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Daniel 11:29–35, New Revised Standard Version, updated edition.

²⁹ “At the time appointed he shall return and come into the south, but this time it shall not be as it was before. ³⁰ For ships of Kittim shall come against him, and he shall lose heart and withdraw. He shall be enraged and take action against the holy covenant. He shall turn back and come to an understanding with those who forsake the holy covenant. ³¹ Forces sent by him shall occupy and profane the temple and fortress. They shall abolish the regular burnt offering and set up the desolating sacrilege. ³² He will flatter with smooth words those who violate the covenant, but the people who are loyal to their God shall stand firm and take action. ³³ The wise among the people shall give understanding to many; for some days, however, they shall fall by sword and flame and suffer captivity and plunder. ³⁴ When they fall, they shall receive a little help, and many shall join them insincerely. ³⁵ Some of the wise shall fall, so that they may be refined, purified, and cleansed, until the time of the end, for there is still an interval until the time appointed.”

Daniel: Prophecy after the fact or universal lessons?

On the 24th of February in 2022, Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine, and yes, he is personally responsible for the war. Throughout history, major wars have been launched entirely at the whim of kings, emperors, sultans, presidents, and prime ministers. In Ukraine, vast numbers of people have been killed, maimed, made homeless, had their lives radically altered, and have been forced to live in fear. There has been a huge impact on the Ukrainian economy. And yes, Russians have suffered. Many families have lost their sons and husbands in combat. Female

Russian soldiers have been killed. There have been Russian civilians killed. My only point right now is that this was all caused by a single person. We'll get back to this.

The Book of Daniel proports to be written around 530 B.C., after the capture of Babylon by Cyrus, the Persian king. It was then that the Israelite exiles were released from Babylon and allowed to return to Israel – but Daniel was too old to return. The captives had been held in Babylon for 70 years. The prophet Daniel was one of those who had been captured and forcibly taken to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar in about 608 B.C. According to the biblical account, Daniel would have been around 18 when taken prisoner and about 100 when he finished the Book of Daniel.

There is a problem with this timeline, however. There is Hebrew and Aramaic grammar and vocabulary in the book that appears to date to a much later period. There are also some Persian and Greek words in the book that appear to be anachronistic. There are some historical inaccuracies in the book, suggesting that the author was not personally familiar with the exilic period. The nature of the writing itself is considered “apocalyptic”, that is, symbolic writing having to do with the violent crushing of evil by God, something that was popular hundreds of years after the story of the Book of Daniel was supposed to have taken place. In sum, although the book is nominally the prophesies of Daniel concerning a period before

500 B.C., most scholars think a large part or all of it was written hundreds of years later, around 165 B.C. This was during the “Maccabean” period when Greek speaking Seleucids occupied the Holy Land. The Seleucids were a Greek dynasty that descended from one of Alexander the Great’s generals, Seleucus Nicator. (Remember that after Alexander the Great died as a young man, his vast empire was divided among his generals.)

Why do we think the Book of Daniel was written far later than the period it describes? One of the prophecies in the Book of Daniel appears to very accurately predict the Jewish revolt that happened during the Maccabean period. The conventional biblical interpretation of this is that Daniel was simply a very accurate prophet. The other explanation is that he “prophesized after the fact” by radically pre-dating his work. We’ll get back to this.

Just what was this later period, the “Maccabean” age? The term “Silent Period” refers to the period between the last of the writing of the Old Testament and the birth of Jesus, at least with respect to the content that we find in most Protestant Old Testaments. This “Inter-Testamental Period” covers an estimated 400 years, from the time of the prophet Malachi until John the Baptist, who is called a prophet. But there is material that many consider biblical and was written during this period of 400 years, during this time when most Protestant Bibles contain

nothing prophetic, nothing from the mouth of God. Protestants call this very diverse collection of materials “the Apocrypha”. This is from a Greek word, meaning “hidden away” or “to hide away”. These are materials that many Christians and Jews once called scriptural and then later excluded from scripture. These books are all Old Testament in nature, as they concern the Chosen People living under the Old Covenant, before the birth of Christ. The last canonical book in most Protestant Bibles, Malachi, shows the Jews being told by Malachi that once again, God is not happy with them. They have wandered from the teachings of God. They had returned home from exile in Babylon but are now living in a land devastated by war. A drought has destroyed the crops. The people are poor. They are still under the control of a foreign power, Persia, which conquered Babylon. Malachi appears to predict the arrival of Jesus 400 years later:

***3** See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. ² But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?*

The books that appear in the Apocrypha, which are not considered biblical to most Protestants, but are in the Roman and Eastern Orthodox Catholic Bibles, and which some Jews do consider valuable as spiritual writings, are useful to all Christians for one very powerful reason: they give us a lot of insight into what was

happening in and around Jerusalem when Jesus was born. Because these books were excluded from our Bible, most Protestants have a very limited understanding of just what was happening in the Holy Land before the Roman Empire took over and Jesus was born. These books explain, for instance, why the New Testament is written in Greek, when the Jews spoke Aramaic and prayed in Hebrew, and yet their colonial oppressors at the time of Jesus spoke Latin. These Apocryphal books include some additions to the existing Old Testament books, and several new books. My favorite is called the Wisdom of Solomon, which is written in a poetic style, and praises a life of wisdom. We see that if we are willing to consider books that have not been included in Jewish scripture and not in most Christian bibles, the silent period wasn't so silent at all. Of interest to us today for this message are the few Apocryphal books that are called 1, 2, 3, and 4 Maccabees. Keep in mind that "apocryphal" does not mean false or not trusted. They simply are not included in the Bible. The Maccabee books - and some collections only contain the first two of them - give us tremendous insight into the world into which Jesus was born.

The Maccabees were a priestly Jewish family. First of all, the term "Maccabee" is believed to be an honorific title given to a family named Hasmonean, and the term apparently derives from the Aramaic word for "hammer". They were a priestly family whose patriarch was named Mattathias. 1 Maccabees was written

in Hebrew, but what we have is a Greek translation of it. 2 Maccabees is a very different document, and it was written in Greek originally. This is part of the reason that these books are not considered scriptural by Jews: they were in part not written in their holy language, Hebrew. Here is a very important fact. 2 Maccabees was written in Greek because the Persians were no longer in control of the Holy Land, as they had been since the return from exile. Greek speaking people were in charge. Although he didn't live long, Alexander the Great, a young king of Greece, had swept through and conquered the Persians, and took control of Israel in 332 B.C. By the time Jesus was born, the Romans were in charge, the Roman general Pompey having taken control of Jerusalem in 63 B.C. Greek rule had pretty much ended by 143 B.C., but the influence of the Greek empire in the centuries before Jesus was born was the reason that the New Testament was written in Greek. The Jews spoke Aramaic, a language related to Hebrew, but somewhat different. They worshipped in Hebrew. During the rule of Greece and other Greek speaking people, Jews became very Hellenized, meaning that some of them had willingly and aggressively adopted much of the Greek culture, including their written language. Many Jews identified more as Greek people than Hebrew people. This is the theme that underlies the Maccabee books: there is a great conflict between Jews who have retained Hebrew culture and still worship God in the Temple in Jerusalem (the

Second Temple) and Jews who have become Hellenized and are worshipping Greek gods. At this time, many loyal Jews are praying that God will send an earthly Messiah to once again bring the People back to God - and crush the Greek empire. Later, when Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey, people yell “Hosanna”, meaning “Save us, now”, pleading with Jesus to destroy the new occupier, Rome.

In the second chapter of 1 Maccabee, the Greek king Antiochus IV, has ordered Jews to come to a pagan altar and offer a sacrifice. The king demands that Mattathias, a Jewish priest, force his people to fall in line. We are told this:

¹⁵ The king’s officers who were enforcing the apostasy came to the town of Modein to make them offer sacrifice. ¹⁶ Many from Israel came to them, and Mattathias and his sons were assembled. ¹⁷ Then the king’s officers spoke to Mattathias as follows: “You are a leader, honored and great in this town, and supported by sons and brothers. ¹⁸ Now be the first to come and do what the king commands, as all the nations and the people of Judah and those who are left in Jerusalem have done. Then you and your sons will be numbered among the Friends of the king, and you and your sons will be honored with silver and gold and many gifts.”

Mattathias defies this order, saying that he will continue to honor their covenant with God, what we call the Old Covenant or the Covenant of Moses:

¹⁹ But Mattathias answered and said in a loud voice: “Even if all the nations that live under the rule of the king obey him and have chosen to obey his commandments, every one of them abandoning the religion of their ancestors, ²⁰ I and my sons and my brothers will continue to live by the covenant of our ancestors. ²¹ Far be it from us to desert the law and the ordinances. ²² We will not obey the king’s words by turning aside from our religion to the right hand or to the left.”

Mattathias kills an official of the king and a Jew who tries to offer a pagan sacrifice:

²³ When he had finished speaking these words, a Jew came forward in the sight of all to offer sacrifice on the altar in Modein, according to the king's command. ²⁴ When Mattathias saw it, he burned with zeal, and his heart was stirred. He gave vent to righteous anger; he ran and slaughtered him on the altar. ²⁵ At the same time he killed the king's officer who was forcing them to sacrifice, and he tore down the altar.

This is the beginning of a two-front war. There is a son of Mattathias, named Judah, who becomes known as Maccabee, which again, derives from the Aramaic word “hammer”. He and his army don’t just fight the Greeks: they fight against fellow Jews who have become Hellenized and have adopted Greek gods. This is in keeping with the key Old Testament theme of the need for people to remain loyal to God.

There is a series of passages in the 11th Chapter of Daniel that closely mimic the series of historical events that occurred when Antiochus IV tried to force the Jews to speak Greek, wear Greek clothing, and worship Greek gods. While some Jews did voluntarily Hellenize, there were those who remained faithful. King Antiochus IV was known to be manipulative and to use violence. This passage from Daniel, while supposedly written several hundred years earlier, after the Babylonian exile, appears to describe that revolt against King Antiochus IV:

³² He will flatter with smooth words those who violate the covenant, but the people who are loyal to their God shall stand firm and take action. ³³ The wise among the people shall give understanding to many; for some days, however, they shall fall by sword and flame and suffer captivity and plunder. ³⁴ When they fall,

they shall receive a little help, and many shall join them insincerely. ³⁵ Some of the wise shall fall, so that they may be refined, purified, and cleansed, until the time of the end, for there is still an interval until the time appointed.”

If Daniel is really a pseudonym for an author who lived during Maccabean times, then he would have been well aware of the Maccabean revolution, with Jews killing fellow Jews who had become Hellenized and adopted the Greek language, Greek clothing, Greek customs, and Greek gods. It would mean that there was no historical “Prophet Daniel” – and whomever the writer was, he was writing for his time. Perhaps “Daniel” was trying to inspire the people of his day by first telling how Israelites had in earlier times survived a brutal attack by the Babylonians, including the destruction of the Temple, followed by a forced exile. Perhaps he deliberately included a supposedly ancient prophesy that accurately reflected the current day, the Maccabean period, to drive home the point that just as the Jews had survived the horror of the Babylonian invasion, with courage, they could survive the attempt by Antiochus IV to crush their faith and culture.

I am not concerned about whether Daniel was a real prophet, or when the Book of Daniel was written. The Bible, especially the Old Testament, is a series of faith stories that assure us of God’s love and dependability. They are not a history lesson. This is from Daniel, Chapter 10, where Daniel is overwhelmed by the weight of being a prophet, of guiding his people through the Babylonian exile:

¹⁸ Again one having the appearance of a man touched me and strengthened me.

¹⁹ And he said, "O man greatly loved, fear not, peace be with you; be strong and of good courage." And as he spoke to me, I was strengthened and said, "Let my lord speak, for you have strengthened me."

When he is feeling the most overwhelmed by his life and his responsibilities, he feels the touch of an angel who reassures him that he can be at peace, that he is in his heart strong and courageous, that God will give him the strength he needs. If this was truly written hundreds of years later, Daniel is conveying this message to people under the thumb of a Greek speaking empire, not the Babylonians.

We take the lessons of the Bible to be universal. Daniel as a prophet might be fictional. But this book of prophesy, beautifully written, still tells us that God will give us the calm and the confidence we need to confront life. Global communications allow us to witness multiple events happening around the world that are as scary as the Babylonian invasion or the oppression of the Greek speaking Seleucids. President Vladimir Putin is a modern King Nebuchadnezzar or King Antiochus IV. He is one man who has secured incredible power and has used it to do great harm. But our Bible tells us to put our faith in God and to turn to God for the strength we need to demand that free nations stand up to regimes that initiate unjust wars. We should take the Bible to heart in today's context. Its lesson tells us about God's ways in universal language that is tied to no specific time period.