

Exploring Daniel:

When God Invades a Broken World

Session 2: The Big Picture

Note: Scripture citations from NIV, 2011, unless otherwise indicated.

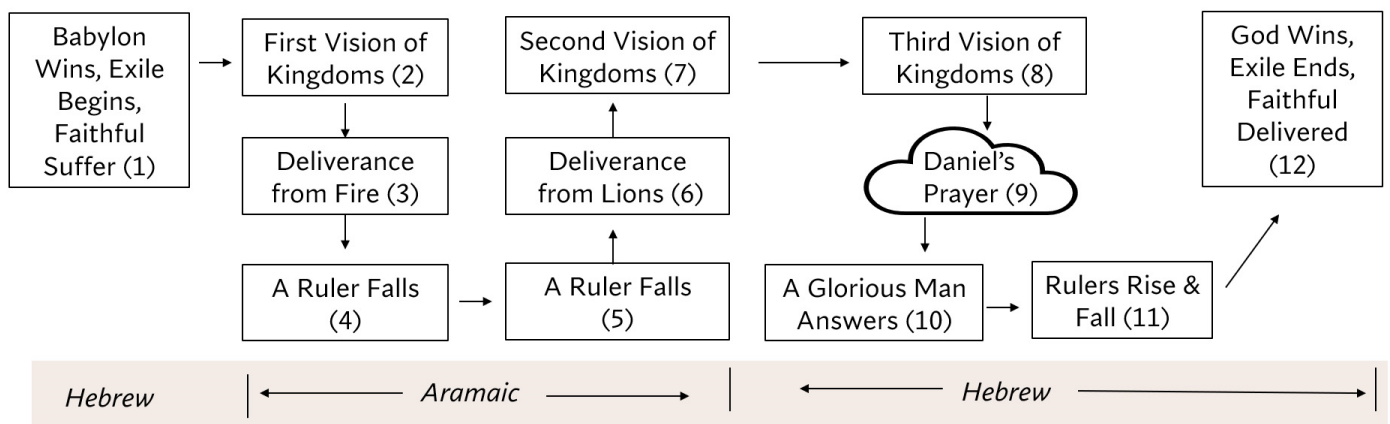
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1 Content Structure

Note: Numbers in () indicates chapter numbers in the book of Daniel.

A Carefully Organized Story



Observations

1. The opening and closing chapters form mirrored book ends. The end of the story completely reverses the beginning of the story.
2. The transitions from Hebrew to Aramaic and then back to Hebrew are not literary accidents. The Aramaic set of narratives in chapters 2-7 tell the story of God's engagement with world empires, while the remaining Hebrew narratives focus upon God's called people. (Note that Aramaic was an international language of diplomacy and commerce in that culture.) If this language difference points to the use of earlier sources, then these sources have been heavily edited before their inclusion in Daniel, since they are so intricately woven into the fabric of the entire narrative.
3. The three key kingdom visions of chapters 2, 7, and 8 support the bridge from the beginning to the end of the story. In Daniel's sixth-century world, kingdoms were the problem. God's kingdom of Judah was now gone, while the kingdom of Babylon oppressed His people. The three visions confirm that this problem will repeat itself in history. Oppressors will constantly assault God's plan to bless His people in their own land. The visions also reveal, however, that God remains active in these times of assault and oppression. His plan unfolds according to His schedule.
4. Each of these three key kingdom visions build upon one another, elaborating important details foreshadowed in earlier visions.
5. The innermost pair of stories in the Aramaic section, chapters 4 and 5, contrast God's handling of a (temporarily) repentant king (Nebuchadnezzar) with an unrepentant one (Belshazzar). God's mercy and justice apply to everyone, not only to His called people.
6. Moving outward, the next pair of stories, chapters 3 and 6, reinforce God's sovereign power over the oppressors and His providential care over His people. This care is revealed throughout Daniel's ministry, at the beginning, under Nebuchadnezzar (3), and near the end, under Darius (6).

Perilous, life-threatening conditions do not mean that God has abandoned the faithful. The response of Daniel's compatriots should represent our viewpoint during these crises:

"If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up." Daniel 3:17-18

7. The first stage of the journey, from chapter 2 to 7, reveals that God will topple the kingdoms of the world and fill the earth with His kingdom. As the culmination of His

plan approaches, one kingdom will be especially hostile to His people, though that kingdom will likewise be overthrown.

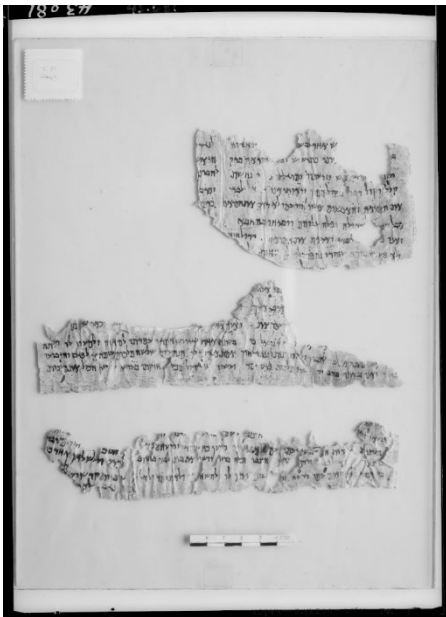
8. Chapter 8 reverts to Hebrew and reveals in more detail the way in which this future oppressor will disrupt and desolate the sanctuary where His people offer sacrifices.
9. Chapter 9 provides an interlude of prayer, connecting Daniel's present with this revelation of the future. While Jeremiah's seventy years of captivity will end, another "seventy 'sevens'" are decreed before the plan of God is more fully revealed.
10. Chapters 10 – 12, then, provide a collection of visions that reveal God's consummate victory over all oppressive kingdoms. There are three visions within this set:
 - A glorious man comes to reveal truth (10)
 - A detailed look at a chain of world events that would prove pivotal for God's called people, culminating in language that looks ahead into the more distant future (11)
 - A closing vision illustrating the consummate victory of God. At the beginning of the story, it looks like Babylon wins, the exile of God's called people begins, and the faithful must suffer. Now, at the end of the story, the reverse is true. God wins, God's people are free, and the faithful are delivered even from death, resurrected to glory and everlasting life!
11. The book ends with the glorious messenger charging Daniel to seal up these revelations, exhorting him to remain patiently faithful until he receives his rest and, eventually, his inheritance. (This, we believe, is the prophetic hook latched onto in the vision shown to John in Revelation 5 concerning the scroll that is sealed.)

2 Our Approach

2.1 Authorship and Origins

In the fourth century AD, when Jerome translated the writings of Daniel into Latin, he noted that at least one church leader had already questioned traditional assumptions about the author of this book.ⁱ Since the eighteenth century, these questions have accumulated at such a rate that, in the academic world at least, many interpreters maintain that the work is fundamentally a product of the second-century BC, completed perhaps around 165 BC. In a cultural environment comfortable with myth, legend and pseudonymous writing, people would have understood what the story attempted to do. The author or authors were collecting traditions, some more accurate than others, to inspire faithful followers in their opposition to the Hellenizing initiatives of Antiochus IV Epiphanes.

It is interesting to note, however, that one of the oldest fragments of Daniel found among the Dead Sea scrolls is usually dated somewhere between 150-100 BC, within 15-65 years of the proposed date of composition. Since fragments from multiple copies of Daniel have been found within the caves from this period up through the end of the first century AD, it seems that, by this point, the book was already received as scripture. This in turn suggests an earlier, rather than a later date of composition.



Dead Sea Scroll, 4Q114 – 4Q Dan^c, usually dated between 150 and 100 BC, containing fragments of Daniel 10:5-9; 13-16.

Source: <https://www.deadseascrolls.org.il/explore-the-archive/image/B-284883>, accessed 10/1/2022

This documentary evidence, the many points in which the book clearly aligns with established history, and the masterful way in which the story is integrated into one whole message all point toward a traditional conclusion. If we accept the possibility of accurate prophecies concerning the future, a sixth-century date sets the background for a powerful, divine revelation concerning God's verifiable sovereignty over historic kingdoms. Meanwhile, none of the historical questions raised by the narratives are substantial enough to warrant a rejection of their factual claims, keeping in mind the that we are still piecing together the puzzle of this period from a disparate collection of Ancient Near Eastern sources.

2.2 History and Symbols

Even a casual read through the book of Daniel reveals its abundant use of images and symbols to represent history. This much is clear. The specifics, however, are not so clear. We must find a way to do justice to these images and symbols without reading too much into them. We must try to discern the difference between interpreting them and speculating about their meaning.

1. Images and Kingdoms

Frequently, kingdoms are represented by various types of images and symbols. A statue, body parts, a tree, animals, beasts, horns ... they all represent kings or kingdoms.

Only four times in the story does the author provide explicit guidance about how to interpret these symbols:

- The “head of gold” -> Nebuchadnezzar (2:38)
- The large “tree” -> Nebuchadnezzar (4:22)
- The “two-horned ram” -> the kings of Media and Persia (8:20)
- The “shaggy goat” -> the king of Greece (8:21)

In almost every other case, we are left to our own devices to read the signs and render an informed opinion.

“Almost,” because there is one more exception. As we will discover, the detail provided in much of chapter 11 will provide clear references to historical kingdoms without explicitly naming them. While references to these kings will not be quite as pictorial as others in the text, they nevertheless go by the generic titles of “king of the South,” and “king of the North”.

In every other case, however, we are left with less-precisely defined images. The history of Daniel interpretation is therefore packed full of suggestions as to how to identify concretely the kingdoms that are symbolized by these images.

We will examine these images more carefully in Session 3. Given the less-defined nature of these symbols, we must proceed with caution. We must be sensitive to the line between interpretation and speculation. Our level of conviction by itself does not justify our conclusions. We must allow for healthy discussion where the scriptures are less declarative.

2. Numbers

As indicated in our previous session, this story is filled with mysterious numbers. Should we regard these numbers literally or symbolically?

Sometimes the context provides a clue. When 1:5 tells us, for example, that the young men were to be in training for “three years,” the context suggests strongly that this number should be understood literally. We are reading a simple report of facts.

We may ask, however, whether numbers, even if they appear in a simple narrative context, should be considered as exact numbers or as rounded, more symbolic numbers. In 9:2, for example, Daniel wants to know if he should interpret literally the

70 years that Jeremiah predicted for the “desolation of Jerusalem” (compare 2 Chronicles 36:21, Jeremiah 21:10).

As we mentioned in our last session, however, Jeremiah’ first reference to a deportation points to 597 BC; however, Daniel was already in Babylon by this point. Is he looking for an exact calendar date, or is he aware that he is within the general range of 70 years?

Numbers also have a way of pointing beyond themselves, as symbols representing similar or related events. For example, when Daniel asks about 70 years, he learns they point toward a larger time frame consisting of “seventy ‘sevens’”. (9:24) See our later discussion in Session 4.

Furthermore, these numbers appear within a culture that already regards certain numbers to be symbolic. The numbers seven and ten, for example, both featured in Daniel, carry a special meaning in this cultural context: seven indicating a complete period (think days of creation), ten indicating a complete set (think fingers and toes).

Given the pervasive symbolic use of these numbers within the culture, again, we must approach their interpretation with humility and thoughtfulness. We must not be too quick to reject a literal interpretation, but we must also be willing to see a symbolic interpretation. In fact, within the same number, both meanings may be present!

2.3 Differing Interpretive Perspectives

Daniel interpreters from a Christian perspective broadly fall into two categories, depending upon when they believe the book was completed. Within each of these broader categories, other divisions suggest themselves. Apart from our commitment to a sixth-century origin for Daniel, we will not be arguing for any one of these interpretive perspectives. We present them for informational purposes only.

Note: This summary is far from exhaustive, and we are creating our own categories for comparison purposes.

1. Completed in the 6th century BC

Traditional interpreters in this category generally agree that Daniel was an historical person who lived in the 6th century BC and is responsible for the content of the book. While the book contains clear symbolism, its historical accounts are factual, not legendary. The book contains authentic prophecy, with a reference toward the future. The outcome of this future is not in doubt. Jesus is the Son of Man who will return and establish His eternal kingdom

Within this larger category, however, interpreters differ regarding how precisely the visions of Daniel define the future for those living in our current age. Two approaches are generally taken:

1. Future less defined

The visions of Daniel look forward to the time of Christ and the desecration of the temple that occurred under Titus in 70 AD. Fulfillments beyond this event are variously found, either as concrete historical events or as cycles that repeat themselves throughout history.

Two commentaries written from this perspective are: Joyce Baldwin, *Daniel: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1978; Tremper Longman, *Daniel, The NIV Application Commentary*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999.

2. Future more defined (Dispensationalist)

Daniel's visions provide clues concerning a future, world-wide kingdom, united under a person identified as the Antichrist. This Antichrist will initiate a period of persecution known as the Great Tribulation, often described as a three-and-a-half-year or seven-year period. At some point before, during, or after this Great Tribulation (opinions vary), Jesus will "rapture" His followers from the earth until He returns with them to set up His earthly kingdom. Right now, from this perspective, we are in the "Church Age", a gap between the 69th and 70th week of Daniel (see Daniel 9:24-27).

Many popular works have been written from this perspective (Tim LaHaye's *Left Behind* series, for example.) For a biblical commentary written from this perspective, see: Stephen R. Miller, *Daniel, The New American Commentary*, Nashville: Broadman, 1994.

2. Completed in the 2nd century BC

Interpreters in this group believe that the book known as "Daniel" was written pseudonymously by some unknown author or authors. It collects various accounts, legends, and myths to encourage the Judean faithful who are resisting the Hellenistic policies of Antiochus IV Epiphanes during his reign in 175 – 164 BC.

Within this group of interpreters, two different approaches are evident regarding the nature of the literature included within this book.

1. Inspired Literature

Interpreters from this perspective are generally less focused on when the book is written or who wrote it. They maintain that God is speaking through it, even if it is

pseudonymous, even if it contains myth and legend, and even if it was written in the second century BC. The important thing is to accept the story the way that we have it and to discern God's word through it. The visions contained in this book include a mixture of inspired reflections on past events and hopeful, sometime unrealized predictions based on those reflections (i.e., "quasi-prophecy"). For a commentary from this point of view, see: John E. Goldingay, *Daniel, Word Biblical Commentary*, Dallas: Word Books, 1989.

2. Cultural Literature

The book called "Daniel" is best understood by viewing it in a second century BC cultural context, comparing it with other works produced in that same period. From this perspective, future visions in the book are part of a larger literary form that seeks to reinterpret present calamitous times. They seek to provide an other-worldly perspective and religious inspiration during tumultuous periods of persecution. For a commentary written from this perspective, see John J. Collins, *A Commentary on the Book of Daniel (Hermeneia: A Critical & Historical Commentary on the Bible)*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1994.

3 "Extra" Material

As Jewish people scattered throughout the Greek world, the call for a Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures was answered in several places, most notably in Alexandria, Egypt. Eventually this edition of the scriptures would be known as the "Septuagint" (LXX), or, as it is more recently called, the "Old Greek" (OG) translation. Copies of this translation often include a set of works that do not appear in existing Hebrew\Aramaic manuscripts. Some of this additional material is included with the Book of Daniel:

- *The Prayer of Azariah and Song of the Three Holy Children*, added into chapter 3
- *Susanna and the Elders*, appearing as a prologue in the LXX\OG and as chapter 13 in the Latin Vulgate.
- *Bel and the Dragon*, appearing at the end of chapter 12 in the LXX\OG and as chapter 14 in the Latin Vulgate.

For those who give Daniel a later date, this material can be considered as part of the original literary product. Since we are taking a more traditional approach, however, viewing Daniel as a sixth-century BC composition, we will not be treating these sections as part of the original story.

4 A Few Words about “Apocalyptic”

Daniel is sometimes referred to as “Apocalyptic” literature. In fact, assuming as we do, that Daniel is a sixth-century BC composition, it may be the original form of its type. Literally, the word refers simply to revelation of something previously hidden. It also connotes, however, a particular type of literary form – a form, by the way, about which not everyone seems to agree. We would suggest that Apocalyptic literature, as we find it within this ancient religious context, is distinguished at least by the following factors:

- Message revealed in vivid, highly pictorial, and symbolic language
- Message usually revealed by a heavenly messenger
- Concerns cosmic consequences emerging from the struggle between heaven, earth, and the underworld
- Focuses on the outcome of those cosmic struggles
- Communicates a message that bewilders as well as reveals

5 What’s the Point?

“If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty’s hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.” Daniel 3:17-18

In the book of Daniel, God proves Himself in history, so that we are better prepared to trust Him with both our present and our future.

ⁱ Jerome. (1893). Prefaces to the Books of the Vulgate Version of the Old Testament. In P. Schaff & H. Wace (Eds.), & W. H. Fremantle, G. Lewis, & W. G. Martley (Trans.), St. Jerome: Letters and Select Works (Vol. 6, p. 493). Christian Literature Company.