Seow, C. L.

Dan<e1>iel

Westminster Bible Companion


Stephen L. Cook
Virginia Theological Seminary
Alexandria, VA 22304

With his new commentary on Daniel, respected Old Testament professor C. L. Seow of Princeton Theological Seminary has contributed a sagacious new addition to the Westminster Bible Companion series, a series intended as a learned resource for use in such ministry contexts as leading advanced Bible study groups and preparing text-based sermons. Seow has thoroughly researched and judiciously presented this work, honing it for its intended audiences. The volume will certainly make Daniel’s enigmas more intelligible and its riches more accessible to communities of faith.

In keeping with the format of the WBC series, the commentary presents the NRSV text of Daniel in meaningful units, followed by explanations and interpretations. Much to his credit, Seow is fair-minded, taking note of approaches to Daniel that differ from his own, even mentioning classical views on the book from time to time. His own interpretive choice is consistently a standard, historical-critical stance, however, that aims to explain the book in terms of its original historical context. He carefully outlines the critical argument that the book doubtless reached its completed form in the tyrannous reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the period before 164 B.C.E.
Seow attends closely to Daniel’s text and language, especially its literary features and the nuances of its Aramaic and Hebrew. He notes that the language used in the story of Belshazzar’s feast, for example, sets up a playful contrast between the king and Daniel. Whereas “loosened” hip joints are associated with the terrified king (Dan 5:6), wise Daniel possesses the ability to “loosen” knots, that is, solve puzzles (5:12, 16).

Sometimes language provides Seow with clues about Daniel’s authorship. Thus, the shift in the quality of the text’s language beginning in Dan 8–12 fits a change in the locale of the book’s composition. The inelegant Hebrew here is just what we might expect from Jewish repatriates of the second century B.C.E., who have returned to Jerusalem from years of exile and reclaimed their native tongue.

Attention to biblical cross-references is often key to Seow’s interpretations, so that Daniel emerges as a book in lively dialogue with other parts of Scripture, especially the second half of Isaiah. Daniel’s God-given victory over all of Babylonia’s sages in chapter 2, for example, helps attest to the claim of Isa 44:25–26 that Israel’s God “makes fools of diviners.” Similarly, the description of the rock-mountain in the same chapter of Daniel echoes Isaiah. The appearance of the rock, which represents the community of heirs to all God’s promises, recalls the language of Isa 51:1–2, “Look to the rock ... to Abraham.... I blessed him and made him many.” Later in the book, Dan 11:33–35 again echoes Second Isaiah. It uses the language of Isaiah’s suffering servant to portray the suffering and martyrdom of the wise under Antiochus. Isaiah’s servant image inspired the model of quiet faithfulness that Daniel advocates here, according to Seow.

Seow makes several helpful suggestions for reading Daniel holistically, as an integral piece of literature. He argues, for example, that in building his golden idol of chapter 3, Nebuchadnezzar is trying to concretize and correct his dream image of a statue in chapter 2. Another example of Seow’s effort at a holistic reading appears in his treatment of the alternating voice of narration in chapter 4, which readers might experience as a fragmented style. Instead, Seow sees the change in voice from first person (“I”) to third person (“he”) in the chapter as “entirely appropriate,” since the switch corresponds to Nebuchadnezzar’s transformation to an animalistic state, where he can no longer express himself in the first person.

Along the same lines, the exceedingly awkward Hebrew of Dan 8:13 may be considered an artistic, literary effect and not merely a corruption of the text, according to Seow. The garbled language of the verse suggests that its angelic speaker is stammering, which would make sense given that the being is contemplating the terrifying prospect of the temple’s desecration.
Several solid insights into the theological perspective of the book emerge from this commentary. Seow is surely correct, for example, that the court tales of the book function only secondarily to provide models for faithful human conduct. The primary message of the tales is God’s divine sovereignty, freedom, and triumph. When Nebuchadnezzar falls prostrate before lowly Daniel, the reader sees an initial fulfillment of Isa 40–55, which prophesies that earth’s rulers will bow down before the exiles, the lowly remnant of God’s chosen people. Here it is already clear that only God has true power to reign on earth. In my view, it is but a small step from this perspective in the court tales to the visions of God’s reign concretely and incontestably established in the book’s final chapters.

Conforming to the aims of the WBC series, Seow’s commentary champions Daniel as a text that is relevant to faithful believers today. After explaining Dan 8 as a vision concerning specific events of the second century B.C.E., he asserts that nevertheless, “the meaning of the passage is not locked in the past” (132). Later, after interpreting Dan 12:1–4 as an end-time judgment specifically on the opponents and the supporters of Antiochus, he maintains that this text too remains relevant for continuing generations. Although Antiochus is long dead, reading Daniel today calls one “to participate with the ancient reader in making sense of the visions that are now revealed, though still in many ways remaining a mystery” (189).

These assertions are intriguing, so I found myself wanting to hear more about the specifics of how Daniel’s revelations relate to the present. The commentary’s interpretative stance, which is consistently a historicist one, does not lend itself to providing such guidance, however. Without fail, Seow interprets Daniel’s visions of history as culminating in Maccabean times.

Even in the case of visions unfulfilled at the time of the book’s writing, Seow reads the text as a mirror of ancient times, not a guide to discernment about events in the present or future. He understands all the details of Dan 11:40–45, for example, as events of the Maccabean era, even though this text peers beyond its author’s immediate experience. “The gist of that prediction” is a thing of the past, according to Seow. It “has arguably been validated in history, although not in precisely the way that the author had envisaged” (185).