

The Book of Daniel

The Book of Daniel is an interesting book of the Old Testament (OT). For many modern-day Christians, they speak of the Prophet Daniel and treat the book as one of the prophetic books, attempt to harmonize the book with the New Testament (NT) Book of Revelation with a goal of unraveling the mystery of the second coming of Jesus, the 1000 year reign of the kingdom, and the identity of the AntiChrist. There is another post (*The Thousand Year Reign*) that lightly delves into those questions.

But what about the Book of Daniel? Is it a prophetic book? The Hebrew canon of books of the OT does not include it with the prophetic books (whose canon seems to have closed ca. 200 BC) but includes it in a section known as “the Writings”, *Ketuvim*. That is not to say the book does not contain oracles and visions. But those are only in the latter half of the book. What about the first half? The first six chapters are perhaps best described as stories from the Babylon Captivity meant to offer encouragement and lessons of wisdom to people facing tribulation and hard times. But who are the readers? People during the 6th century exile in Babylon? Or people facing tribulations of a later period? Is it a book that is prophetic to just the people of Jerusalem? To Jews everywhere in the diaspora? To people of faith in all times and places? It is an interesting book.

Some evidence of the book's date can be found in the fact that Daniel is not present in the Hebrew Bible's canon of the prophets (where it might arguably be expected to fit), which was closed c. 200 BC. Rather, Daniel forms a part of the Ketuvim (writings) also formed c. 200 BC.

The Author

This Book takes its name, not from the author, who is actually unknown, but from its hero, a young Jew taken early to Babylon, where he lived. The early chapters are written in Aramaic and contain stories originating in and transmitted by oral traditions which tell of the trials and triumphs of the wise Daniel and his three companions. The moral is that men of faith can resist temptation and conquer adversity. The characters are not purely legendary but rest on older historical tradition. What is more important than the question of historicity, and closer to the intention of the author, is the fact that a persecuted Jew of the later times would quickly see the application of these stories to his own plight.

The author/editor was probably an educated Jew, knowledgeable in Greek learning, and of high standing in his own community. It is possible that the name of Daniel was chosen for the hero of the book because of his reputation as a wise seer in Hebrew tradition. Ezekiel, who lived during the Babylonian exile, mentioned him in association with Noah and Job (Ezekiel 14:14) as a figure of legendary wisdom (28:3), and other legends feature a hero named Daniel (more accurately Dan'el, but the spelling is close enough for the two to be regarded as identical) that may have lent some influence on the selection of the name.

The Book and its Dating

Strictly speaking, the book does not belong to the prophetic writings but rather to a distinctive type of literature known as “apocalyptic,” of which it is an early specimen. Apocalyptic writing enjoyed its greatest popularity from 200 B.C. to 100 A.D., a time of distress and persecution for Jews, and later, for Christians. Though following in time well after the prophetic literature, apocalyptic literature has its roots in the teaching of the prophets, who often pointed ahead to the day of the Lord, the consummation of history. For both prophet and apocalypticist Yahweh was the Lord of history, and he would ultimately vindicate his people.

There are no references to this book before the bitter 2nd century persecution (167–164 BC) carried on by Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Like all apocalyptic literature its goal is to strengthen and comfort the Jewish people in their ordeal.

The Book contains Aramaic lending support to the thought that the collection of “Daniel and companions” stories formed “phase 1” of what became to be known as the Book of Daniel. This collection, as noted, was in Aramaic. After the time of “phase 1”, Jerusalem and the land was under the rule of Antiochus IV Epiphanes.

Note: And who is Antiochus IV Epiphanes? After the death of Alexander the Great who had conquered the lands from Egypt thru Asia Minor to the steppes of Afghanistan, his empire was divided into two great powers: the Ptolemies (ruling from Alexandria) and the Seleucids (ruling from Antioch). Alexander died in 323 BC. The breakup and subsequent history of Alexander’s empire is complicated with a “game of empires” ebbing and flowing from west to east and back again. Some 170 years later, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, after expanding his eastern empire to the borders of Egypt, on his way home to Asia Minor, lay siege to Jerusalem as punishment for what he believed was support of his enemies. Jerusalem fell under his rule, his Hellenizing (or de-Judaizing) activities were brutal and ultimately led to a full scale armed rebellion in Judea—the Maccabean Revolt.

The oracles and visions of the Book of Daniel belong to this period of history - some 370 years after the Babylonian court stories of Daniel and his friends. The series of visions promise deliverance and glory to the Jews in the days to come. Their incorporation was “phase 2” of the development of Daniel. Unlike the court stories, the visions have a more cosmic perspective. They tell of the great nations of the ancient world having risen in vain against Yahweh; his kingdom shall overthrow existing powers and last forever. Under this apocalyptic imagery are contained some of the best elements of prophetic teaching: the insistence on right conduct, the divine control over events, the certainty that the kingdom of God will ultimately triumph.

The arrival of the kingdom is a central theme of the synoptic gospels, and Jesus, in calling himself the “Son of Man,” reminds us that he fulfills the destiny of this mysterious figure in the seventh chapter of Daniel. Unlike the earlier chapter, these chapters are largely written in Hebrew. There are three parts of Daniel that are only found in the LXX (Septuagint) version of the OT: the episodes of Susanna, Bel, and the Dragon. These three sections are considered canonical in Catholic and Byzantine churches, but not in the Protestant and Reformed churches.

Final Written Form of the Book

Chapter 1 was composed (in Aramaic) as a brief introduction to provide historical context, introduce the characters of the tales, and explain how Daniel and his friends came to Babylon. The visions of chapters 7–12 were added and chapter 1 translated into Hebrew at the third stage when the final book was being drawn together; this final stage, marking the composition of Daniel as a book, took place between the desecration of the Temple by Antiochus IV Epiphanes in 167 and his death in 164 BC.

Dating

The prophecies of Daniel are accurate down to the career of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, king of Syria and oppressor of the Jews, but not in its prediction of his death: the author seems to know about Antiochus' two campaigns in Egypt (169 and 167 BC), the desecration of the Temple (the "abomination of desolation"), and the fortification of the Akra (a fortress built inside Jerusalem), but he seems to know

nothing about the reconstruction of the Temple or about the actual circumstances of Antiochus' death in late 164 BC. Chapters 10–12 are then considered to have been written between 167 and 164 BC. There is no evidence of a significant time lapse between those chapters and chapters 8 and 9, and chapter 7 may have been written just a few months earlier again.

Daniel is also quoted in a section of the Sibylline Oracles commonly dated to the middle of the 2nd century BC, and was popular at Qumran at much the same time, suggesting that it was known from the middle of that century.

Meaning, symbolism, and chronology

The message of the Book of Daniel is that, just as the God of Israel saved Daniel and his friends from their enemies, so he would save all Israel in their present oppression during the reign of terror of Antiochus IV Epiphanes.

The book is filled with monsters, angels, and numerology, drawn from a wide range of sources, both biblical and non-biblical, that would have had meaning in the context of 2nd-century Jewish culture, and while some Christian interpreters have always viewed these as predicting events in the New Testament—"the Son of God", "the Son of Man", Christ and the Antichrist—the book's intended audience is the Jews of the 2nd century BC. The following explains a few of these predictions, as understood by modern biblical scholars.

- The *four kingdoms* and the *little horn* (Daniel 2 and 7): The concept of four successive world empires stems from Greek theories of mythological history. Most modern interpreters agree that the four represent Babylon, the Medes, Persia and the Greeks, ending with Hellenistic Seleucid Syria and with Hellenistic Ptolemaic Egypt. The traditional interpretation of the dream identifies the four empires as the Babylonian (the head), Medo-Persian (arms and shoulders), Greek (thighs and legs), and Roman (the feet) empires. The symbolism of four metals in the statue in chapter 2 comes from Persian writings, while the four "beasts from the sea" in chapter 7 reflect Hosea 13:7–8, in which God threatens that he will be to Israel like a lion, a leopard, a bear or a wild beast. The consensus among scholars is that the four beasts of chapter 7 symbolize the same four world empires. Antiochus IV is seen as the "small horn" that uproots three others (Antiochus usurped the rights of several other claimants to become king of the Seleucid Empire)/
- The *Ancient of Days* and the *one like a son of man* (Daniel 7): The portrayal of God in Daniel 7:13 resembles the portrayal of the Canaanite god El as an ancient divine king presiding over the divine court. The "Ancient of Days" gives dominion over the earth to "one like a son of man", and then in Daniel 7:27 to "the people of the holy ones of the Most High", whom scholars consider the son of man to represent. These people can be understood as the *maskilim* (sages), or as the Jewish people broadly.
- The *ram and he-goat* (Daniel 8) as conventional astrological symbols represent Persia and Syria, as the text explains. The "mighty horn" stands for Alexander the Great (reigned 336–323 BC) and the "four lesser horns" represent the four principal generals who fought over the Greek empire following Alexander's death. The "little horn" again represents Antiochus IV. The key to the symbols lies in the description of the little horn's actions: he ends the continual burnt offering and overthrows the Sanctuary, a clear reference to Antiochus' desecration of the Temple.
- The *anointed ones* and the *seventy years* (Chapter 9): Daniel reinterprets Jeremiah's "seventy years" prophecy regarding the period Israel would spend in bondage to Babylon. From the point of

view of the Maccabean era, Jeremiah's promise was obviously not true—the gentiles still oppressed the Jews, and the "desolation of Jerusalem" had not ended. Daniel therefore reinterprets the seventy years as seventy "weeks" of years, making up 490 years. The 70 weeks/490 years are subdivided, with seven "weeks" from the "going forth of the word to rebuild and restore Jerusalem" to the coming of an "anointed one", while the final "week" is marked by the violent death of another "anointed one", probably the High Priest Onias III (ousted to make way for Jason and murdered in 171 BC), and the profanation of the Temple. The point of this for Daniel is that the period of gentile power is predetermined, and is coming to an end.

- *Kings of north and south*: Chapters 10 to 12 concern the war between these kings, the events leading up to it, and its heavenly meaning. In chapter 10 the angel (Gabriel?) explains that there is currently a war in heaven between Michael, the angelic protector of Israel, and the "princes" (angels) of Persia and Greece; then, in chapter 11, he outlines the human wars which accompany this—the mythological concept sees standing behind every nation a god/angel who does battle on behalf of his people, so that earthly events reflect what happens in heaven. The wars of the Ptolemies ("kings of the south") against the Seleucids ("kings of the north") are reviewed down to the career of Antiochus the Great (Antiochus III, father of Antiochus IV), but the main focus is Antiochus IV, to whom more than half the chapter is devoted. The accuracy of these predictions lends credibility to the real prophecy with which the passage ends, the death of Antiochus—which, in the event, was not accurate.
- *Predicting the end-time* (Daniel 8:14 and 12:7–12): Biblical eschatology does not generally give precise information as to when the end will come, and Daniel's attempts to specify the number of days remaining is a rare exception. Daniel asks the angel how long the "little horn" will be triumphant, and the angel replies that the Temple will be reconsecrated after 2,300 "evenings and mornings" have passed (Daniel 8:14). The angel is counting the two daily sacrifices, so the period is 1,150 days from the desecration in December 167. In chapter 12 the angel gives three more dates: the desolation will last "for a time, times and half a time", or a year, two years, and a half a year (Daniel 12:8); then that the "desolation" will last for 1,290 days (12:11); and finally, 1,335 days (12:12). Verse 12:11 was presumably added after the lapse of the 1,150 days of chapter 8, and 12:12 after the lapse of the number in 12:11.

As mentioned, the book of Daniel is complicated.