

Unit 1 Introduction

The Book of Daniel

When I survey the children’s Bibles read by my son and daughter, only two writing prophets typically receive much attention: Jonah and Daniel. Although prophetic writing constitutes a large chunk of the Old Testament, it can be very difficult to understand. Even so, there is something special about Daniel that makes the book accessible to the Bible’s youngest readers, even as it baffles the most learned scholars. Considering that most of us fall somewhere between those two groups: What is it that Daniel might teach the church today? How might we understand its historical background and what makes it so special?

A Different Kind of Prophet

Daniel, both the man and the book, stand apart from other prophets in the Old Testament. Daniel was one of two known biblical prophets who wrote in exile, but also had experienced life in Judah before it fell to Babylon (the other prophet was Ezekiel). Daniel would have been a younger contemporary to Jeremiah and Habakkuk. When he was still young, the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar forcibly moved Daniel and many of his peers to Babylon in 597 BC (see 2 Kings 24:14). It was after this that Daniel and his three friends received training for service in the Babylonian royal court.

The book of Daniel narrates the life of the man after his deportation to Babylonia. In Babylon, Daniel became one of the wise men and exhibited the ability to interpret dreams. In addition to dream interpretation, Daniel had dreams and visions of his own, which we find in Daniel 6–12. The earlier chapters of Daniel report his trials and faithfulness to God as a Judean exile who served several different kings in two empires (the Babylonian empire fell to Persia in 539 BC).

As a book, Daniel has several special features. First, it is one of two books in the Old Testament that contains substantial portions originally written in Aramaic rather than Hebrew. This change reflects the universal language (Aramaic) at the time Daniel was written. Secondly, Daniel also includes several Greek and Persian loanwords (Greek and Persian words written in Hebrew-Aramaic letters), which fits with a book written during the Persian period. Lastly, the book of Daniel is a mixture of different types of literature. Its early chapters are primarily stories about the experiences of Judean exiles in Babylon (whether Daniel, or his compatriots—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego). The latter half of Daniel reports prophetic and apocalyptic visions that Daniel received. These visions reveal a heavenly perspective on the events of Daniel’s lifetime and the centuries that would follow.

Eschatology and Apocalypse

Two important terms for understanding the prophets, and Daniel in particular, are “eschatology” and “apocalypse.” Eschatology refers to a doctrine of the end times. In biblical theology, this involves the arrival of God’s kingdom and the return of Jesus. Daniel 7 speaks about four kingdoms, the last of which apparently arises at the end of time. Jim Edlin explained the vision well when he concluded that this chapter narrates human history from Babylon to the end of time with the first kingdom representing Babylon and the fourth kingdom the final kingdom of human history. Meanwhile, the middle two kingdoms “do not necessarily intend to reference particular historical entities but rather stand as representatives of the kinds of kingdoms the world will experience.”¹

Other parts of Daniel seem to speak directly to the second century before Christ. Jewish people reading Daniel 11 in that time would have found parallels to events surrounding the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175–163 BC) and his persecution of God’s people. Such readers would also recognize Daniel’s description of the wars between rival Greek kingdoms in their time. But even as Daniel spoke to people in the second century, the book addresses God’s people throughout history. Therefore, Christians are also correct to see instantiations of the beasts of Daniel 7–8 in their own time because—as noted above—the beasts have a broader reference point than any one kingdom. Rather, in Daniel, the kings of Persia and Greece sit for a portrait of the spiritual reality that lies behind earthly kingdoms throughout history.

It is here that Daniel begins to resemble the type of writing called, “apocalypse.” Designating Daniel as apocalyptic fires the imagination for modern readers. When we hear the word “apocalypse,” we imagine cataclysmic events that create a horrific dystopia while history as we know it careens out of control. Although that may be one meaning of the word “apocalypse” in our modern vernacular, when biblical scholars use the term they are referring to a specific type of writing. Just as a piece of modern literature might be a newspaper, novel, or a Sunday School curriculum introductory article, one type of writing in the ancient world was called “apocalypse.”

Defining any genre of literature proves difficult, but apocalypses have a number of common characteristics. They typically include a story about an individual who sees a vision, which is in turn interpreted, often by some sort of angelic visitor or vision-guide. The second half of Daniel contains each of these characteristics. Another feature of apocalypses is that they typically pertain to the writer’s present, or to the not too distant future. This is where Daniel can

become a little tricky. For example, the events symbolized in Daniel 11:5–45 narrate—with precision at several points—the history of the Greek kingdoms that arose following Alexander the Great’s death. This would be long after Daniel-the-man had died and would make Daniel-the-book a special example of apocalyptic writing that is predictive of events centuries down the road if one concludes Daniel-the-man wrote the book.

That point aside, for Jewish people reading Daniel in the second century before Christ, Daniel was no newspaper from the future that reported events millennia beforehand. Rather, they recognized an important feature of biblical apocalypses: apocalyptic literature speaks to God’s people now, whenever “now” might be. While apocalypses, by their nature, address the future, their primary reason for doing so is to encourage faithfulness amongst God’s people in the present. Thus, it is important for us now to consider the message and theology of Daniel.

The Message and Theology of Daniel²

God is Sovereign

Theologically, Wesleyan-Arminian readers can become nervous when discussing God’s sovereignty because of our strong commitment to free-will and human responsibility. Daniel also affirms such commitments, but does so without any qualms about also believing that God is sovereign and orchestrates the developments of history behind the scenes. Many non-biblical apocalyptic writings commend a dualistic worldview in which good and evil duke it out in the end times. Daniel, however, insists that God is sovereign and denies that there can be any true competition since God directs history as the “Most High.”

While the Nebuchadnezzars, Belshazzars, and Dariuses of history boast about the might and grandeur of their realms (cf. Daniel 4:30), Daniel insists the God of Israel directs the play of history in order both to exalt and to humble kings according to His own design, and that is exactly what Nebuchadnezzar was forced to recognize (Daniel 4:34–35).

Although evil and sin remain undeniable realities in the book of Daniel—so much so that an angel was delayed in delivering a message to Daniel (Daniel 10:11–13)—the book never suggests there is a meaningful struggle between God and evil. God will guide history to its designed conclusion with the reign of the Son of Man who is worshiped by all the peoples (Daniel 7:13–14).

Responsible Free Will

Given Daniel’s insistence on divine sovereignty, it might seem counterintuitive also to claim the book maintains a strong commitment to human responsibility. Contemporary Christians typically stress one or the other of these points. Even so, the Bible—and especially Daniel—rejects any either/or arrangement and insists

both that God is sovereign and that humans have free will and are therefore responsible for their actions.

Two examples from the first half of Daniel attest human responsibility. First, in Daniel 1, Daniel and his friends find themselves in exile as a result of God’s judgment (Daniel 1:2–3). However, rather than resigning themselves to judgment and embracing sin in exile, Daniel and his compatriots maneuver themselves so that the Babylonian court works around the kosher laws of Leviticus by providing vegetables for food instead of the meat that would be impure in one sense or another. For their efforts, God blessed Daniel and his friends for their responsible faithfulness.

A second example is the experience of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4. Worded as a letter from the king to his subjects, the chapter reports a dream—subsequently interpreted by Daniel—in which Nebuchadnezzar was destined to fall under God’s judgment until he became humble before God. While it would seem the hand had been played showing God pre-determined what would happen, Nebuchadnezzar did not experience this judgment until 12 months after the dream when Nebuchadnezzar made the choice to boast about himself in building Babylon “by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty” (Daniel 4:30). It was at the point of his sinful pride that Nebuchadnezzar experienced God’s judgment. God knew the future beforehand and, arguably, the dream was a warning for the king to submit to God. However, like most kings, Nebuchadnezzar was reluctant to submit to a conquered people’s deity and so God held him accountable for his behavior.

Optimism for God’s People

Daniel’s insistence of divine sovereignty and human responsibility mix together to create a final theme for the book: God blesses the faithful. This is an encouraging message for those who have read and continue to read Daniel under the threat of persecution. Sometimes God delivers (Daniel 1:15–17; 3:24–27); sometimes the faithful die (7:25; 11:33–35). Either way, the picture Daniel offers readers is of a God whose hand guides history toward His eternal kingdom in which those who have chosen faithfulness will receive blessing (12:1–3).

As God’s people study the book of Daniel today, it is important for us to remember the type of writing that it is and the message that it proclaims: God is leading history to the arrival of His kingdom. As we await that end, we hear the call of Daniel to faithfulness even as kings and nations insist on their own lordship.

1. *New Beacon Bible Commentary; Daniel* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2009), 193.

2. For more detailed information, consult Jim Edlin, *Daniel*, 37–43.

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