

Symbols of Conflict and Hope: An Introductory Analysis of the Symbolism of Daniel and Revelation

Alexandru Neagoe
West University of Timișoara, Romania
alexandru.neagoe@e-uvv.ro

UDK:27-242;27-27
Original scientific paper
Received: June, 2017
Accepted: September, 2017

Abstract

The present article offers an analysis of the use of symbolism in the books of Daniel and Revelation. Thus, the first section of the study evaluates the degree of thematic unity which may be said to exist between the two books (given their common literary genre). Secondly, the article explores the different roles which symbolism plays within the two books. Finally, a concluding section brings together the findings of the study, indicating that despite the complex symbolism of Daniel and Revelation, it is plausible to speak of these books (individually and together) as having a unifying message which could be described as the victory of good over evil or, more precisely, the sovereignty of God in a world where evil seems to prevail. At the same time, this unifying message can take a wide variety of distinctive meanings for specific groups and for specific settings.

Introduction

It is ironic that books which by their genre were meant to be apocalyptic (from the Greek *avpokaluptein*, 'to reveal', 'to disclose') have come to gain the reputation of being the two most *cryptic* (*kruptein*, 'to hide', 'to keep secret') books of the canon of Christian Scriptures. There can be very little doubt that this was not the writers' intention for their original readers; they were not writing some puzzles for groups of people who had plenty of time and nothing to do with it, but on

the contrary for groups of people who, as we shall shortly see, were living under tremendous pressures and who were keen to make sense of their condition. It is much more likely to suppose that it is only the remoteness of the modern eye from the original culture and context that creates this 'puzzle' image.

The first goal of the present paper is to explore the degree to which Daniel and Revelation may be said to share a common theme (in view of their common genre) and, if so, what that theme may be. Secondly, we shall take a closer look at the way symbolism functions in these two books and what this symbolism tells us about their message. Finally, a concluding section brings together the findings of this analysis.

Thematic Unity?

The first question which needs to be raised is whether the complexity of the symbolism of Daniel and Revelation allows us to speak of a thematic unity – first of all *within* each of the two books and then also *between* them (after all they are two books addressed by different writers to different groups at different periods in time).

Literary Genre

There is at least one main thing which the two books have in common: their literary genre. Although neither of them is exclusively apocalyptic literature (Daniel has also narrative, and Revelation has prophecy and epistle), yet apocalyptic is their most distinctive feature. The bearing which this literary genre has on the thematic unity both within and between the two books is quite significant. By its nature, "apocalyptic was concerned about coming judgment and salvation", and this largely because it "was born either in persecution or in time of great oppression" (Fee and Stuart 1982, 206). This 'occasional' character of apocalypses suggests, on the one hand, a unifying concern *within* each writing. On the other hand, the similarity of the 'occasions' for the writing of the two books supports the possibility of common themes between the two books.

This kind of 'occasion' is precisely what we can glimpse about the origins of Daniel and Revelation. Whether one goes for an earlier origin of Daniel, when there were "specific pressures on Jews", or for a later date, when "power lies in the hands of constitutionally hostile gentile authorities and a compliant Jewish leadership that has cooperated with the subversion and outlawing of traditional Jewish faith," (Goldingay 1987, 326) the point remains very much the same, that the composition of the book of Daniel took place in a time when staying faithful to God implied significant hardships. The same holds true concerning Revelation, which was written at a time when the Church was either already experiencing

serious persecution or very close to doing so; the most likely date seems to be sometime towards the end of Domitian's reign (81-96).

Preliminary Survey

If it is true that apocalypses tend to concentrate their message in one direction, in order to suit the problems of one particular situation, then we would expect to see that verified in the actual content of Daniel and Revelation. It might seem too early at this stage to make firm statements concerning the message of the two books, since we have not discussed yet their use of symbolism, but the main thrust of the books is very insignificantly altered by how one decides to interpret specific symbols which are not decoded in the books.

As far as the book of Daniel is concerned, even a cursory reading is enough to reveal the repetition of the main message throughout the book: loyalty to God in the present world implies dangers and suffering; yet God will vindicate His people and judge their opponents, for however great they may seem, they are all subjects to His sovereignty (Goldingay 1987, 326; Hanson 1987, 121-130).

Basically, the same message can be seen to underline Revelation. After surveying the first eleven chapters of Revelation, Fee and Stuart write a summary of the whole book:

Thus we have been brought through the *suffering* of the church and the *judgment* of God upon the church's enemies to the final triumph of God....In chapters 8-11 we have been given the big picture; chapters 12-22 offer details of that *judgment* and *triumph* [italics mine] (Fee and Stuart 1982, 214).

Thus, the main plot of the two books seems to be related to the ongoing conflict between good and evil and the hope (indeed, certainty) that, despite indications to the contrary, evil will not have the final word in the world. The underlying message of the two books could perhaps be summarised in the words 'victory of good over evil' – especially if by this we mean that the writers of these two books were trying to encourage the persecuted believers by telling them that the 'evil' of this world will have an end, when God will exercise justice and bring 'good' for those who served Him. It is, however, important to qualify such a summary statement by saying that the conflict and the contrast between good and evil should not be understood as a cosmic dualism. Although it cannot be denied that often Daniel and Revelation seem to perceive the world in a dualistic way (Barr 1984, 39) (angels versus monsters, above versus below, this age versus the age to come, etc.), this is not the same as saying that the events in the world are the outcome of two impersonal principles or forces of 'good' and 'evil' which are in operation. The conflict is presented as unfolding between God (the Ancient of Days) and His agents (the Son of Man, the Lamb, the holy ones, the Bride) on the one hand, and Satanic figures (the beasts, the Dragon, the serpent) on the

other. This does not mean, however, that the two sides are presented on equal footing. It is only God who has the sovereignty, he alone sits on the throne (Rev. 4-5); the beasts (Dan. 7; Rev. 12-13) are only allowed *by Him* to exercise authority over limited areas and periods of time. Nor is the contrast between this age and the age to come to be taken as God's complete abandonment of this world to the powers of evil; "this world remains God's world" (Bauckham 1972, 21; note also his distinction between cosmological wisdom and mantic wisdom), the millennial kingdom of Christ (Rev. 20) is said to be *on earth*.

We may conclude this section with two remarks: (i) the literary genre and the content of Daniel and Revelation do seem to support the possibility of an underlying message; (ii) there is good reason for formulating this message as 'the victory of good over evil', or 'the sovereignty of God in a world where evil seems to prevail'. We may nuance this further by saying that while for the book of Daniel this victory was largely a future hope, in Revelation this hope had already been materialized in the death and victory of the Lamb (Rev. 5) (Bauckham 1993a, 185). The 'evil' which is still being experienced in history is merely the temporary exercise of the power of an already defeated enemy.

The Role of Symbolism in Daniel and Revelation

It will be of great relief to the 'unprofessional' reader of the Bible to know that the main message of Daniel and Revelation is not restricted to the 'experts'. Our 'less professional' survey of the main theme of the books (without a previous discussion of symbolism) in the last section is an argument in this direction. Things begin to change, however, once we begin to zoom in from the overall picture to its individual details. It is here that our interpretation starts to be greatly dependent on the decoding (or at times 'non-decoding') of symbols. A study of the way symbolism is used in these writings becomes therefore compulsory at this stage.

Decoded Symbols

Fortunately for the interpreter, not all the symbols are left uninterpreted in the writings. Some of them are already decoded. It is crucial that the work of interpretation should begin by identifying these and then using them as keys for interpreting other symbols. In this respect, Daniel has a considerable advantage over Revelation. Christopher Rowland correctly points out that in Daniel every dream-vision is followed by an interpretation, while in Revelation that only happens once. The reason for this is probably that

By John's day the stock of images used by the apocalypticists was well enough known, and the political and religious allusions so obvious, that the readers

could discern the message of the visions which the various symbols were supposed to convey (Rowland 1982, 12-13).

This is not to say, however, that all the individual symbols of the visions in Daniel are decoded while in Revelation none is apart from the ones in chapter 17. In Daniel 2, for example, it is only the first of the four parts of the statue that is explicitly identified as the Babylonian kingdom, represented by Nebuchadnezzar (2:38); all we know about the other parts is that they also stand for kingdoms (2:39-40), but we are left to work it out ourselves what kingdoms are meant (e.g. is Medo-Persia to be taken as one kingdom or as two?). In Revelation, on the other hand, David Barr notes that “John explicitly interprets his imagery in 1:8; 1:13ff.; 8:3ff.; 10:1-11; 11:7; 13:6; 13:18; 14:14-20; 17:9-15; 18:21; 19:11-16; implicit interpretations are evident at 4:1-11; 5:6; 6:1-8; 12-17; 12:1 and a number of other passages” (Barr 1984, 40).

Background of Symbolism

John J. Collins argues at length for the similarity in the use of symbolism between Daniel 7-12 and other ancient Near Eastern documents (Canaanite, Babylonian, and Hellenistic) (Collins 1977, 96-108).

Pagan mythology, however, is certainly not the only source of Danielic symbolism, and quite likely not the most significant one. Earlier Jewish writings provide a very influential source. Collins admits this, too (Collins 1977, 96-108). Thus, (i) the image of the sea and its monsters are used in the Old Testament to describe forces of chaos (Job 26; Ps.89:9-11), a historical crisis (Isa. 51:9-10), Israel’s enemies at any time (Isa. 17:12-14); (ii) Daniel 7:9-14 reminds of Psalms 2 and 110; (iii) the choice of the four beasts in Daniel 7 finds its closest parallel in Hosea 13:7; (iv) Daniel 8:8-12 mirrors Isaiah 12-15; (v) the heavenly representatives of various nations in Daniel 10-12 is similar to Isaiah 36:18-20.

It is the same twofold source, cultural influences, and Jewish Scriptures, that Richard Bauckham detects behind the symbolism of Revelation. In his words, this means that the symbolism is ‘intertextual’ and ‘contextual’ (Bauckham 1993a, xii). The most significant examples of this, in his view, are the Lion and the Lamb (messianic symbols), the Dragon (a symbol of the devil), and the earthquake (a symbol of the end). These “all allude to the Old Testament and also resonate with aspects of contemporary culture and history in the environment of the seven churches” (Bauckham 1993a, xv. 6-7). John’s description of the Son of Man in Revelation 1 is a good example of how the Old Testament (in this case Daniel 7) feeds the meaning of the symbolism of Revelation.

Having acknowledged the importance of the background in *influencing* the meaning of a certain symbol, it is equally important to emphasize that the background should not *determine* the meaning. Occasionally symbols can have a constant meaning (e.g. the beast out of the sea seems to have become by the time

of John a standard symbol for a world empire), but most times the meaning of symbols can be very fluid (Fee and Stuart 1982, 210). This aspect is especially noteworthy in Revelation. David L. Barr gives three examples of what he calls 'symbolic transformation' (chapters 5, 12 and 19), whereby symbols of suffering turn to be symbols of victory (Barr 1984, 39).

Original Purpose

Following in the lines of classical prophecy, apocalyptic literature is not so much concerned with foretelling as it is with forthtelling. We have already noted that apocalypses in general, and Daniel and Revelation in particular, were written to help people who were living under oppression or persecution to make some sense of their condition. Losing sight of this whole picture could lead to very distorted interpretations of the individual symbols. Very often, the details of the visions are simply not meant to be decoded. "In this matter, the visions are like the parables. The whole vision is trying to say something; the details are either (1) for dramatic effect (6:12-14) or (2) to add to the picture of the whole so that the readers will not mistake the points of reference" (Fee and Stuart 1982, 211). This is perhaps especially true when it comes to the predictive character of the apocalypses; the apocalypists were not writing detailed timetables of history so that the subsequent generations could look at the symbols and 'spot' their fulfillment in their time.

Stages of Fulfillment

The prophetic character of Daniel and Revelation opens the possibility that some of the symbols might have a meaning which is beyond the immediate intentions of the writers and the grasp of the original readers. Judged by this criterion, there seem to be three categories of symbols:

a) Symbols which are decoded by the text itself as representing specific historical realities which are not meant to be repeated: the four parts of the statue in Daniel 2 and the four beasts in Daniel 7, representing the sequence of four earthly kingdoms following the time of Daniel; the Lamb 'looking as if it had been slain' (Rev. 5:6), referring to the death of Christ, etc. The relevance of such symbols for today is no longer to be sought in terms of 'fulfillment' but rather along the lines of the main message of the book: God's sovereignty in human history.

b) Symbols which are used by the text in a way which allows for their repeated historical fulfillment and which therefore can be regarded as types of further stages of fulfillment. The 'little horn' of Daniel 7:8, or the horn 'which started small' (Dan. 8:9), is such a type of one who is a blasphemer and glorifies oneself above God (cf. Rev. 13:5-6; 2 Thes. 2:3-4). Sometimes, when the text does not exclude the possibility of a repeated fulfillment, perhaps even our retrospective look in history is a valid way of identifying such types, or principles. Stephen

Motyer mentions the locusts of Revelation 9 as an example of this type of symbols. The locusts combine in an unusual way beauty (women's hair, something like golden crowns) and horror (lions' teeth, demonic identity). Their meaning is perhaps "everything which seems to offer life, but which turns to torture" (Motyer 1990, 105).

c) Symbols which are strictly eschatological (especially Revelation 19-22). In the images which refer to the eschatological age the distinction between symbol and the reality which is represented is often blurred. Therefore one needs to be careful not to attempt to 'decode' something which might be simply a human way of describing heavenly realities (see Rowland 1982, 60).

Numbers

One very significant feature of apocalyptic literature is the great emphasis on the use of numbers. There is one major thing to be noted concerning their role: "*the numbers are symbolic* - even when they are also literal" (Motyer 1990, 110). 'Seven' is undoubtedly the most significant one, symbolizing fullness, completeness (Dan. 9:24; Rev. 2-3; 6-7; 8-11; 15-16). 'Four' is the number of the world (Dan. 7:2; 8:8; 11:4; Rev. 7:1; 20:8). 'Twelve' is the symbol of 'the whole people of God' (21:14; 21:12). Multiples of these numbers, as well as the use of numbers like three, six, and arguably two, eight, ten are also significant (Bauckham 1993a, 29-37; Motyer 1990, 110-113; Sweet 1990, 14-15). Because of this symbolic use of numbers, schemes based on a literal interpretation of numbers should always be treated with great reserve.

Concluding Remarks

What do all these add up to? As noted above, this study has argued that despite the complex symbolism of Daniel and Revelation, it is plausible to speak of these books (individually and together) as having a unifying message which could be described as the victory of good over evil or, more precisely, the sovereignty of God in a world where evil seems to prevail. However, our analysis of the symbolism of Daniel and Revelation has indicated that this unifying message can take a wide variety of distinctive meanings for specific groups and for specific settings. Thus, to the oppressed it tells of God's control over their situation and of a time when this present order will be changed; to the oppressors it is a reminder of God's coming judgement; to those who oscillate between obeying God and obeying ungodly ideologies it is a challenge to hold on to God; to those who are living in situations where radical change is needed it may be an encouragement to act in that respect, etc. (Hanson 1987, 62-64; Collins 1984, 224).

As a final observation, our introductory analysis of the books of Daniel and Revelation seems to afford the conclusion that the use of symbolism both ‘intertextually’ and ‘contextually’ (i.e. building bridges between Scriptures and people) should be regarded as a basic hermeneutical key in the interpretation of apocalyptic symbolism by all those who, in their own generations, are willing to be used by God for prophetic ministries.

Bibliography

- Barr, D.L. 1984. “The Apocalypse as Symbolic Transformation of the World: A Literary Analysis”, *Interpretation*, 38.
- Bauckham, R. 1993. *The Climax of Prophecy*, T&T Clark.
- Bauckham, R. 1978. ‘The rise of apocalyptic’, *Themelios*, 3:2.
- Bauckham, R. 1993. *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, Cambridge U.P.
- Boring, E. 1989. *Revelation*, J.Knox Press.
- Collins, A.Y. 1984. *Crisis and Catharsis*, The Westminster Press.
- Collins, J.J. 1977. *The Apocalyptic Vision of the Book of Daniel*.
- Dillistone, F.W. (Ed.) 1966. *Myth and Symbol*, SPCK.
- Fee, G.D., and Stuart, D. 1982. *How to Read the Bible for all its Worth*, S.U.
- Fiorenza, E.S. 1991. *Revelation’s Vision of a Just World*, Forest P.
- Goldingay, I.E. 1987. *Daniel*, Word.
- Guthrie, D. 1988. *The Relevance of John’s Apocalypse*, SCM.
- Hanson, P.D. 1987. *Old Testament Apocalyptic*, Abingdon P.
- Mathewson, D. 1992. “Revelation in recent genre criticism: some implications for interpretation”, *Trinity J.*, 13NS.
- Motyer, S. 1990. *Unlock the Bible*, Scripture Union.
- Osborne, G.R. 1993. ‘Theodicy in Apocalypse’, *Trinity J.*, 14NS.
- Rowland, C. 1982. *The Open Heaven*, SPCK.
- Sureet, J. 1990. *Revelation*, SCM.

Alexandru Neagoe

**Simboli sukoba i nade: uvodna analiza simbolizma iz knjiga
Daniel i Otkrivenje**

Sažetak

Ovaj članak donosi analizu upotrebe simbola u knjigama Daniel i Otkrivenje. Prvi dio studije procjenjuje razinu tematskog jedinstva, za koje se može reći da postoji između dvije knjige (s obzirom na njihov zajednički književni žanr). U drugom dijelu članka istražuju se različite uloge koje simbolizam igra u ove dvije knjige. Konačno, završni dijelovi ujedanju nalaze istraživanja, ukazujući na to kako je, unatoč složenom simbolizmu u knjigama Daniela i Otkrivenja, moguće o njima govoriti (pojedinačno i skupno) kao o knjigama koje imaju jedinstvenu poruku koja bi se mogla opisati kao pobjeda dobra nad zlom, ili točnije, kao suverenost Boga u svijetu u kojem izgleda da prevladava zlo. Istodobno, ta jedinstvena poruka može za određene skupine i okruženja poprimiti širok raspon posebnih značenja.

