THEOLOGICAL ETHICS IN DANIEL

JOHN BARTON

1. ETHICAL CONCERNS IN DANIEL

The book of Daniel is usually classified as apocalyptic literature, and this has consequences for what we expect to find in it so far as moral teaching is concerned. If apocalypticism is the literature of small, beleaguered groups looking for deliverance from oppression, then the ethics of apocalypticism can be expected to manifest the characteristic mind-set of such groups, with their desire to stress all that binds them together and makes them distinctive. As with the Qumran community, one looks for strict rules of membership, a code of discipline to bind the group together, and an authoritarian structure that will ensure individuals conform to the ethos of the group.

In fact Daniel only partly conforms to these expectations. On the whole its ethical concerns are those that came to characterize "mainstream" Judaism in later times. The first chapter sets the tone for this, with its emphasis on Jewish food laws as the point on which Daniel and his three companions feel obliged to insist. "Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the royal rations of food and wine" (1:8). He asks for permission to be limited to a vegetarian diet, and God vindicates him by ensuring that he and his companions enjoy more blooming health than the young men who eat the royal rations of rich food and wine. This concern for the food laws can be seen in another work which may be from much the same period as Daniel and similarly reflects the Maccabean situation, the

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book of Judith. Here, it will be recalled, Judith is particularly scrupulous about matters of diet, and even when going to deliver her people by killing Holfernes she is careful not to eat his defiled food, but takes with her her own supplies, odd as this seems for someone invited to a banquet:

Then he [Holfernes] commanded them to bring her in where his silver dinnerware was kept, and ordered them to set a table before her with some of his own delicacies, and with some of his own wine to drink. But Judith said, “I cannot partake of them, or it will be an offence; but I will have enough with the things I brought with me” (Judith 12:1-2).

When Holfernes expresses a fear that her supplies may run out, she retorts, with dramatic irony, that they will last her until “the Lord carries out by my hand what he has determined” (12:4).

Observance of the food laws is a crucial symptom of a general ethical attitude that pervades the book of Daniel, that of intense loyalty to the God of Israel. This manifests itself in another practice which is not formally included in biblical law, but was certainly by this period a feature of Jewish piety: prayer towards Jerusalem at certain times of day. In Daniel 6, the “presidents and satraps” have Darius enact a law forbidding the worship of any god but himself, and Daniel’s immediate reaction to it is to continue to observe set prayer-times:

Although Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he continued to go to his house, which had windows in its upper room open towards Jerusalem three times a day to pray to his God and praise him, just as he had done previously (Dan 6:10).

Thus he registers his loyalty and devotion to his own God in spite of the danger of arrest which, of course, promptly follows. When Daniel is vindicated and freed from the lions’ den, he attributes his deliverance to the fact that he has been found “blameless”; presumably it is his constancy in prayer that results in this verdict on his conduct.

Of course a similar theme appears in the story of the burning fiery furnace (Daniel 3). Here again the issue is whether Shadrach, Meschach, and Abednego are prepared to show disloyalty to their God, and despite the king’s threats they absolutely refuse to do so. The ethics of exclusive obedience to the God of Israel is here stated in a peculiarly “disinterested” form, as the three young men insist that they will be loyal to God even if he does not choose to deliver them (Dan 3:18). Religious commitment here takes a strikingly self-