



## Zdravko Stefanovic



Zdravko Stefanovic, Ph.D. was born in Bosnia, Europe. Educated in Croatia, France, and the United States, Stefanovic specialized in biblical languages and interpretation. For thirteen years, he taught religion

in a number of countries in the Asia-Pacific region. At present, he teaches classes in Hebrew Bible at Walla Walla College, Walla Walla, Washington, and serves as adjunct professor for schools in the Philippines, Croatia, and Serbia. He has taught and held seminars on three continents, and has written popular and academic books and articles, including several articles on Daniel. His book entitled *The Aramaic of Daniel in the Light of Old Aramaic* was published by Sheffield Academic Press in England. He is in the process of writing a commentary on Daniel for Andrews University Press.

**S** *habbat Shalom*\*: Zdravko, you have worked and studied extensively in the book of Daniel, you lecture about it, and you have written a number of articles and a book about it. What draws you to the book of Daniel and makes it so interesting to you?

**Zdravko Stefanovic:** I can think of at least three reasons. The first is simply that the book of Daniel is part of the Bible, and I have a lot of interest in the messages of the Bible.

The second reason is that the book of Daniel is bilingual. In addition to the use of two languages, it also uses two main genres or literary types: historical and prophetic. Furthermore, the book was most likely intended for a bicultural audience. Since we are living at a time when culture is very important and many people, including myself, are bi- or multicultural, the book is appealing to me.

The third reason is that I have a personal interest in the Aramaic language and its various dialects. The Aramaic language was the *lingua franca* at the time when the book of Daniel is traditionally believed to have been written. There is a midrash on the presence of the Aramaic language in the Bible. It says that God honored the Aramaic

language by allowing it to be present in all three major parts of the Tanakh: in the Torah, which contains two Aramaic words (Gen 31:47), in the prophets (Jer 10:11), and in the writings (Ezra and Daniel, which are both bilingual).

**Shabbat Shalom:** Will you explain how important the book of Daniel is in Christian tradition?

**Stefanovic:** As we study the history of the Christian church, which some have defined as the history of the interpretation of the Bible in the church, we can see how much the book of Daniel and its central message have inspired people of faith. Especially during times of persecution or great difficulty, the book's message has served as a source of comfort to believers. A number of contemporary academic publications deal with the book of Daniel, which testifies to its continuing importance in academic study.

At a popular level, the stories of the book of Daniel are well known and treasured by both children and adults. Sometimes in the Bible classes that I teach there are students who have never purchased a copy of the Bible—some have never read it at all—but even so they have somehow heard of stories from the book of Daniel.

**Shabbat Shalom:** Daniel is not only important for Christians. It was also popular for the Jews of Qumran, the region where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. When the site was excavated eight manuscripts of the book were discovered. In the Qumran collection, the book of Daniel ranks in number of manuscripts only behind the Torah, the Psalms, and the book

of Isaiah, making it one of the most numerous books found at Qumran. And, of course, the Maccabees must have thought that the book of Daniel applied to their own time. Is it still important for the Jews of today?

**Stefanovic:** First, I agree with you that the book of Daniel was very popular at Qumran, and it must have been an inspiration to the Maccabees in their struggle for religious and political independence. And yes, the book of Daniel is important to the Jewish people today. Even so interpretations of the book vary among different authors. I am

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presently working on a commentary on the book of Daniel and I am using several sources from Jewish writers. The Talmudic view of the book's authorship is that the prophet Daniel authored the book at the oral level, but that it was written down by some outstanding Old Testament prophets. It is an interesting idea that more than one prophet could have participated in its writing. Why is this important? Most likely, the rabbis wanted to show that the book forms the very *raison d'être* of the Jewish people. How? In Gen 12, in the *Lekh lekha* story of the call of Abraham, God unveils His universal plan to bless all the nations of the earth through Abraham's descendants. The book of Daniel illustrates how the presence of the Jewish people, and especially of the remnant, in some far-away countries becomes a source of blessing not only to the people of

Israel, but even to foreign emperors.

**Shabbat Shalom:** What lessons can Jews draw from the person and life of Daniel? How can the book of Daniel help diaspora Jews find ways to impact the culture in which they are living?

**Stefanovic:** I appreciate this question because it focuses, first, on the person and life of Daniel. Very often we put the emphasis on other areas when we talk about Daniel's message. However, the person and life of Daniel are essential to the book. I want to point out several important lessons we can learn.

The first lesson is that we should set our hope in God, who is eternal and in charge of both our individual lives and the history of the world. Daniel was born in good times, during the great reform brought about by King Josiah. In his teenage years, however, Daniel's faith went through some challenges, basically because of the sudden death of Josiah and the trip Daniel had to take into exile. The hope in God, which was present in Daniel's life, figures prominently in the book. I perceive this hope in God to be the most important lesson one can draw from Daniel.

Second, people frequently think of Daniel as someone who was very successful in his life and career. This is true. Daniel did have “ups” in his life. However, he also had his “downs,” for example, when he was at the bottom of the lion's den. The book of Daniel teaches us that even the faithful have ups and downs in life, but the downs cannot take away their faith in God.

Lesson three is the importance of prayer. Throughout the book, we see that Daniel is faithfully praying to God. In the

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first part of the book, Daniel is seen praying in the most difficult moments of his life. Even when he is not in a usual posture of prayer, he is closely interacting with God, as illustrated in the visionary part of the book.

A final lesson is the promise of the so-called “allotted inheritance” that is given to Daniel. Not only can God’s people find comfort and blessings while they are persecuted in the world, not only can God grant them success as He did to Daniel, but we also find the promise of something lasting and enduring that extends beyond this present life—the promise of the “allotted inheritance” that was given to Daniel at the end of his book.

**Shabbat Shalom:** Do you think it is reasonable to believe that the prophecies of Daniel still point to future events?

**Stefanovic:** I do believe that the book of Daniel shows that God knows the future and that He revealed it to His servant, the prophet Daniel, for a purpose. In my studies, I have found a number of parallels between the book of Daniel and the messages from the book of Isaiah, specifically Isa 40-66. In my teaching, I often introduce the stories of Daniel by reading a passage from the book of Isaiah to point out God’s promises and to show how they were fulfilled in Daniel’s life. The core of the message found in Isa 40-66, and maybe of the entire book, is that God challenges idols and other gods by asking them, “Can anyone of you predict the future like I can?” Of course, this is a rhetorical question. The same theme also becomes important in the book

of Daniel, for God revealed to Daniel events that pertain to the present and to the future.

Having said this, we need to define prophecy in a biblical way. Prophecy should never be brought down to the level of mere predictions. Prediction is an important component of biblical prophecy, but the concept of prophecy goes far beyond being just a prediction about the future. Furthermore, we need to avoid two extreme positions in interpreting Daniel’s prophecies. One extreme is antisupernaturalism, which usually prevails in academic circles. I cannot subscribe to this reasoning. The other extreme is to study Daniel’s prophecies either purely out of curiosity or in isolation from the other prophetic books in the Hebrew Bible or by only focusing on some details of those prophecies.

I think the best way to interpret Daniel’s prophecies that pertain to the future is to understand them in the context of both the overall teaching of the book and God’s plan for Israel and the nations. Let us remember that the message that Daniel received for the future of God’s people was given to a persecuted people. Remembering this, we need to place the prophecies of the book of Daniel in the context of persecution and identify the messages of comfort and confrontation given therein.

**Shabbat Shalom:** Why has the book of Daniel frequently been a favorite source of controversy and theological dispute? Why has it so often promoted fanaticism and sectarianism?

**Stefanovic:** Probably the main

reason for this lies in the presence of subjective approaches to the book, as well as to the entire Scriptures. These subjective approaches very often limit the rich message of the book, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Let me illustrate this by two points. First, people often study the Bible and the book of Daniel by means of a proof-text approach that consists of tying together isolated verses from here and there without regard for the context and the overall message. Such an approach limits and even distorts the book’s rich message. There is a danger of making the Bible say anything that one wants it to say or to teach one’s own messages through the Bible. Instead, the message of the Bible needs to inform, teach, and even rebuke.

A second type of subjective approach is when people focus their study of the book of Daniel primarily on the predictions and their fulfillment. Interpretations are often controlled by extrabiblical sources; that is, information found outside the Bible such as newspapers and history books. People resort to the reading of isolated predictions and the whole message of the book of Daniel is brought to that level, completely disregarding the original context in which the messages were given. Too frequently, I have seen people separate Daniel’s life from his prophecies, studying the one without regard for the other.

**Shabbat Shalom:** What suggestions would you make for reading the book of Daniel in a more holistic and objective way?

**Stefanovic:** Here are a few

suggestions. First, the book needs to be understood in the entire biblical context of God's dealing with His people and the whole world. The book of Daniel should not be taken in isolation from the rest of the prophetic writings or the rest of the Bible.

Second, Daniel's prophecies should be interpreted in light of Daniel's own life of faith. It is not without reason that several visions are dated in Daniel. Why is it, for example, that the visions of the end-time power, sometimes referred to as the little horn, are all dated in the reign of King Belshazzar? Why is it that the promises of the coming deliverer are given during the time of Darius the Mede and Cyrus? Is this only coincidence, or does it serve a purpose? The stories inform us about Daniel's spiritual life, while the visions are grounded in his experiences of faith.

**Shabbat Shalom:** So there is a clear relationship between the specific time and historical context in which the visions were given to Daniel and the content of the revelation?

**Stefanovic:** Yes. The starting point of nearly every vision is Daniel's experience. Let me give you an example. In Dan 9, Daniel studied the scrolls of Jeremiah. He was praying and fasting. Then he offered a prayer of supplication to God, whereupon a revelation came from God. So the visions of Daniel did not happen in a vacuum. They are given in the context of a life of dedication to God, in a life of struggle with evil forces. Thus the biblical context and the context of Daniel's life become the starting point for the divine messages.

**Shabbat Shalom:** In your personal as well as academic studies of the book of Daniel, you have

no doubt come across numerous insights and possible applications. So here is a more personal question, How does the book of Daniel impact your own life, religion, and spirituality?

**Stefanovic:** In responding to this question, I want to build on what I have already mentioned. My answer has, therefore, two aspects: a personal and a more universal one. First, there are ups and downs in life, and I have experienced both of these. From Daniel, I learn that my life has to be a life of faith, because life is unpredictable and very often when we serve God we face difficulties in life. So what did I learn from the book? In Dan 2, I find the first instance where Daniel faced a death threat. What did he do? "Then Daniel returned to his house and explained the matter to his friends Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. He urged them to plead for mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that he and his friends might not be executed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon" (Dan 2:17-18, NIV). When facing a death threat, Daniel brought everything before God. He did not do it alone; he teamed up with other believers and they all pleaded with God, asking Him to intervene and help. When all human help fails, a believer may still put his or her trust in God. Similarly, in chapter 6, Daniel faced another death threat. How did he react this time? "Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before. Then these men went as a group and found Daniel pray-

ing and asking God for help" (Dan 6:10-11, NIV). Asking God for help is expressed in these passages by the Aramaic words *ba'e* ("plead, pray"), *mitchannan* ("implore"), and *rachamin* ("mercy"). So when faced with a difficulty in life, especially a death threat, Daniel turned to God and pleaded for mercy. What I have personally learned is that I may not face a death threat, but in the difficulties that I do encounter I may turn to God, and I may also pray with those who are around me.

Secondly, what we see in the world around us is often frightening because our world is not static. The book of Daniel describes the world as restless, as a sea that is ever changing. So what can we say about our own attitude in regard to the future, to the things that may happen in our world? Again, the messages of Daniel are a great comfort. There is a promise that even though evil forces are at work in this world God is still in control. I would like to point to Dan 2:44 (NIV): "In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever." God promises that there will be a transfer of power at the end when His sovereignty and dominion will prevail and justice will triumph forever. His reign will be righteous and eternal. For me, this is a great source of comfort. So, in the book of Daniel, I find great sources of hope for my own life and for the world around me.

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This interview was conducted by Martin Pröbstle.