

DANIEL: A BOOK OF SIGNIFICANT REVERSALS

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Recent studies on the OT book of Daniel have underscored the literary beauty of that book's narrative and prophetic sections.¹ Among the literary devices used is the "reversal," a term which in common parlance is frequently understood to indicate an adverse change of fortune. In biblical usage, reversals are broader in intent and scope than this, however, for they frequently serve as a literary device more akin to the dictionary definition of "reversal" as "causing to move or face in an opposite direction."² Moreover, in the Bible, reversals are used, as well, as a means for producing a heightened emphasis.

The book of Daniel is especially rich in its use of reversals. These occur with respect to both thematic and linguistic features. In this brief essay only the thematic reversals are treated, but I hope at a later time to present also a brief study on reversals in language expression.

1. *Thematic Reversals in the Historical Section of Daniel*

Thematic reversals appear in the book of Daniel in both its historical section (chaps. 1-6) and its prophetic section (chaps. 7-12). We shall examine these sections in turn.

The book of Daniel opens in chapter 1 with the record of a Babylonian triumph over Judah, Yahweh's chosen nation, in the

¹Among basic works on this topic is J. C. Greenfield, "Early Aramaic Poetry," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University* 11 (1979): 45-51. Other discussions on the topic include A. Lenglet, "La structure littéraire de Daniel 2-7," *Bib* 53 (1972): 169-190; W. H. Shea, "Further Literary Structures in Daniel 2-7: An Analysis of Daniel 5, and the Broader Relation within Chapters 2-7," *AUSS* 23 (1985): 277-295; and P. W. Coxon, "The 'List' Genre and Narrative Style in the Court Tales of Daniel," *JSOT* 35 (1986): 95-121.

²See, e.g., Webster's Third New International Dictionary, s.v. "reversal."

late seventh century B.C. At this time, captives were taken from Palestine and led into Babylonian exile. This exile (Dan 1:2) to "Shinar" (that is, Babylonia) represents, in fact, a reversal of events recorded in Gen 11:31-12:7, wherein Abraham left the land of Shinar and eventually reached Palestine, where he entered into covenant with Yahweh. Now, with the covenant broken by the descendants of Abraham, there was—by means of a captivity—a movement back to Shinar.

In both the official and popular thinking of the Ancient Near East, Nebuchadnezzar's carrying of the Jewish people, their king, and the holy vessels of the temple in Jerusalem to Babylon would mean that the chief Babylonian god Marduk had triumphed over Yahweh. In view of this, it would seem that a major purpose of the historical-apocalyptic book of Daniel was to prove the opposite, answering specifically—and in the negative—the question of whether Yahweh could be defeated by exile, as could Chemosh, Milkom, and other deities (cf., e.g., Jer 48:7 and 49:3). Indeed, throughout the first five chapters of the book of Daniel, Yahweh repeatedly triumphs over Marduk, as evidenced by the triumphs of the Hebrew captives over their captors. In fact, in several of these chapters we find that even the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar finally capitulates to the God of his Jewish captives—at least to the extent of giving praise to Yahweh.

"Reversal" in Chapter 1

In Daniel 1 we immediately encounter the story of the four young Hebrew captives—Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah—who gave allegiance to Yahweh and his covenant rather than to Nebuchadnezzar and to the latter's table.³ Instead of choice food (*pat-bag*) and strong drink, these four Hebrew youths opted for a simple diet of "seed" (*zēro'im*, sometimes translated "vegetables") and of natural water (v. 12). This diet was officially approved for them on a ten-day trial basis (vv. 12-14). At the end of the ten days, the result was exactly opposite to what was expected by the royal supervisor, for the Hebrew captives were

³For J. Baldwin the words, "from the king's table," are an expression of allegiance to the king and dependance on him and his supplies. To support her point she quotes Dan 11:27 (*Daniel* [Wheaton, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978], 83). In the ancient Near East and in biblical usage, covenantal connotations were present in the sharing of a meal (cf. Gen 31:54).

"better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king's rich food" (v. 15).⁴ Because of this result, these four young Hebrews were then permitted to continue their vegetable diet (v. 16). At "the end of the 'time'" (v. 18; that is, at the end of the three years mentioned in v. 5), when they were examined by the king, Nebuchadnezzar "found them ten times better" in "wisdom and understanding . . . than all the magicians and enchanters" in his entire realm (v. 20).⁵

The reversal that occurs in this case involves a play on the number "ten." The Hebrew youths had a "ten-day" test with a special diet and they later demonstrated a "tenfold" superiority in mental acumen when examined by the king himself at the end of their three-year training period. The first test came at the very beginning of this three-year period of Babylonian education, and the last came at the close of that same period. Moreover, the whole episode reveals that Yahweh was fully able to act in behalf of his faithful ones even in their captivity and distress in Babylon.

"Reversals" in Chapter 2

In the second narrative of the book of Daniel, as recorded in chapter 2, the bankruptcy of Babylonian wisdom, magic, and astrology is made manifest. The wise men of Babylonia who had been trained to decode dreams and to read the future proved totally incapable of doing what they were requested to do by the king: namely, to bring back to Nebuchadnezzar's mind a disturbing dream that he had seen but had forgotten, and to give the meaning of this dream (vv. 1-13). This account of the failure of Babylonia's wise men serves as a foil or backdrop for the main point of the chapter: i.e., Daniel's being brought to the king by Arioch, "the captain of the king's guard," for the purpose of doing precisely what the wise men of Babylonia had miserably failed to do—recall to the king his dream and to give him its interpretation (vv. 15-16, 24-25).⁶ Daniel was, of course, fully successful (vv. 26-45). Yahweh

⁴Quotations from the biblical text are from the RSV.

⁵Daniel may have followed this special diet only for a time, however, since Dan 10:2-3 suggests that meat and wine were later a part of his diet.

⁶There is an apparent discrepancy between chaps. 1 and 2 in that Arioch appears here to make Nebuchadnezzar acquainted with Daniel when in fact Daniel had already in chap. 1 been brought before the king and given significant

was exalted, and Nebuchadnezzar was so impressed that he praised Daniel's God as the "God of gods and Lord of kings, and a revealer of mysteries" (v. 47). The king also made Daniel "ruler over the whole province of Babylon, and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon," giving, at Daniel's request, high offices to Daniel's three companions as well (vv. 48-49).

The major reversal in this episode is found in the fact that Daniel succeeded precisely where Babylon's wise men failed. From this emerged other reversals: a remarkable attitude change on the part of Nebuchadnezzar, and a new and exalted status for Daniel and his three companions, one which gave these captives authority over the Babylonian people who had taken them captive! There may also be a minor reversal in that Daniel was evidently able to spare the lives of the intellectual element of the very people who had made him a captive (not specifically stated in the text, but certainly strongly implied; see, e.g., vv. 15-16, 48).

"Reversals" in Chapter 3

In Daniel 3 we find Nebuchadnezzar transforming the golden head of his dream of chapter 2 into an actual image made totally of gold. All the persons whom he had summoned to the plain of Dura, where this image had been erected, were required by the king to fall down before the image and worship it. The royal decree was that anyone who would fail to do obeisance before this image should immediately be thrown into a fiery furnace (vv. 1-6).

In contrast to all the other imperial officials at the convocation,⁷ the three young Hebrew friends of Daniel dared to

recognition. A close reading of Dan 2:25, however, shows that the problem is simply that Arioch is eager to take credit to himself for having located Daniel and therefore introduces Daniel accordingly. The context in chap. 2 reveals, on the other hand, that the king's behavior towards Daniel was what would normally be expected for a person he already knew. In fact, it appears that Daniel had free access to the throne (2:16, 26). Some interesting contrasts and comparisons may be mentioned here: Arioch's designation of Daniel as one of the exiles from Judah is far different from that made by Nebuchadnezzar in 4:8,9. Daniel was later considered in the same negative way by Belshazzar (5:13) and again still later by Persian officials (6:13).

⁷The repetitive lists that occupy much of the narrative strongly suggest the art of persuasion in the ancient world. See Coxon, 107-117. As to the persons assembled on the Plain of Dura on this occasion, see William H. Shea, "Daniel 3: Extra-Biblical Texts and the Convocation on the Plain of Dura," *AUSS* 20 (1982): 30-32.

disobey the king's command. When thrown into the furnace that had been fired to sevenfold heat, these Hebrews were, however, unharmed by the fire. Rather, they were now accompanied in the furnace by a divine being (vv. 19-25), whom the king described as being "like a son of the gods" (v. 25) and as God's "angel" (v. 28).⁸

The entire episode of chapter 3 may, in fact, be considered as a reversal. The major theme is one in which Nebuchadnezzar at the outset commanded false obeisance and at the close praised the God of Daniel, describing him as "the Most High God" (v. 26).⁹ A further, and somewhat minor, reversal occurs in the fact that in contrast to the good outcome for the three faithful Hebrews, the strong men who threw them into the superheated furnace died from the fire blast.

"Reversals" in Chapter 4

The fourth episode in the book of Daniel is presented as an autobiographical report by Nebuchadnezzar. In Daniel 4 the king turns into a wild beast because of his pride (vv. 10-33). This type of reversal is common in the OT and is used in such major instances as the fate of ancient Egypt and its Pharaoh in connection with the Israelite exodus from Egypt, and it is also used for the fall of Babylon (cf., e.g., Isa 13:19-22; 14:12, 18-21; etc.).

At the end of the narrative of Dan 4, the king, after his restoration to health and to the throne, shifted his focus from himself and from Babylon, the city of which he had been the proud builder (see vv. 28-30), to the most high God. Yahweh he now praised in most glowing terms (vv. 34-37).

Thus, in the episode of Dan 4, we find two main reversals. The first pertains to Nebuchadnezzar's physical and temporal condition—his loss of health and throne, followed by his restoration in both respects. The second relates to his attitude change that resulted as a consequence—from pride over his own accomplishments to an expression of honor for the God of heaven.

The further point should not be missed that in this episode Nebuchadnezzar's insanity had been the theme of a dream, and

⁸An "angel" is mentioned also in another rescue operation in Daniel—that of Daniel in the lions' den (Dan 6:22).

⁹It is evident that Nebuchadnezzar even considers himself as protector of the most high God. See P. R. Davies, *Daniel* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1985), 84.

that this dream was interpreted to him by Daniel after Babylon's wise men had failed to accomplish the feat. Thus we have once again the same kind of dynamic that we noticed in connection with chapter 2.

"Reversal" in Chapter 5

In Dan 5 we find a sudden transition from the time of Nebuchadnezzar to the time of Babylonia's defeat by the Median and Persian armies. Several reigns of Babylonian kings have been skipped over, as we come to the last king of Babylon, Belshazzar, the monarch who was in the city itself on the night of Babylon's capture. That night turned out to be the final one for both his rule and his life.

This king apparently bore the very same Babylonian name as that for Daniel, Daniel's name being given as "Belteshazzar" in v. 12 (compare chapters 1 and 4 as well). The name "Belteshazzar" seems to have been an intentionally corrupted form of "Belshazzar," as has been pointed out by William H. Shea.¹⁰ In spite of the name similarity of these two persons, their characters stood in striking contrast. Belshazzar defied the very God of heaven whom Daniel adored and worshiped. He even openly challenged Yahweh (who to him must have seemed to be only a "defeated" Jewish deity) by using Yahweh's sacred vessels from the temple in Jerusalem in a drinking orgy (vv. 1-4). That night, however, Belshazzar's own sentence was written on the wall of his palace by that very same "living God" (vv. 5-9, 22-28),¹¹ and the story itself also ends "that very night" as Belshazzar the king was slain and his kingdom taken over by the Medo-Persians (vv. 28, 30). Rather than having an opportunity to enjoy the result of his "crowning" at the feast, he closed his career in ignominy and death.¹²

¹⁰See W. H. Shea, "Bel(te)shazzar Meets Belshazzar," *AUSS* 26 (1988): 72-81. I concur with Shea that there was most likely an intentional corruption in producing the name Belteshazzar, this as a negation of the validity of the Babylonian deity Bel Marduk. The same phenomenon appears in "Abed Nego" for "Abed Nabu" and possibly also "Nebuchadnezzar" for "Nebuchadrezzar."

¹¹In Daniel's speech, six impotent gods are contrasted with the living God (v. 23).

¹²Davies, 95, opines: "Daniel alone is rewarded, without reference to his God; Belshazzar, unlike Nebuchadnezzar, is not interested in the source of Daniel's wisdom."

The most obvious reversal in the narrative of this chapter is undoubtedly the change in the situation concerning Belshazzar the king. We should not overlook, however, the fact that in contrast to Nebuchadnezzar, whose changes of attitude led him repeatedly to give honor to Daniel's God, Belshazzar ignored Daniel completely until the queen mother brought Daniel to the king's attention as a person who would be able to read the mysterious handwriting on the wall of the palace (vv. 10-12). Moreover, though Belshazzar honored Daniel personally because of the latter's interpretation of the mysterious handwriting on the palace wall (v. 29), there is no evidence of any meaningful repentance on Belshazzar's part and no evidence that he ever gave any praise whatsoever to Yahweh. Thus Belshazzar's experience can be considered as a reversal of Nebuchadnezzar's. The latter had his reign prolonged because of his repentance; Belshazzar, on the other hand, met the end of his kingdom and of his life because of his intransigent defiance of Yahweh.

"Reversals" in Chapter 6

The last story in the historical section of Daniel (chap. 6) takes place after Medo-Persia's victory over Babylonia. Nevertheless, it continues the biography of Daniel that was begun in chapters 1 and 2. After being the Babylonian king's appointee "over the whole province of Babylon" (2:48), Daniel was now similarly honored by Darius the Mede, who made Daniel one of three "presidents" and who further planned to set him over the whole kingdom (6:1-3). Because of this situation there was jealousy on the part of other officials, causing them to instigate a ruse that resulted in Daniel's being thrown into a den of lions (vv. 4-17). Through God's intervention, however, Daniel's situation was once again reversed so that he was saved from the fate planned for him and was restored to a position of honor (vv. 19-23, 28). In contrast, the perpetrators of the plot against Daniel experienced a negative reversal, they themselves and their families becoming the food for the lions (v. 24).

As for Daniel's own situation of reversals in this chapter, it is noteworthy that these bear a partial resemblance to Nebuchadnezzar's experience of downfall and restoration reported in chapter 4. There is a significant difference, however, in the fact that, whereas Nebuchadnezzar underwent his adverse experience because of his own pride, Daniel's adversity came about because

of his faithfulness to Yahweh, coupled with jealousy on the part of non-Hebrew officers of the Medo-Persian king.

As for the monarchs themselves in chapters 4 and 6, their eventual change of attitude was similar. Both Nebuchanezzar and Darius the Mede gave high praise to Yahweh at the conclusion of their respective experiences.

Assessment

The line of thematic-theological development given in the historical chapters of the book of Daniel deserves at least brief mention here. The historical section of the book of Daniel is one which in a step-by-step progression continually vindicates Yahweh and proves that the universal ancient Near-Eastern pagan notion of a deity's being defeated when that deity's people were taken captive was totally untrue in the case of the God of the Hebrews. Yahweh was repeatedly victorious and was even glorified by such pagan monarchs as Nebuchadnezzar and Darius the Mede. A corollary lesson emerges in the fact that Yahweh brings blessings not only to his people, but also to heathen kings who will treat his people rightly.

2. Thematic Reversals in the Prophetic Section of Daniel

The prophetic section of Daniel in chapters 7 through 12 carries forward further the theme of Yahweh's supremacy over all earthly powers and over the gods of foreign nations. The several main vision sequences in this section expand the historical arena so as to portray Yahweh's absolute supremacy and control for the entire span of earth's history and for the eternity that follows. A variety of symbols is used in portraying earthly kingdoms or other earthly rulerships and their activities.¹³ In whatever way these empires or other rulerships are represented, the point of importance is that all of them, together with the evils which they have perpetrated and executed, will meet a total and final end in the greatest reversal of all time—this by none other than Yahweh himself. Moreover, in this end-time reversal which carries these

¹³It is noteworthy that the first three chapters of the prophetic section of Daniel portray God's control from the perspective of judgment (chap. 7), sanctuary (chap. 8), and covenant or Messiah (chap. 9), respectively. It may also be noted that the presence of lions in chap. 6 helps prepare the reader for the first image of chap. 7, the lion.

entities down from their position of dominance to their utter doom and destruction, the status of God's people whom they have oppressed will also be reversed. Decisively and permanently God's saints will be removed from a condition of subservience and tribulation to a position of honor and safety in Yahweh's everlasting kingdom.

"Reversal" in Chapter 7

In chapter 7, the depiction of world history from the Babylonian Empire onward is represented as dominated first by empires symbolized by four dreadful and mighty beasts (vv. 2-7, 14). The fourth beast was especially ferocious. Each new empire brought reversal, of course, to the fortunes of its immediate predecessor.

The four beasts themselves seem suddenly to pale in significance, however, as the major focus of the vision turns to a "little horn" that becomes very great and powerful (vv. 8-9, 11, 20-22, 24b-26). This little horn acquires domination over God's saints (vv. 21, 25), and even blasphemes Yahweh himself (v. 25). Because of its horrendous misdeeds of lawlessness, oppression, persecution, and blasphemy this mighty oppressor will eventually, in a striking reversal, face the judgment bar of God, where the verdict will be rendered against it and in favor of God's suffering saints (vv. 9-10, 26-27). The message of chapter 7 is clear: God controls earth's history and will in the end reverse the historical situation in such a manner as to vindicate and reward his faithful people. These downtrodden saints of the Most High will be vindicated in God's heavenly "supreme court" (cf. v. 26), and subsequently will receive an everlasting and all-glorious kingdom and dominion (*šoltān*).¹⁴

"Reversal" in Chapters 8 and 9

In Dan 8 the reader encounters a different set of animal symbols, beholding first a powerful ram whose aggressiveness seems to know no bounds (vv. 3-4). Nevertheless, when this ram is at the height of its power a goat with one great horn on its head

¹⁴On the importance of "dominion" (*šoltān*) in Dan 7, see Arthur J. Ferch, *The Son of Man in Daniel Seven*, Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series, vol. 6 (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1987), 136-145, 179. Whereas the earthly powers take hold of the dominion for a time, the dominion of the Son of Man and the saints is permanent.

enters the picture and defeats the ram (vv. 5-7). Then the goat's horn is broken, and from it emerge four other horns (v. 8). The various reversals in fortune symbolized by this sequence of events is, however, once again overshadowed, as was the case in chapter 7, by a "little horn" that appears on the scene (v. 9). Now too, the major discussion focuses on this particular entity, which flagrantly works its own will and damages the sanctuary and the very worship of Yahweh himself (vv. 10-12, 23-25). The divine decree reveals that at a set time—after 2300 evenings and mornings—this little horn's activities and prosperity will meet reversal (vv. 13-14). God will act in behalf of his people and will restore fully the sanctuary and proper worship.

In a similar vein, chapter 9 also decrees the end for the cruel devastating power. Here the prophet is once more assured that God's faithful people will triumph in the midst of what appears to be their defeat (vv. 24-27).

"Reversal" in Chapters 10-12

The prophetic section which begins in Dan 10 and concludes in chapter 12 reiterates scenes in earth's history under two new symbolisms, the "king of the North" and the "king of the South." Most of chapter 11 (i.e., vv. 5-43) describes a long series of reversals in the battles which these two powers wage against each other. Like the little horn of Dan 8 the king of the North does "according to his will," magnifying "himself above every God" and speaking "astonishing things against the God of gods" (v. 36; compare the characteristics also of the little horn in Dan 7:25). When, however, everything seems to have been achieved for this "king of the North" and he has gained the full ascendancy, his fortunes are reversed through the activity of a new source that brings him evil tidings from the east and north (v. 44). This former conqueror then comes to his end, "with none to help him" (v. 45).¹⁵ The language would indicate here a divine intervention as the cause of this conqueror's demise.

But again, the real climax is reached, not simply in the degradation of this "king of the North," but also in the reversal of fortune for God's own people. At the end of the time periods

¹⁵Expressions parallel to this one include the following: "by no human hand," 2:45; mysterious "fingers of a man's hand" writing on the wall, 5:5; and "by no human hand," 8:25.

indicated by the divine decree, special blessings emerge for them (12: 4, 7, 9-13). Among the specific promises are increased knowledge (v. 4), deliverance (v. 1), a resurrection (v. 2), and the assurance that "the wise" will shine "like the stars for ever and ever" (v. 3). As for Daniel himself, he will stand in his "allotted place at the end of the days" (v. 13).

3. *Conclusion*

The numerous thematic reversals in the book of Daniel deal with the fate of individuals, of nations, of world history, and of God's own people. In the historical section of the book, demonstration is given that—contrary to the view current both officially and popularly in the ancient Near East to the effect that the deities of captive peoples were inferior to deities of their captors—Yahweh was and remained the one true and all-powerful God of heaven and earth. The Babylonian captivity of the Hebrew people contained magnificent illustrations of Yahweh's full control of history and destiny, and of the fact that Yahweh is a God who can and does bring complete and glorious deliverance to his faithful children in the severest of circumstances.

The prophetic chapters of the book expand the motif introduced in the historical chapters. In the visions of chapters 7 through 12, the historical developments from the prophet's time onward are symbolically portrayed, and it is once again clearly demonstrated that Yahweh is in full control. Irrespective of the ups and downs of earthly powers, and no matter what oppressiveness these powers may use against God's people, their end will be in complete destruction. On the other hand, the all-powerful Yahweh, Lord of all history and of all people, will in the great denouement vindicate his saints fully and will grant them a place in his glorious and eternal kingdom.

Two further points should be noted in closing: (1) this very message of the prophetic visions of Daniel had already been highlighted in summary fashion in the forecast of Dan 2. As Daniel in that earlier chapter interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's dream, he pointed to a time when the individual parts of the great image—each part standing for an earthly world power (as the context makes clear)—would all meet their doom when the total image would be destroyed and the stone striking the image on the feet would become a great mountain to fill the whole earth (2:34-35, 44-45). (2) There is a certain confluence between Daniel's first

chapter and twelfth chapter. In the first the end of the kingdom of Judah comes to view, and in the twelfth the end of the prophet's life is foreseen. The two events are brought together, however, into the same beautiful context of an assured favorable reversal. There will be a glorious new beginning both for Daniel and for God's saints.

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