Sunday Message Notes – Better Bible Reading in 2026

Daniel: Rightly Dividing Apocalyptic Literature

Overview: The Book of Daniel is divided into **two distinct sections** that differ in literary genre and theological emphasis. **Daniel 1–6** consists primarily of **court tales**,[1] narrating Daniel and his companions' experiences under foreign rulers in Babylon and Persia (e.g., The fiery furnace - Daniel 3; and the lions' den - Daniel 6). These stories explore themes of faithfulness to God, wisdom, survival, and the relationship between Jewish identity and imperial power. **Daniel 7–12**, by contrast, consists of **apocalyptic visions** that use symbolic imagery to interpret successive kingdoms, political oppression, divine judgment, and the anticipated transformation of history.

From a historical-critical perspective chapters 7-12 are dated to the 2nd c. BCE (particularly the persecution under Antiochus IV Epiphanes) **even though the narrative presents Daniel as a figure living centuries earlier during the Babylonian exile.** The visions therefore function **less as predictions** made centuries in advance than as **a way of interpreting contemporary events through an ancient setting.**

Thus, Daniel is **NOT** a timetable for the end of the world. **It is apocalyptic, crisis literature** - a symbolic response to imperial violence and religious persecution. **Read historically**, the book preserves the fears and hopes of people living under domination. **Read as literal prediction**, it becomes material for **fear-based systems** that repeatedly mistake ancient political symbolism for a divine schedule of future events.

Caution of Supersessionism: Although Christians have traditionally interpreted the fourth figure in **Daniel 3:25** as a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus Christ, the text itself does not explicitly identify the figure as Jesus; **the Aramaic phrase** is more accurately rendered **"like a son of the gods"** or **"like a divine being."** We should therefore distinguish a later Christian theological interpretation from what the text communicates in its original cultural and literary context.

Jesus' awareness of Daniel: Jesus' use of the title "Son of Man" draws on the imagery of **Daniel 7**, where "one like a son of man" receives authority and an everlasting kingdom from God, making Daniel central to understanding Jesus' apocalyptic message and identity.

I. The World Behind the Text: Crisis, Canon and Creativity

A. Crisis. Biblical apocalyptic literature emerges in **times of crisis**, oppression, and uncertainty. Through symbolic imagery, visions, and revelations of the end times, apocalyptic texts encourage communities to remain faithful and hopeful when present circumstances seem overwhelming (e.g., Daniel, Revelation).

1. Biblical apocalyptic literature functions as **apologetic** writing by interpreting present suffering and oppression in ways that sustain communal identity, hope, and confidence in divine justice.

[1] Court tales are stories set in royal courts where loyalty to God or empire arises - faithful people navigate political power, and cultural danger, to rise to power (e.g., Daniel, Joseph, Nehemiah, Esther).

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B. Canon. Daniel's placement in the Jewish *Ketuvim* (Writings), rather than the *Nevi'im* (Prophets), distinguishes the Jewish canonical tradition from most Christian Bibles. For scholars and rabbis, this underscores the importance of interpreting Daniel within its historical, and theological context, rather than reading it exclusively through later Christian interpretations.
1. Non-canonical. There are dozens of known Jewish and early Christian apocalyptic writings, including: 1, 2, 3 Enoch, Book of Noah.
a. Apocalypses associated with biblical figures: Adam, Moses, Abraham, Elijah.

C. Creativity. Daniel was written in its final form during the persecution under Antiochus IV Epiphanes in the 2nd c. BCE (amid the Maccabean Revolt). Its dating is crucial: many scholars argue that Daniel's visions **accurately reflect events up to the persecution under Antiochus, but become historically inaccurate when they describe what is expected to happen next. In other words, when Daniel moves from interpreting recent history to predicting the future, its predictions do not unfold as anticipated.**
1. This does not diminish the book's historical or theological significance; rather, it reveals apocalyptic literature as a creative response to crisis, expressing the urgent hope that present suffering will soon end through divine intervention.

D. What is happening? The Historical Reveal: Daniel's Prophecies Become Least Accurate Where the Author's Present Becomes His Future
1. The striking feature is that Daniel's visions appear to predict events with extraordinary specificity **up to the time of Antiochus IV (167–164 BCE)**. Then the predictions begin to go wrong. For example, Daniel 11 describes the conflicts involving the Seleucid and Ptolemaic kingdoms in considerable detail. But when it gets to what Antiochus will do next, the account no longer corresponds well with what actually happened. Scholars therefore commonly see this as **vaticinium ex eventu (**the presentation of past or contemporary events as if they had been prophetically foretold) or literally, "prophecy from the event": **presenting events that have already happened as though they were being predicted beforehand**.
2. So, under that interpretation: Daniel is telling contemporary history in the literary form of a prophecy given centuries earlier. **The purpose wasn't necessarily to deceive people for personal gain.** It appears to have been a way of saying something like: "Look at what God has revealed to Daniel. The persecution we're experiencing now is part of God's larger plan, and God will ultimately defeat the oppressor."
3. But is that fraud? If the author intended readers to believe that the 2nd-century visions were literally received by a 6th-century Daniel, then by modern standards, yes, that would involve deliberate deception.

II. The World of the Text: Apocalyptic Symbolism Turns Empire into a Cosmic Drama

A. Apocalyptic beliefs became increasingly prominent in Jewish thought **around 200 years before the time of Jesus**, reflecting a response to political oppression, religious persecution, and uncertainty about the future.
1. The church was not always apocalyptically driven. Augustine of Hippo wrote that the millennial reign was in his time (during the expansion and victorious nature of the church).

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2. Apocalyptic prophets and movements, including Daniel, Jesus, and Paul, must be understood within the expectation that **God's decisive intervention and the end of the present age were imminent.** The apparent **delay of Parousia** (Christ's second coming), raised questions about how their predictions should be interpreted and how early Christians adapted their expectations.

III. The World IN FRONT of the Text: Ancient Crisis Literature and an Industry of Fear

A. Cycles and Dangers of Choosing dates for the end of the world.
1. Daniel and the Great Disappointment of October 22, 1844: William Miller's interpretation of the 2,300 evenings and mornings in **Daniel 8:14** helped generate a date for the expected return of Christ. When the event did not occur, the failure exposed the danger of turning symbolic crisis literature into calendar arithmetic.
a. People selling their property to be ready for Jesus to return. One man gave his farm to his son - then wanted it back.
b. Hal Lindsey ("The Late Great Planet Earth") did revise his interpretations of current events as earlier expectations failed. He claimed biblical prophecy would likely be fulfilled forty years after Israel's founding in 1948—pointing toward 1988—yet that expectation failed. Rather than abandon his overall prophetic framework, he continued reinterpreting world events through it.
2. Dispensationalist interpretations of apocalyptic literature warrant scrutiny when they **defer justice to a future end-times kingdom or treat the earth as disposable in anticipation of Christ's return.** Such readings risk diminishing the biblical call to care for creation, confront oppression, and pursue justice in the present. **The hope of a future divine renewal should never become an excuse for neglecting the world and its people now.**

B. The use of Daniel and apocalyptic literature to **manufacture fear, demand unquestioning obedience, or generate financial profit is a profound abuse of sacred texts**. From failed end-times predictions to people surrendering their livelihoods in anticipation of the apocalypse—shows the real harm of turning symbolic visions into tools of control. **When fear of the end distracts people from ecological responsibility, social justice, and the needs of their neighbors, apocalyptic faith becomes an instrument of exploitation rather than hope.** These ancient texts should challenge oppressive power, not become a means of profiting from people's fear.

IV. Good News from Daniel? Even in times of crisis, oppression, and uncertainty, hope remains possible. Daniel reminds us that empire does not have the final word, that faith can resist oppressive power, and that despair need not define our future. We need not treat apocalyptic visions as infallible predictions or use them as a blueprint for the future. Instead, we can **receive Daniel as a courageous work of theological imagination—one that sustains communities in crisis, calls injustice into question, and invites us to embody hope and pursue justice in the world as it is.**

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