

Daniel's Apocalypse through Repetition

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Abstract

The paper focuses on repetition as the major literary device which makes Daniel 7–12 an “apocalypse”. By comparing how the three initial visionary scenes of ch. 7 are resumed, modified and expanded in the following chapters, it shows how readers understand that the message they receive is heavenly and nevertheless bound to shape their history.

The hybrid beasts pictured in ch. 7 are first replaced by an ordinary ram and a goat in ch. 8, until they give way to the appearance of distinct kings whose acts are thoroughly detailed in ch. 11. The “son of man”-like figure opens up the view onto a group of righteous men who undergo humiliations and death (weak and mortal as they are, they are verily descendants of Adam) but are made to shine like stars in the heaven (thus showing the original kingly glory of Adam). In order to help believers to see how what they are told concern their own earthly life, even the circumstances in which Daniel receives his revelations are increasingly closer to ordinary experience (not anymore in the night, by a river of fire, but at daylight, at the bank of well-known streams of water).

As the central position of ch. 9 (flanked by chs. 7–8 and chs. 10–12) suggests, special revelations are indeed granted when the faithful strive to understand old prophecies. Ancient sages study traditional oracles and, by using a highly sapiential technique such as repetition, compose an apocalypse.

1. The “Apocalypse” of Daniel

As it is well-known, the Hebrew-Aramaic book of Daniel consists of court tales and visions. From ch. 1 to ch. 6 the protagonist and his three friends Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah are brought to the palace of Nebuchadnezzar, where they prove to be wise counselors and thus reach a well-respected position in the empire administration. Their status endures down to the Persian time, notwithstanding considerable threats that thrice expose them to death. From ch. 7 to ch. 12 Daniel receives divine revelations which, taken as a whole, are usually regarded as an apocalypse.

The usual denomination of “apocalypse” aptly accounts for the several themes and features which Daniel 7–12 shares with the Book of Revelation (the apocalypse *par excellence*) and compositions such as the Enochic Animal Vision, the Apocalypse of Weeks (in 1 Enoch 85–90 and 91:12-17 + 93:1-10 respectively), 4 Ezra or 2 Baruch 1–77. The pious Daniel

experiences a series of successive dreams, visions and celestial dialogues showing what is to happen over the course of some centuries to his people by divine decree. His language is rich in symbols, enigma and numbers, overloaded with quotations of texts from his literary religious tradition, and veiled albeit understandable references to political events of the time.

As an apocalypse, the second part of the book of Daniel can be read – with the words of a widely accepted definition elaborated by John J. Collins for *Semeia* 14 (1979) and later expanded by Adela Yarbro Collins in *Semeia* 36 (1986) – as

a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world,

a genre which normally serves

to interpret present, earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world and of the future, and to influence both the understanding and the behavior of the audience by means of divine authority (see J.J. COLLINS, *Daniel*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993, 54).

Being a “historical apocalypse”, rather than an “other-worldly journey apocalypse”, the apocalypse of Daniel focuses on the profound mechanisms of evil subverting history and on how divine salvation finally imposes itself.

2. Structure of Daniel 7–12

The second part of the Book of Daniel consists of two sections, marked by the narrator’s voice in 7:1 and 10:1:

In the first year of King Belshazzar of Babylon, Daniel had a dream and visions of his head as he lay in bed. Then he wrote down the dream (7:1).

In the third year of King Cyrus of Persia a word was revealed to Daniel, who was named Belteshazzar (10:1a).

Within the first section three chronological settings open each of the three chapters, thereby coupling ch. 7 with ch. 8 (both located at the time of Belshazzar) and setting ch. 9 on its own. As a matter of fact, chs. 7 and 8 deal with a revelation disclosed during a dream (ch. 7) and a vision (ch. 8), whereas in ch. 9 Daniel is granted a divine word while studying the Scriptures.

The second section, covering chs. 10–12, is again composed of three sequences. The first and the second ones are more strictly related as they present a theophany (10:1–11:2a) with a long speech (11:2b–12:4), while the third one concludes the whole book with one last angelic encounter (12:5-13).

As can be easily observed, ch. 9 sticks out in the context of both sections. Here Daniel is mainly occupied with the Scriptures of his people and, more specifically, tries to penetrate the meaning of the seventy years of desolation prophesized in Jer 25:11-12 and 29:12. In order to grasp their significance, he does penance and formulates a long prayer to the Lord (vv. 4-19). As a divine answer, Gabriel arrives with the interpretation of the biblical passage.

Although ch. 9 is different from the adjacent sequences, distinctive points of contact can be detected. Firstly the celestial figure appearing is the same Gabriel as in the previous chapter (8:16; 9:21) and his words in 9:24-27 resume and specify his first communication in 8:23-26. Secondly the protagonist takes on mourning practices (9:3) which are still being adopted some years later when he is granted a new revelation (10:2-3). Thirdly, the *pešer* procedure through which the oracles of Jeremiah are explained reflects the *pešer* style of the allegorical interpretations offered in chs. 7 and 8. Finally, ch. 9 binds the act of interpretation to a revelation, in perfect accordance with what happens during the dream and the vision reported in chs. 7 and 8.

3. A Revelation Through Repetition

One revelation may suffice but in the apocalypse of Daniel the way to

wisdom is disclosed only gradually, through different steps, in a particular kind of repetition which provides more or less the same content, albeit in different forms. Dreams, visions and predictions are juxtaposed, overlap and repeat.

Three scenes, already typified in the first half of ch. 7, are interpreted and enlarged in 7:15-28 and then return, modified and increasingly enriched with political references in chs. 8–12. The attention of the seer is specifically attracted to four hybrid beasts emerging from the chaotic sea (7:2b-8), the vision of the divine court ready to pass judgment upon them (7:9-12) and a man-like figure who receives dominion over all nations (7:13-14).

In Dan 7:15-28 two different interpretations of the previous visions are offered: at first it is spelled out that the four beasts symbolize four kings while the human figure embodies what is reserved for “the holy ones of the Most High” (vv. 15-18), and then the fourth beast is identified with the kingdom whose last sovereign will wage war against the “holy ones” and their cultic life (vv. 19-27). Interestingly enough, these people seem to belong both to the meta-historical realm and to the historical one.

In the vision of Dan 8 the animals appearing are no longer surreal: they are just an ordinary ram and a he-goat. They are so described as to help the reader to understand which historical realities they represent, i.e. the empire of the Medes and of the Persians and Alexander’s empire. Palestine is affected by their military actions and temple life is above all offended (vv. 11-12). Their evil pursuits are made still clearer in ch. 9 and in 10:1–12:4. An anointed one is to be destroyed, the holy city is to be subverted together with its sanctuary and a new ungodly covenant will be established between many people and a foreign wicked prince (9:26-27). Three Persian kings are subsequently envisaged, followed by “a warrior king”, i.e. Alexander the Great (11:2-4). A number of meticulous “prophecies” continue to itemize a number of conflicts between a “king of the south” and a “king of the north”, i.e. between the Ptolemies and the Seleucids.

As far as the second scene observed in Dan 7:9-12 is concerned, one should note how predictions become neater: the enemy will succeed for no more than “a time, two times, and half a time” (7:25), “2,300 evenings and mornings” (8:14), that is to say three and a half years (9:27). Antiochus IV,

alluded to as “a contemptible person” (11:21), will be attacked by a Ptolemy and will get the upper hand until he will be disturbed by alarming reports and die (11:40-45).

The scene of the kingly investiture is analogously specified. The fate of the “son of man”-like figure will be reserved for those who will persevere in their faithfulness to their religion, notwithstanding the aggressions and persecutions enacted by the last wicked king (7:25; 8:24; 11:33). The *maškilîm* engaged with the teaching of their people at the price of their own lives will enter the divine court, by becoming part of the heavenly world: after being put to death, “they will shine like the brightness of the sky [...], like the stars” (12:3).

Just as the three extraordinary inaugural scenes of Dan 7 progressively approach reality, the circumstances of the different revelations are increasingly ordinary ones. At the beginning Daniel has a vision during the night, within a dream in which he finds himself at the divine court, by a river of fire (7:1-2,10). Two years later he has a vision while awake, standing by a natural watercourse in the province of Elam (8:2). In his last visionary experience he is by the Tigris, on a very specific date (the 24th day of the first month), while in the company of other people (10:4,7).

4. The Background of Such Use of Repetition

Such a way of presenting a divine revelation is somehow conform to the subgenres used within the apocalypse. The kind of knowledge Daniel is receiving and is willing to impart is altogether divine and this makes him recipient of a dream, a vision, and (pseudo) predictions. The genres accordingly adopted are the dream report (especially to be found in Daniel 7), the prophetic/symbolic vision (Daniel 8), the theophany account (Daniel 10) and *ex eventu* prophecies (Daniel 11).

a. Repetition in Dreams and Prophetic Visions

As far as the dream report is concerned, it is to be recollected how this *Gattung* is employed already in chs. 2 and 4. King Nebuchadnezzar has dreams which leave him troubled (2:1; 4:2). He urges an expert to provide him with the interpretation of what he has seen (2:5; 4:6) and finally

discovers what is to come in the future (2:45; 4:21-22). Every oneiric scene is related twice, first in its plain exposition and then in its allegorical interpretation (2:31-35,37-45; 4:7-14,17-23).

Such a kind of dream report is well attested both in Daniel's religious tradition and in the Mesopotamian literature which the young exile is to become familiar with by the will of the king (Dan 1:4). The episodes of the Pharaoh's cupbearer and chief baker, like the tales of Pharaoh's own dreams of fourteen cows and fourteen ears of grain, in the book of Genesis, are close instances (Gen 40:5-19; 41:1-32). Each of the circumstances portrayed are good occasions to get to know a decision, a disposition, a secret of the divine world, curiously enough delivered in multiple versions (the two dreams of Pharaoh follow the two dreams of his servants). What in the language of Nebuchadnezzar would be termed as a divine *purussûm* (or *tēmum* / *pirištum*) is likewise communicated during the night. When somebody sleeps, his/her mind is indeed believed ready to welcome words and images unforged by human intentions and thus of utmost importance, to be carefully understood so as to act accordingly. In the Babylonian tablets the objects and the situations appearing – be they in the context of so-called symbolic dreams or within message dreams – can be rather unusual and thus closer to what is described in Dan 7 and 8. Gilgamesh sees for example a star fall down before him like a rock (Gilg. I 262-263), a Thunderbird in the sky whose mouth is fire and whose breath is death (Gilg. IV OB Ni 11,14), and a bull from the wild cleaving the ground with its bellows and raising clouds of dust into the sky (Gilg. IV Ha₁ 4-6). All these occurrences are duly interpreted as ominous signs of what is to come, exactly as the death of Enkidu is dreamt in a fight with a grim man with lion's paws and eagle's talons (Gilg. VII 168,170). As a rule, again, one same message (say, the imminent encounter with Enkidu, his impending death or the oncoming battle with Humbaba) is conveyed through a sequence of dreams. What is therefore revealed is irrevocably bound to happen.

If we turn to consider the dialogues of Daniel 7 and 8, we can detect features typically reminiscent of the prophetic vision, where a visual perception is integrated by a commentary given by God or by one of his emissaries. Special similarities are to be found in Zechariah 1–6, a section

which provides in the first person what the prophet observes, the questions he poses to his angelic interlocutor, together with the answers obtained (often with the same wording and topics as in the Book of Daniel). The forthcoming reestablishment of the temple is here conveyed through a series of visions, interlocked and conceived in progression: four horses riding among myrtles (Zec 1:8), four horns, four blacksmiths (Zec 2:1,3), a man with a measuring line in his hand (Zec 2:5), a lampstand flanked by two olive trees (Zec 4:2-3), a flying scroll (Zec 5:2), a basket with a woman inside (Zec 5:6) and four heavenly chariots (Zec 6:1), with the interlude of dialogue overheard regarding the high priest Joshua (Zec 3:1-10), foretell in detail the one divine decision to have Jerusalem rebuilt, with its nation at last unoppressed, free from sin and led by uncorrupted figures.

b. Repetition as a Sapiential Technique

The special use of repetition is also reminiscent of distinctive expository techniques that occur in Israel's wisdom language. Dreams and visions, a hallmark of mantic wisdom, seem indeed reported as *m^ešālîm*, in a constant increment of information typical of a numerical sequence of proverbs, in a combination of warnings and prayers, formulated in the first person like the teaching of a master to his pupils his own experience.

Daniel's accounts challenge readers. They are invited to ponder events which are far remote from ordinary life, where good and evil stand out vividly. After they understand the typical traits of the wicked and the political sphere within which they act, they are then led to consider their own time and world. Daniel's readers must be suspicious of sacrilegious Hellenizers, as well as of violent traditionalist opposers, and side with the *maškilîm*.

In the apocalyptic mind more and more details are given as the narration develops. Such a presentation resembles the didactic way by which a master addresses his pupils: "Three things are too wonderful for me; four I do not understand" (Prov 30:18), "Under three things the earth trembles; under four it cannot bear up" (Prov 30:21).

The underlying logic of such expositions is probably to be detected in

the method of a master issuing the challenge of $X / X + 1$, prompting the student to complete the numbers by finding analogies between natural and social areas:

Three things are stately in their stride; four are stately in their gait:
the lion, which is mightiest among wild animals and does not turn back before any;
the strutting rooster, the he-goat, and a king striding before his people (Prov 30:29-31).

As pressing milk produces curds,
and pressing the nose produces blood,
so pressing anger produces strife (Prov 30:33).

The many expressions of Daniel's astonishment and bewilderment in the apocalypse represent sequences of equivocal sayings whose clarification is constantly postponed, e.g. Prov 5:15-18:

Drink water from your own cistern, flowing water from your own well.
Should your springs be scattered abroad, streams of water in the streets?
Let them be for yourself alone, and not for sharing with strangers.
Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth.

The very same device of giving the floor to the protagonist in Dan 7:1 contributes to present him as a teacher. By addressing himself directly to the reader and speaking in the first person, he takes on the tone of the pedagogue. A sage likes indeed to engage his pupil talking of himself (e.g. Prov 7:6-7), of his pursuit of knowledge (e.g. Eccl 1:12–2:26; Sir 51:13-22), claiming that what he has experienced is education for others (Sir 33:16-18). The wise man recounts that he first observed, thought, saw and drew the lesson (*wā'eḥḏezeh, 'āšīt libbî, rā'itî, lāqaḥtî mûsār* – Prov 24:32). Daniel himself has investigated and so can teach; he can offer insights as he has been awarded explanations. He can say, with the Book of Proverbs: "Hear, my child!" (Prov 1:8), "I myself was a son with my father" (Prov 4:3).

The sapiential character of such a use of repetition well relates to the

special place reserved to Daniel's investigation of Scriptures. Ch. 9, flanked by the two sequences of chs. 7–8 and chs. 10–12, functions indeed as a gateway to the adjacent visions: visions of the events to come arise out of the interpretation of old prophecies. References to old texts are interwoven in the visions of chs. 7–8 and 10–12, just as angelic words are heard while meditating upon ancient oracles in ch. 9. Ancient sages study traditional oracles and compose an apocalypse.

5. The Function of Repetition in Daniel's Apocalypse

At the end of our journey into the visions of Daniel we can better appreciate their lessons. The apocalypse of Daniel provides the reader with the revelation of God's decree upon history. Although history is suffocated by violence and oppressed by outrageous kings, God has decided to grant all power to a man. This new king will not be as fierce as beasts are but will rather be just a man. Weak and corruptible, and yet made to his own image, lord over the whole earth. The coming of this man will be apparent when a group of faithful will be persecuted and put to death. In fact these people will be this man. They will die and yet enter God's court in the heaven and will there shine like stars, endowed with the majesty reserved for the "son of man"-like figure.

Such revelation is conveyed so as to help the readers to believe its divine origin on the one hand, and to lead them to recognize how it is taking shape in their own history on the other. The apocalypse comes from a supernatural world and yet is for the world of humankind. By repetition and gradual application of meta-historical events to earthly realities, it thus aims to prepare its listeners to welcome the new world order established by God and act accordingly.

At its deepest level, the message of the apocalypse finds its accomplishment in the very life of its recipient. The destiny of the son of man, i.e. the destiny of the holy of the Most High, is first of all the destiny of Daniel, who finally is to die and then to rise to get his reward "at the end of the days" (12:13). By transmitting his message, however, he invites his listeners to follow him. The *maškilîm* of his time do not have to hesitate but expose themselves to death, like he and his friends did at the time of

Nebuchadnezzar and Darius the Mede. The son of man will then come, the dignity of human kind will be restored and the world will be at last freed from the power of the beasts. In the meanwhile, listeners are to pay heed to what they hear.