Carla Sulzbach  
McGill University  
Montreal, Canada H3S 2R8

This commentary forms part of the Westminster Bible Companion series. Its stated objective is to “assist pastors and students in their study of the Bible as a guide to Christian faith and practice. Each volume presents the text under discussion, explains the biblical book in its original historical context, and explores the text’s significance for faithful living today. These books are an ideal resource for preparing a text-based sermon and for use in advanced Bible study groups” (back of the book). In addition, the series foreword states that it is “intended to help the laity of the church read the Bible more clearly and intelligently” (xi).

Choon Leong Seow, the Henry Snyder Gehman Professor of Old Testament Language and Literature at Princeton Theological Seminary, is no stranger to writing biblical commentaries. In recent years he has produced the Anchor Bible volume on Ecclesiastes and contributed the 1 and 2 Kings commentary to The New Interpreter’s Bible. He has also written on linguistic issues pertaining to biblical Hebrew and Aramaic.

The commentary’s format is to present first the NRSV translation of the chapter followed by an introduction and a historical and theological analysis of its literary units, rather than providing a strict verse-by-verse interpretation. Given the fact that the use of the NRSV is
standardized practice in this series, Seow ably comments on the quality of this translation and provides improvements or alternatives as he sees them. Although he frequently calls attention to the original Aramaic or Hebrew word in the text, it would have been instructive if he had added the transliteration of these terms for those interested.

In the introduction Seow follows mainstream critical scholarship in dating the final redaction to the second century B.C.E., with the court tales (Dan 1–6) being older. He neatly outlines the problems that arise when the traditional view for an exilic date of composition is maintained (4–5). Daniel and his friends are described as belonging to the maskilim (the wise ones) who, while opposing Hellenization, did not advocate active resistance, unlike the hasidim (Dan 11). The author of Daniel may have belonged to these maskilim. Based on a similarity of terminology, Seow suggests that these may have considered Isaiah’s suffering servant as a role model who, while stumbling, was ultimately vindicated (13). He further emphasizes a link with Ugaritic myth for the background of the figure of Daniel. Throughout the commentary links with Canaanite and Ugaritic mythology are made. It would have been helpful if it had been explained that, while being part of Canaanite culture, Ugarit was a relatively independent kingdom, geographically far to the north of the biblical understanding of the land of Canaan, and that its literature flourished from the fifteenth through the thirteenth centuries B.C.E., written not in Canaanite script but a consonantal cuneiform. The city was destroyed in approximately 1180 B.C.E.

In the analysis of the first six chapters many examples are provided of how especially two of the other famous court tales in the Hebrew Bible, the Joseph stories and the book of Esther (aside from numerous other references from the Hebrew Bible), illustrate the exploits of Daniel. Besides references to the New Testament, however, there is only sparse mention of the Dead Sea Scrolls or other Second Temple period literature, which is unfortunate. The author has refrained from making the appropriate connections to such texts (especially 1 Enoch and Jubilees, as well as certain Qumran texts) in favor of indicating links with other ancient Near Eastern sources that are much more remote from the milieu of Daniel. This applies, for instance, to two examples that are typical for many texts with an apocalyptic character, namely, the treatment of the “overview of history” (166) and the “tablets of destiny” (167). The Testament of Daniel (187) is a printing error for the Testament of Dan (part of the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs). Further, in the list of abbreviations (xiii), 1 Enoch is dated to the fourth century B.C.E. This is difficult, as it is a composite work, the earlier part rather dating to the second (or perhaps third) century B.C.E. and the latest probably to the late first century B.C.E. No dating is given for Jubilees. This should be placed sometime in the second century B.C.E. (we learn this only on page 3).

There are only six brief and scattered references to Qumran. In the first the author points out that the shift from Aramaic back to Hebrew at the beginning of chapter 8 “is now
corroborated by manuscripts from Qumran” (116). When discussing the reverse trend in 2:4 in the next sentence, however, he neglects to mention the even more interesting fact that the Qumran manuscripts of Daniel also bear out the scribal peculiarity of creating a blank area in the text highlighting the shift from Hebrew to Aramaic, exactly as in the Masoretic Text and as found in the printed editions. Another (160) refers to “one of the documents from Qumran images a perpetual conflict between the forces of light and those of darkness.” No doubt, the Scroll of the War of the Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness is intended. However, the significance for the broader understanding of Daniel in light of the numerous copies of the book found at Qumran is never pointed out. “The Copper Scrolls” (149) must be Scroll.

While pointing out the theological message of Daniel “for the contemporary community of faith,” Seow wants to present Daniel within the context of a clear understanding of the original audience of the text (2). This would be a Jewish readership in Judea during the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes in the years preceding and during the Maccabean revolt. He is very careful not to read Daniel christologically. Characters that are often interpreted as allusions to the person or actions of Christ are explained in their historical, literary, and especially mythological context. An example of this may be found in Seow’s treatment (108) of the “son of man” figure in Dan 7. He explains that the messianic reading accorded to the “son of man” by the Gospel writers is a later understanding that is not found in Daniel’s vision. The general message of the book is seen in “its perspective on the sovereignty of God and how that sovereignty may be manifested on earth through God’s faithful servants” (2).

The focus on the “original audience” seems to prompt Seow to look at the Jewish aspects of the text. One of these is the issue of purity, especially the impurity that is caused by mixing of species. He thus explains (46) that Herodotus “reports that Cyrus himself was a product of mixed marriage, which was, of course, an anathema to the Jews.” In fact, no Jew of any time would care less about this as long as no Jews were involved! This notion returns in the treatment of the four hybrid monsters in the vision of Dan 7 (102). Seow states with certainty that “[t]heir hybrid character no doubt suggests uncleanness to the original Jewish audience,” based on the listing of unclean animals in Lev 11. However, this argument offers by no means a satisfactory explanation for the animal imagery, since, among other things, it does not account for the use of the animals symbolizing Persia and the Seleucids (117, 120), the ram and the goat, “two animals that are clean according to ritual laws” (117). Moreover, the listing in Lev 11 pertains to dietary law. It refers only to animals that may or may not be consumed! In his discussion of the passage in Dan 6 where Daniel is said to pray three times a day, Seow states (90) that “Jewish law makes no stipulation about the number of times that one must pray each day.” This is somewhat misleading, as rabbinic halakah (which the term “Jewish law” evokes) clearly stipulates exactly that! When
precisely the fixed prayer times became institutionalized is not entirely clear, but it is not inconceivable that the behavior of the seer in the text may have helped shape later views. See on this the discussion in John Collins’s Daniel commentary (Hermeneia, 1984: 268–69). Seow does comment on the importance of the prayer direction toward Jerusalem, which is clearly pointed out in 6:10. Puzzling, then, is his comment on Dan 9, where he says (136) that “Jerusalem is mentioned nowhere else in the book, but appears both in the prayer (vv. 7, 12, 16) and in the introduction (v. 2).” How then should we understand the presence of Jerusalem in 1:1 and 6:10?

On Daniel’s dietary habits of not accepting the royal portions, Seow comments (25) that “[t]echnically, the Torah’s dietary laws are not violated.” He explains this by adducing 2 Kgs 24:30 (this must be 25:29–30) and ANET (308). In it the exiled King Jehoiachin seems to have accepted similar portions “as far as we know” (26). In fact, this is not at all clear from the text, and neither is it specified what exactly the rations consisted of. No matter the various explanations: that particular passage specifically only refers tolehem, the primary meaning of which is bread, (and the Babylonian record specifies only oil rations), not to other food or wine or the king’s table. He merely ate in his presence (if we follow the simple meaning of the text).

In dealing with Daniel’s status as a prophet (29), Seow writes on 1:17, “Daniel is portrayed here as a mediator of divine revelation, a vehicle of the prophetic word . . . . Hence he is appropriately called a prophet in the New Testament (Matt. 24:15).” To this should be added the first-century Jewish historian Josephus (Ant. 10.11.4) as well as Qumran. In 4QFlorilegium he is mentioned as Daniel the prophet alongside Ezekiel the prophet. However, 11Q Melchizedek says “said Dan[iel]” but a few lines earlier the text refers to Isaiah the prophet. Although the text is broken off at a crucial point, it is interesting that the proposed restoration leaves no room for the additional “the prophet.” More importantly, at least one of the so-called Pseudo-Daniel texts from Qumran with certainty does not refer to him as a prophet. Seow’s phrasing of the issue does not reflect that this matter is actually debated. (see, e.g., K. Koch, “Is Daniel Also among the Prophets?” Int 39 (1985): 117–30; and M.A. Knibb, “‘You Are Indeed Wiser than Daniel’ – Reflections on the Character of the Book of Daniel,” in The Book of Daniel [ed. A. S. Van der Woude, 1993], 399–411).

Toward the end the author makes a puzzling comment. As has been accepted by a majority of scholars, Daniel produces ex eventu prophecies. The historical observations made by the author of Daniel are precise when dealing with his own time, after which the precision falters. There is nothing strange about this, and this position is followed by Seow throughout the commentary. To say, then, that “the contradictions have greatly troubled interpreters who have been embarrassed by the inaccuracy of the details” (185) is curious, to say the least. Who are these interpreters? Certainly not the critical ones. It is
even stranger that he continues this thought by arguing that this in no way discredits biblical prophecy. “Biblical prophecy is not clairvoyance but the interpretation of the will of God,” and the prophets were, after all, “not soothsayers . . . [but] . . . inspired in their ability to shape the community of faith’s response, not because of the precision of their predictions.” This is not quite correct. Numerous passages in especially the books of Kings emphasize exactly the prophets’ clairvoyant and predictive powers (see, e.g., the listing of these passages in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* 13:1158). Moreover, there is the concept of the false prophet discussed in Deut 18:20–22. From this passage it is abundantly clear that people expected legitimate prophets to predict properly.

Seow’s knowledge of the world of Daniel and its impact surely reaches beyond the size of this modest volume as well as what the series’ objective allows him to display. This results, on one hand, in attempting to squeeze in as much information as possible and, on the other hand, a seeming inability to supply exactly that information. Being written for a lay audience, the text is not footnoted, and the bibliography consists of only one and a half pages. Most points of view are given anonymously, and even the few that are named are not referenced, except for Pritchard’s *ANET*, which is always cited by page. Formulating the various existing opinions in this way does not reveal anything about the sources and the actual discussion going on with regard to different issues, and it certainly does not help the reader to find out more.

If it was Seow’s intention to provide a taste of the approaches to Daniel in the past and the present, as well as a glimpse of the world of this book, he has succeeded admirably in this well-written commentary. However, those with a bigger appetite and/or the need for a more theologically grounded approach will have to look elsewhere for their information.