

## Small Horn with a Big Mouth:

*An Appreciation of Literary Features from Daniel's Book* | BY ZDRAVKO STEFANOVIC

In the past, most scholarly studies and popular presentations about the Old Testament book of Daniel have focused on proving or disproving the historical value of certain statements found in it. Attempts to show that Daniel's text and claims are trustworthy is a task worthy of scholarly investigation and writing. Yet to limit one's research to this aspect of the book does not do full justice to its rich and multifaceted contents. In this article, I argue that it is possible, even necessary, to see Daniel's messages as attractive, beautiful, and applicable in people's lives. For this reason, I intend to demonstrate that the book of Daniel is nothing short of a literary masterpiece.<sup>1</sup>

### Genres in Daniel's Book

The study of any piece of literature begins with a definition of its genre, which is defined in English as "literary form or type."<sup>2</sup> The presence of captivating stories in Daniel's book, as well as of graphic visions that contain details of colorful symbolic images, is foremost among its genres. Among the best-known stories are King Nebuchadnezzar's Dream (chap. 2), the Fiery Furnace (chap. 3), the Writing on the Wall (chap. 5), and Daniel in the Lions' Den (chap. 6). Each story is characterized by a plot (or a conflict), characters (or heroes), and a setting (or context). The message of these stories centers on God, who has power to save lives and control events.

The best-remembered visions from the book are the Four Beasts and a Son of Man (chap. 7), a Ram and a Goat (chap. 8), and the Rise of Michael (chap. 12). Although the message of the visions centers on God, the visions also focus on the Messiah, who, throughout earth's history and especially in the time of the end, provides deliverance for a faithful remnant of God's people.

Stories and visions in Daniel are given in narrative as well as poetic form. Narrative is the most common genre in the Bible. Due to its strong presence in Daniel, the book has been called "a gallery of memorable narrative moments."<sup>3</sup> Biblical narrators not only tell stories but also interpret them. In the case of Daniel's book, the narrator selects certain events but ignores others.<sup>4</sup> He also uses a lot of repetition. The presence of poetry in Daniel's book is easily discerned in contemporary versions of the Bible because poetic passages are indented. In the visions of Daniel 7, for example, the book uses poetry in reporting about events that take place in heaven (vs. 9–10, 13–14), in contrast to prose, which relates to events that happen on earth.

The first half of the book contains several hymns of praise to God. Daniel himself composed the first:

*Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever;  
wisdom and power are his.  
He changes times and seasons;  
he sets up kings and deposes them.  
He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning.  
He reveals deep and hidden things;  
he knows what lies in darkness, and light dwells with him.  
I thank and praise you, O God of my fathers:  
You have given me wisdom and power,  
You have made known to me what we asked of you,  
You have made known to us the dream of the king. (2:20–23)*

The hymns that follow come from the mouths of two pagan kings, Nebuchadnezzar and Darius the Mede (but not Belshazzar). The hymns of praise composed by these two kings echo Daniel's hymn. In King Nebuchadnezzar's case, we see a ruler who had previously issued cruel and vindictive orders changed into a

poet who composes a song about the Most High God:

*Signs, how grandiose!  
Wonders, how mighty!  
His kingdom is an eternal kingdom,  
His dominion from generation to generation. (4:3)<sup>5</sup>*

The king's words in this passage touched ancient Jewish scholars, and they commented that he "has stolen all the songs and praises from David."<sup>6</sup>

Only in recent times have scholars devoted significant amounts of attention to the topic of prayer in Daniel's book.<sup>7</sup> The best example of this genre is found in chapter 9, where Daniel confesses the sins of his people and presents a petition to God to intervene on their behalf. The following list of examples shows the presence of this and other genres.

1. Story (chaps. 2, 3, 6)
2. Dream (chaps. 2, 4)
3. Apocalyptic vision (chaps. 7, 8, 10–12)
4. Interpretation of a dream/vision (chaps. 2, 7, 8, 9)
5. Audition (8:13–14; 11:2–12:4)
6. Riddle or cryptic writing (5:25–28)
7. Prayer (6:16; 9:4–19)
8. Hymn of praise (2:20–23; 4:1–3, 34–35; 6:26–27)
9. Royal edict (3:29; 6:7–9, 26)
10. Royal proclamation (chap. 4)
11. List (3:2–6; 5:4, 23)
12. Dialogue (4:9, 18–20; 10:12–20; 12:8–13)
13. Oath (12:7)

### Plan of Daniel's Book

Generally speaking, balance and symmetry characterize the structure of Daniel's book, and are best evidenced through the use of chiasm, especially in the first half. Chapters 2–7, originally written in Aramaic (chaps. 1, 8–12, are in Hebrew) are clearly arranged in this manner:<sup>8</sup>

- A. Vision of world kingdoms (chap. 2)
- B. The faithful tested (chap. 3)
- C. Judgment on a king (chap. 4)
- C'. Judgment on a king (chap. 5)
- B'. The faithful tested (chap. 6)
- A'. Vision of world kingdoms (chap. 7)

### Artistic Imagery

Another important literary feature in Daniel is rich artistic imagery characterized by the use of metaphor and simile. The imagery is presented on at least three distinct levels: terrestrial, extraterrestrial, and celestial.

**Terrestrial** Following King Nebuchadnezzar's command, provincial administrators assembled in the Plain of Dura, and everybody except three Hebrew men bow down and worship the image of gold. The text from Daniel 3:8–12 says that this act of insubordination did not go unnoticed:

*At this time some astrologers came forward and denounced the Jews. They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, "O king, live forever! You have issued a decree, O king, that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold, and that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace. But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—who pay no attention to you, O king. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up."*

The act of denouncing the Hebrews is presented in much more graphic language in Aramaic. The original text literally says that the Chaldeans "ate their pieces." The concept here is that the talebearer ate his victim's flesh, a sort of verbal cannibalism. A modern equivalent would say that the astrologers "chew out" the Hebrews. In the story of Daniel's rescue from the lions, the same expression is translated "falsely accused" (Dan. 6:24).

Daniel 7 describes the second in the series of four ferocious beasts the following way:

*And there before me was a second beast, which looked like a bear. It was raised up on one of its sides, and it had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth. It was told, "Get up and eat your fill of flesh!"*

The impression that this picture makes is that an "insatiable monster" has eaten another creature and that some of its bones are still in the monster's mouth. The same chapter presents a small horn with a big mouth (v. 8) that will oppress the "Saints of the Most High God" (v. 25). The long persecution is expressed in this passage through a familiar picture of garments that people wear.

**Extraterrestrial** The story of Belshazzar's banquet is found in chapter 5. In response to the king's blasphemous behavior,

*Suddenly the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall, near the lampstand in the royal palace. The king watched the hand as it wrote. His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his knees knocked together and his legs gave way. (5:5–6)*

Belshazzar's vision of a detached hand writing on the wall before him "remains one of the most haunting images in literature."<sup>9</sup> Generally speaking, a disembodied palm of the hand represents a defeated enemy. The effect of this eerie scene might be similar if "the head of a decapitated victim began to speak."<sup>10</sup>

Contrast this scene with Psalm 119:73a, where the psalmist sings praise to God's powerful hands: "Your hands made me and formed me." What is fascinating in Daniel's book is that a similar (possibly the same) hand touched the prophet and restored life-sustaining strength to him no less than three times during his vision of the person "dressed in linen" in chapter 10.

The book describes Belshazzar's fear graphically and in detail, in contrast to his pride and arrogance, as seen in preceding verses. "The noble silhouette of the king crumbles to a heap of bones rubbing against each other in fear."<sup>11</sup>

**Celestial** One of the richest imageries in the book (7:9–10) is the passage that describes God's throne in heaven:

*As I looked, thrones were set in place,  
and the Ancient of Days took his seat.  
His clothing was as white as snow;  
the hair of his head was white like wool.  
His throne was flaming with fire,  
and its wheels were all ablaze.  
A river of fire was flowing,  
coming out from before him.  
Thousands upon thousands attended him;  
ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him.  
The court was seated,  
and the books were opened.*

Whereas whiteness symbolizes purity, fire is a standard biblical metaphor used to represent divine presence and judgment (Ps. 78:14, 21; Heb. 12:29).

In Daniel 12:3, God's messenger tells Daniel what will happen once Israel's patron angel, Michael, arises:

*Those who are wise will shine  
like the brightness of the heavens,  
and those who lead many to righteousness,  
like the stars for ever and ever.*

**Parallelism** Semitic (Hebrew and Aramaic) literary style is most commonly characterized by the presence of parallelism. A good example can be found in the following two verses:

*Those the king wanted to put to death, he put to death;  
those he wanted to spare, he spared;  
those he wanted to promote, he promoted;  
and those he wanted to humble, he humbled. (5:19b)<sup>12</sup>*

Synonymous parallelism is illustrated in 12:3:

*Those who are wise will shine  
like the brightness of the heavens,  
and those who lead many to righteousness,  
like the stars for ever and ever.*

Similarly, according to Daniel 6:26c, Darius praises God, saying:

*his kingdom will not be destroyed  
his dominion will never end.*

Antithetic parallelism is found in 9:7:

*Lord you are righteous,  
but this day we are covered with shame.*

Inverted parallelism or chiasm can be seen in Daniel's report about the king's dream, in chapter 2.<sup>13</sup> The composite statue is made of elements given in descending order in verses 32–33: gold, silver, bronze, iron, and clay. After the rock strikes the statue, all of these elements are destroyed but listed in ascending order in verse 35: iron, clay, bronze, silver, and gold.

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## Literary Figures

A number of literary figures are found throughout Daniel's book. The first of these is a play on words (or pun) already found in the opening chapter. Daniel 1:7, says that the chief official determined (Hebrew *waryāšem*) new (that is, Babylonian) names for the four young men, which would replace their Hebrew names.<sup>14</sup> In verse 8, the same Hebrew word is used to express how Daniel determines not to defile himself with the rich food and drink served at the king's table. In fact, both verses begin with the identical verbal form preceded by a consecutive *waw* ("and").

Another example of wordplay is found in chapter 9, where Daniel prays and fasts regarding the end of seventy years of exile in Babylon. Yet when Gabriel arrives in response to the prayer, he delivers God's revelation, which concerns "seventy weeks" of years (compare 10:2 "three weeks [of days]").

The most elaborate set of wordplays is found in 5:25–28, where the divine judgment pronounced on Belshazzar is presented through "the rhythm of four." Thus, each of the four words that formed the cryptic writing on the wall (Mene "numbered"; Mene "numbered"; Tekel "weighed"; Peres "divided") is explained in the original Hebrew through four-word statements.

Closely related to wordplay are *paronomasia* and *hendiadys*.<sup>15</sup> *Paronomasia* is one of the most frequently used literary figures in Semitic languages. It is characterized by the recurrence of the same word stem in close proximity.<sup>16</sup> Thus, for example, Daniel 1:4, says that one characteristic of the choice captives was that they were "well-informed" (NIV) (in the original Hebrew, *yōd'ê da'at* "knowing knowledge").

Another example is found in Daniel 2:1, which says that the king "dreamed dreams," which is to say that the king had dreams. *Hendiadys*, in contrast, occurs when two different words are combined to express a single concept.<sup>17</sup> Thus, in 2:14, Daniel addresses Arioch, the royal executioner, with "wisdom and tact." These two words could be rendered as "tactful wisdom." In 7:25, the hostile king, represented by the symbol of a little horn, tries "to change the set times and the laws" (NIV). A better rendering of the original Aramaic statement would be "the set times which are regulated by the law."

Another literary figure related to wordplay is *merism(us)*, which is characterized by the use of two or more contrasting (or opposite) elements to express the concept of totali-

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ty. In his hymn of praise to God (2:21–23), Daniel states that he sets up and deposes kings, which is to say that the power of earthly monarchs is under God's sovereign control. Daniel goes on to say that darkness and light are known to God, another way of saying that God knows everything.

In his hymn of praise, King Darius sings about God, who "performs signs and wonders in the heavens and on the earth" (6:27), meaning everywhere in the universe. In his prayer, Daniel confesses that God's people, who live "both near and far" (9:7), had sinned against him.

Merism is also found in chapter 11, which talks about earthly conflicts between north and south, and in chapter 8, which describes conflicts between east and west.

*Hyperbole* may be defined as "making emphasis by overstatement."<sup>18</sup> Among many examples of hyperbole in Daniel is the statement from 1:20 that says the Hebrew young men's final grades were ten times better than those of all other wise men in the kingdom. Another example is found in Daniel 8:5, which describes the coming of a goat that crossed the whole earth "without touching the ground."

In common parlance, *irony* is "the statement of one thing with the intention of suggesting something else."<sup>19</sup> In Daniel, irony is used mostly as an intentional literary device. The presence of irony is attested in 2:33–34, where the imposing statue seen by the king in the dream is struck by a stone "on its feet of iron and clay," its weakest part. According to 3:8, the same Chaldeans whose lives Daniel's intervention had spared (2:24) come forward and denounce the Jews. In the same chapter, irony can be found in verse 19, where the king orders the furnace to be heated seven times hotter, although punishment is greater when a person is burned with a slow fire.

Numerical progression can be found in several places. One well-known example is the description of the innumerable angelic host that surrounds God's throne:

*Thousands upon thousands attended him;  
ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. (7:10)*

Another example can be seen in 12:7, 11–12, where three periods are given: "a time, times and half a time," which total 1,260 days, followed by 1,290 days and 1,335 days. Moreover, some examples of broken numerical progression are also found in the text. The best known comes from 7:25, where temporary progress of the little horn is conveyed through the

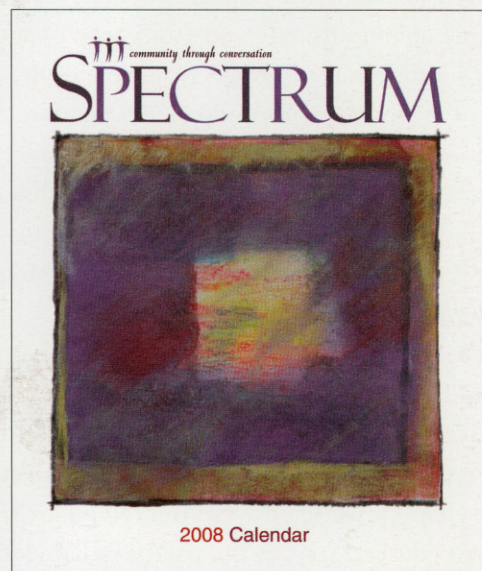
expression "time, (two) times, and half a time."<sup>20</sup>

*Reversals* are attested in the book on smaller and larger scales.<sup>21</sup> In Daniel 3:15, the proud king asks the faithful worshipers of God a challenging (rhetorical) question: "Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?"<sup>22</sup> At the end of the story, in verse 29, he answers his own question: "no other god can save in this way."

The story from chapter 5 tells how Belshazzar and his thousand nobles drink wine and praise the idols of "gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone" (v. 4). Later in the story, Daniel rebukes the king because he desecrated God's holy vessels while giving praise to the idols "of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone" (v. 23). By intentionally reversing the order of the first two materials, Daniel wants to show that, as far as Heaven is concerned, Babylon is no longer the ruling empire of the world, but that Medo-Persia is. Gold had already given place to silver.

*Reversal* is also attested in the last chapters of the book. According to Daniel 11:33, wise people who instruct many during persecution by the contemptible ruler fall by the sword, or are burned, captured, or plundered. Yet because of the rise of Michael, the same wise

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people will be glorified, so they “will shine like the brightness of the heavens...for ever and ever” (12:3).

*Inclusio* is a literary device that takes place when the opening theme or phrase is repeated at the end.<sup>23</sup> Daniel begins (2:28) and ends (2:45) his lengthy speech before King Nebuchadnezzar with a reference to his God, who knows the future and holds it in his hand. Chapter 4 contains a royal letter addressed to the whole world and enveloped by two hymns of praise. The chapter begins (v. 3) and ends (v. 34) with a statement that affirms God’s enduring dominion and kingdom.

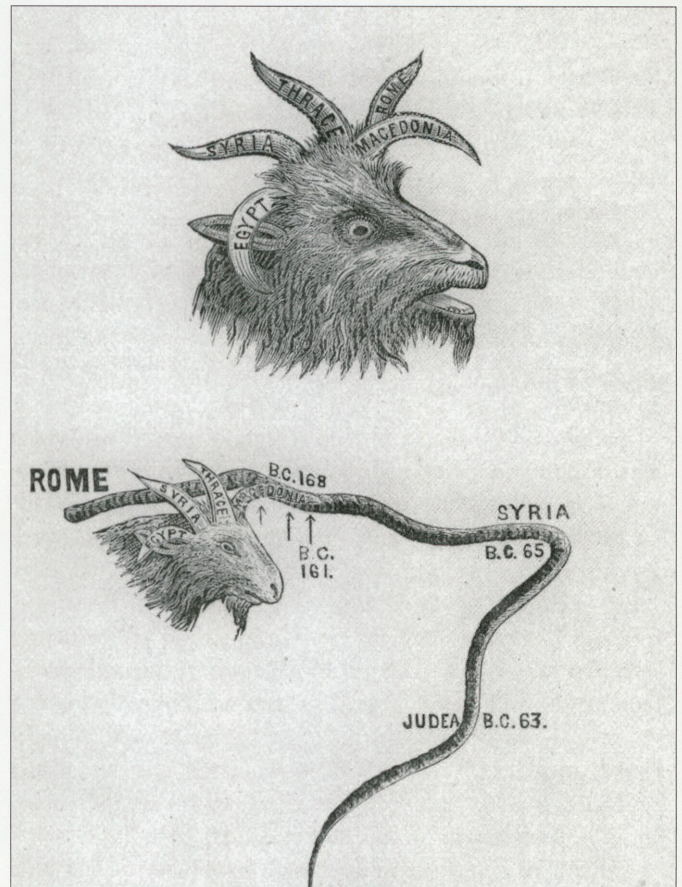
Similarly, Daniel 12 begins with a report of the rise of Michael, an event that guarantees Daniel will also rise to receive his allotted inheritance at the end of days. In both cases, the Hebrew verb root *’md* is used.

### Themes and Motifs

A careful reading of Daniel discloses a number of literary themes and motifs that attest to the book’s unity. The dominant theme is God’s power, displayed in the ways he deals with his covenant people and other nations. The book teaches that the events of world history are subject to God’s ultimate control.<sup>24</sup> The book portrays God as sovereign and eternal. Not only is he compassionate, but also “mighty to save”; he is also able to defeat the oppressor and deliver his suffering people.

The Bible commonly refers to God’s way of acting in the lives of individuals or groups of people as divine judgment. God’s judgment results in destruction of the oppressor, on the one hand, as well as deliverance and vindication of the righteous, on the other. Although the theme of judgment permeates the entire book of Daniel, it is especially present in chapter 7, which is often viewed as a pivotal chapter in Scripture.

From chapter 1, the reader discerns that, when the children of Israel went into exile to the land of Shinar, they, in fact, backtracked (or reversed) Abram’s journey of faith as reported in and around Genesis 12. Yet, in that same chapter, we see the faithful remnant rising from (desert) dust to stars at the palace in Babylon. One scholar describes this motif as “from pit to pinnacle.”<sup>25</sup> In contrast, the story from chapter 5 tells about the fall of Babylon, the event that can be described as a movement from stars to dust. Finally, in chapter 12, the wise and the “many” to whom they had witnessed rise from dust to stars once again, this time forever, never



again to go back to dust.

In addition to being the most powerful being, God is portrayed in Daniel as someone who shares power with humans. In this sense, world history as presented in biblical prophecy is a witness to numerous examples of uses and misuses of God-given authority to rule (*soltan*) by beastlike powers. In practice, this means that human laws sometimes stand in opposition to God’s principles, as they do in chapters 3 and 6, where the reader can see two unchangeable laws in conflict.

Daniel presents the rise of the beasts in chapter 7 as a replay of the creation story from Genesis 1 that climaxes in the coming of a humanlike being who receives universal authority to rule.<sup>26</sup> Daniel 8 describes the same theme of cosmic battle as a reversal of cultic services in the sanctuary. Both chapters climax in a statement that God’s cause will triumph in the end.

Chapter 9 presents the same truth through another theme that could be called the “Story of Two Exiles.”<sup>27</sup> From an earthly, temporary exile of seventy years, the prophet is introduced to a much longer (“seventy weeks” of years) universal captivity to sin, which will come to an end because of the Messiah’s death. That event will make God’s covenant prevail

in behalf of "many" people when their sins are forgiven.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have endeavored to show that the book of Daniel contains outstanding literary qualities. The book is attractive and useful material for reading, study, and application. Hopefully, the use of literary approach and its technical jargon will not hinder students of Daniel from glimpsing God's way of acting. For that reason, I close with a quote that offers a useful analogy.

*Like a telescope, it [Scripture] summons us to look through, not at, it and see the starry heavens. The most crucial question to ask is, Have you seen the stars? not, What do you think of the lens? . . . Like a lamp, the Scriptures make it possible for us to see; like bread, they satisfy our appetite and nourish us. It is very important not to forget. . . that the Bible is a means to an end, not an end in itself.*<sup>28</sup> ■

## Notes and References

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11. Jacques B. Doukhan, *Secrets of Daniel* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2000), 79.

12. Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotations in this paper

are taken from the New International Version (NIV).

13. Soulen, *Handbook*, 32-33.

14. In most modern English translations, including the NIV, this wordplay is lost.

15. As far as our present evidence goes, alliteration and assonance are not attested in Daniel's book.

16. For a different definition of *paronomasia*, see W. Randolph Tate, *Interpreting the Bible* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2006), 258.

17. "Two words are used, but one is meant." This simple definition of *hendriads* is found in E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1968), 657.

18. Bullinger explains hyperbole as "When more is said than is literally meant." *Ibid.*, 423.

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