

THE BOOK OF DANIEL

A. ORIENTING DATA FOR DANIEL

- Content: a series of stories about how God brings honor to himself through Daniel and his three friends in Babylon, followed by four apocalyptic visions about future kingdoms and God's final kingdom
- Prophet: Daniel, one of the early exiles to Babylon, who was selected to serve as a provincial administrator in the Babylonian—and finally Persian—court
- Date of composition: unknown; presumably toward the end of the sixth century B.C. (ca. 520), although many have suggested it dates from the early second century B.C. (ca. 165)
- Emphases: God's sovereignty over all the nations and their rulers; God's care for the Jews in exile, with promises of final restoration; God's present overruling of and final victory over human evil

B. OVERVIEW OF DANIEL

The book of Daniel comes in two clear parts (chs. 1–6 and 7–12). The first half contains court stories, mostly about Daniel and three friends who remain absolutely loyal to Yahweh even while rising to positions of importance within the Babylonian Empire. The emphases are four: (1) on the four Hebrews' loyalty to God, (2) on God's miraculous deliverances of them, (3) on Gentile kings' acknowledging the greatness of Israel's God, and (4) on Daniel as the God-gifted interpreter of dreams—all of which emphasize God's sovereignty over all things, including the king who conquered and destroyed Jerusalem.

Part 2 is a series of apocalyptic visions about the rise and fall of succeeding empires, in each case involving a coming tyrannical ruler (7:8, 24–25; 8:23–25; 11:36–45)—most often understood to be Antiochus IV (Epiphanes) of the Seleucid rulers of Palestine (175–164 B.C.), who because of his desolation of Jerusalem and sacrilege of the temple was to become the first in a series of antichrist figures in Jewish and Christian literature. But in each case the final focus is on God's judgment of the enemy and the glorious future kingdom awaiting his people.

C. SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING DANIEL

At the outset it is important to note that in the Hebrew Bible, Daniel is included among the Writings rather than the Prophets. In part this was due to its genre—stories about a “prophet” and apocalyptic visions, rather than prophetic oracles. Indeed, there is nothing else quite like

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Daniel in Jewish and Christian literature, with its combination of court stories and apocalyptic visions. Furthermore, its intent is to inspire and encourage God's people living under foreign domination, not to call them to repent in light of coming judgments. Daniel is thus never called a prophet, but one to whom God reveals mysteries.

It may be helpful, therefore, for you to review the brief description of apocalyptic in *How to 1* (pp. 251–52), since the dreams and visions in chapters 2 and 7–11 have most of the features of apocalyptic—the book was born in a time of oppression; it is a literary work altogether; it comes by means of visions and dreams that are given by angels; the images are those of fantasy symbolizing reality; and Daniel is told to seal up the visions for the last days (8:26; 9:24; 12:4).

Interestingly, chapters 1 and 8–12 are in Hebrew, while chapters 2–7 are in Aramaic, the lingua franca of the Near East from the sixth century onward through the time of Christ. Two things about this are important. First, the Aramaic portion consists of the stories, plus the first vision, suggesting that these are open reading for all, but the introduction and the interpreted visions are in Hebrew, implying perhaps that they are for God's people only. Second, the Aramaic portion is arranged in a chiasmic pattern:

- Chapters 2 and 7 contain similar visions of future kingdoms, ending with God's final, eternal kingdom.
- Chapters 3 and 6 are stories of miraculous deliverance, where opposition has been directed against God.
- Chapters 4 and 5 are stories about the demise of two Babylonian kings, who both acknowledge the greatness of Israel's God.

Thus these stories tell us that God is in ultimate control of all human history (chs. 2; 7), illustrated both by the stories of miraculous deliverance (chs. 3; 6) and of the "overthrow" of the two Babylonian kings (chs. 4; 5). In each case they are marvelously narrated; to get their full benefit, you might try reading them aloud, as they were originally intended to be.

Also important for reading Daniel is to be aware of two historical contexts: (1) Daniel's own and (2) that predicted in his visions. Thus chapters 1–6 describe affairs within the Babylonian court from Nebuchadnezzar to the first of the Persian rulers of Babylon (ca. 605–530 B.C.)—from the time before the fall of Jerusalem, when the first captives from Judah were brought to Babylon, to that just beyond the demise of the Babylonian Empire in 539.

The visions (chs. 7–12) pick up at that point. Babylon was followed by the long-lived Persian Empire (539 to ca. 330). Then came the short-lived Greek Empire of Alexander (333–323), which at his death was divided among four generals (see 8:19–22). Of special interest for understanding intertestamental Jewish history is the long contest for Palestine between the Seleucids (of Antioch [the North]) and the Ptolemies (of Egypt [the South]), which is alluded to in the vision of Daniel 11 (see, e.g., the study notes in the NIV Study Bible). Crucial for Daniel is the rise of Antiochus IV, described in 11:21–32, who in fact set out to crush Jewishness in Jerusalem by forcing them to adopt his policy of Hellenizing his lands. Thus he forbade the keeping of the law and showed special favors to those who Hellenized (see 11:28). Eventually thwarted by Rome from seizing Egypt, he returned home by way of Jerusalem and poured out

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his fury on the Jews who resisted him, finally desecrating the Holy Place by erecting a statue of Zeus there in 167 (11:30–31). This event, which eventually led to the Maccabean revolt recorded in the Apocrypha's 1 and 2 Maccabees, is envisioned in Daniel 7–11. You can well imagine what it might have been like to read Daniel during this period—both the stories in chapters 1–6 (God honors loyalty and will humble arrogant kings!) and the visions themselves (God has foretold all this).

Finally, it is important to note that the coming of the messianic kingdom is pictured as taking place following the overthrow of Antiochus, which in fact it did a century and a half later—the only kingdom worth mentioning after Antiochus being not the Roman one, but that of Christ. In keeping with the whole Hebrew prophetic tradition, these coming historical events were seen against the backdrop of God's great final eschatological future (see the introduction to the Prophets, p. 173).¹

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 204–207.