist had always been central to Luther's understanding of his revolt against the Catholic Church. From an early stage he spoke of the papacy as antichrist, but increasingly he associated antichrist also with the Turkish invaders. What was the relationship between the two? Drawing from Daniel, Revelation, and Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians, Luther saw the papacy and the Turks as closely related. The popes were the "spirit" of antichrist, while the "Turks" were the flesh. In reading Daniel 8, Luther saw Antiochus Epiphanes as the forerunner of the great antichrist who was to be revealed in the church.

For Luther, the book of Daniel was to be preferred to Revelation for interpretations about the events of his age. Contrary to what we might expect, in his 1529 preface he argued that Daniel with all its prophecies of disaster was in fact a source of comfort to all Christians in the last times. Two chapters in Daniel were especially important for Luther, who saw chapter eleven as the transition from the description of past historical events to prophecy about the future. In particular, he found in chapter eleven both references to the popes as antichrist and the promise of the Gospel. Remarkably, Luther devoted even more attention to chapter 12 than to the rest of the book altogether. At great length he sought to reveal the malign character of the papacy, but, as was his style, ended on the revelation of promise, which was the certain appearance of Jesus Christ to save the people from their misery. Scholars have pointed to inconsistencies in Luther's interpretation of the symbols found in Daniel. This problem is found in the work of all the reformers, as it

was in their medieval and patristic sources. Nevertheless, Luther's writings on the topic were hugely popular and influential as he sought to place the Reformation in its eschatological framework. Everywhere he found in Daniel confirmation that the Church was in its last days that antichrist had been unmasked, the people were being punished for their apostasy, and that Christ's return was imminent. These beliefs are captured in his 1530 preface to the book:

From this we see what a splendid, great man Daniel was, before both God and the world. First before God, for he, above all other prophets, had this special prophecy to give, that is, his work was not only to prophesy of Christ, like the others, but also to count the times and years, determine them, and fix them with certainty. Moreover, he arranges the kingdoms with their doings, down to the fixed time of Christ, in the right succession, and does it so finely that one cannot make a mistake about the coming of Christ, unless one does it willfully, as do the Jews; and from that point on till the Last Day, he depicts the condition and state of the Roman Empire and the affairs of the world in such a way that no one can make a mistake about the Last Day or have it come upon him unawares, unless he does it willfully, like our Epicureans. (Luther, 1530)

John Calvin lectured and preached on Daniel during the 1550s when his authority in Geneva was growing following the defeat of his opponents. Calvin would lecture on the text extemporaneously, working through the chapters in order without a prepared text. His assistants would write down pretty much exactly what he said, and his work on Daniel was published in 1561. For Calvin, as for Luther and the other reformers, Daniel was a paragon of faith, the person who had maintained his integrity during exile and the temptations of a foreign court. As such, Calvin saw

Daniel's exemplary conduct in exile as a model for those who had been forced to flee their native France on account of persecution. Many of those exiles were living in Geneva and would have been listening to Calvin speak on the biblical book. Indeed, Calvin dedicated his lectures to the people of France who were suffering persecution for their faith. The timing of Calvin's lectures on Daniel was crucial; for just as they appeared from the press, his native France was plunged into a religious war in which Protestants and the Catholics killed one another in substantial numbers. It was not difficult for Calvin to see in these events the consummation of time.

Again, following other reformers, such as Oecolampadius and Luther, Calvin focused on the moral and prophetic elements in Daniel. In addition to Daniel's conduct, the book revealed God's plans for the future of God's people. However, it has been noted that Calvin took a different approach to interpreting the book of Daniel from earlier reformers. Luther, as we have seen, read Daniel in an eschatological manner, mapping the events of the book onto present times. This had the effect of associating the four monarchies spoken of in Daniel with a universal history that embraced the sixteenth century.

Calvin offered a different take on Daniel, one that occupied a minority position among Reformation interpreters, although he shared much in common with other Protestants. Let us take, for example, the four empires that appear in Nebuchadnezzar's dream in Daniel 2 and then in Daniel's vision of the four beasts in chapter 7. Traditional readings placed these empires as those of Babylon, Persian, Macedonia, and Rome. Calvin argued, following the tradition, that Rome was the very worst of the kingdoms, but that its rule came to an end after Nero when

foreigners took control. Although Rome was to continue in a form, it was no longer the great kingdom seen by Nebuchadnezzar. The prophecy of the kingdoms, according to Calvin, was about a period of time that had come and gone. Its purpose was to encourage the Jewish faithful that a messiah would come.

Calvin's treatment of the Roman Empire continued with his interpretation of the small horn of the beast, which Luther had associated with the papacy and the Turks. Calvin rejected this line of thought and pointed to the horn as representing the consolidation of Roman power from Julius Caesar. It was the Roman emperors' abuse of power and usurpation of the republic that was being referenced in Daniel, so Calvin argued. It was the emperors who persecuted Christians. Calvin's position was to demonstrate that the prophecies had already come to pass: it was to strengthen the faith of the Christians while they were being persecuted by the Romans and, in the book, to confirm to David that the prophecy of the kingdoms was being fulfilled.

Another significant place where Calvin differed from other Protestant interpretations was in the prophecy concerning Christ, found in Daniel 7:13-14, when the Son of Man came to the Ancient of Days. Most Christian interpreters saw this as the fulfillment of Christ's reign with his second coming. Calvin, consistent with his view that the events of Daniel have already taken place, saw the reference as pointing to Christ's first coming. It referred to the establishment of the Word of God and true preaching in the early church.

On the whole, Calvin was not interested in historical calculations and the mapping of future events. In looking at the central aspects in Daniel of the four

kingdoms, the seventy weeks, and antichrist, Calvin looked to the past for their occurrence, not to the present or future dates. Above all, he saw the book of Daniel as consolation for ancient peoples. All the prophecies have been fulfilled in Christ's first advent, demonstrating God's care for God's people through the ages. Calvin believed that these events should be understood in their various historical contexts.

Although the Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century could look at the book of Daniel in various ways, they arrived at the same final conclusion: It was a pastoral work that demonstrated that God had been with God's people through all the ages and would remain with them right to the end.

Questions for discussion:

Why is the book of Daniel open to such diverging interpretations as we see in Luther and Calvin?

How should the Bible be read: as explaining the past, or as predicting the future?

Both, neither?

What makes Daniel so susceptible to being interpreted as a prediction of the end of time?

For further reading:

Barbara Pitkin, "Prophecy and History in Calvin's Lectures on Daniel (1561)" PDF provided.