



## An Introduction to the Book of Daniel

### Author and Title

The Book of Daniel, named after and written by Daniel in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC, records the events of his life and the visions that he saw from the time of his exile in 605BC until the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of King Cyrus (536BC). Daniel, whose name means 'God is my Judge', was a young man of noble blood who was exiled from Judah during the time of King Jehoiakim (609-597BC) and lived thereafter at the Babylonian court. After the fall of the Babylonian Empire, he served the Medo-Persian Empire that succeeded it.

### Date

Both Jewish and Christian tradition, as confirmed by Matthew 24:15, have held that the author of this book is Daniel, a Jew who lived during the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC in Babylonian exile. Many of the chapters are dated and range from the first year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign (605BC) to Cyrus's 3<sup>rd</sup> year (536BC). But because of its detailed prophecies of events in the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BC and alleged historical inconsistencies with what scholars know of 6<sup>th</sup> Century history, some scholars have argued that the book must be a 2<sup>nd</sup> Century document, from the time when Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164BC) was oppressing God's people. In that case, it would contain 'prophecies after the fact', put into the mouth of a famous historical character rather than being written by Daniel himself. Thus, the visions that Daniel saw would attempt to interpret rather than predict history. It has also been argued that the book must be dated later than the 6<sup>th</sup> Century due to its language, especially the presence of Persian and Greek loanwords.

However, the facts do not require a late date. In the first place, current knowledge of 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC history is far from complete, and there are plausible harmonisations that explain the alleged discrepancies.

Secondly, the Bible asserts clearly that the Lord announces ahead of time his plans through his prophets as a means of vindicating his sovereignty and encouraging his

people, refer to Isaiah 41:21-24 and 44:6-7, and there is no reason in principle why such prophecies should not be detailed and precise. Some scholars, who allow in principle that God can foretell events, nevertheless suggest that such detailed foretelling is unparalleled in the rest of the canonical prophets, and that it cannot be reconciled with the usual purpose of prediction; namely, that the first audience should be faithful to the covenant. In reply, note that Jeremiah did give a specific amount of time for the exile (Jeremiah 25:11); as confirmed by the comments on Daniel 9:2. Further, the high degree of specificity in Daniel's prophecies does serve its first audience as well as those to follow: this shows how carefully God has planned events and governs them for his perfect ends; therefore the faithful can recognise that none of their troubles take God by surprise, and none will derail his purpose of vindicating those who steadfastly love him. This is quite relevant to the people of God in Daniel's day, who are on the verge of horrendous devastations and persecutions; they must be assured that the story will continue to its appointed fulfilment, so that they do not lose heart.

Thirdly, there were likely Greeks and Persians present at the Babylonian court as mercenaries and in other capacities, providing a ready explanation for the presence of loanwords.

Fourthly, the Book of Daniel was accepted as canonical by the community of Qumran, who produced the Dead Sea Scrolls. This is telling because this group emerged as a separate party in Judaism between 171BC and 167BC, before the proposed late date. They would not have accepted the book if it had appeared after the split.

Fifthly, some who favour a later date say that the author of Daniel represented Antiochus IV Epiphanes using the figure of Nebuchadnezzar. Literary studies, however, have shown that the Book of Daniel puts Nebuchadnezzar in far too positive a light, e.g. he comes to acknowledge the true God, for him to be an effective image of the relentless persecutor Antiochus IV. Of course the book's lesson, about God's sovereignty over even the imperial forces, would have taken a heightened relevance in the days of Antiochus IV; but that is different from saying that the book was written for that particular occasion.

There are therefore no compelling reasons to deny that Daniel wrote this book.

### Theme

The central theme of the Book of Daniel is God's sovereignty over history and empires, setting up and removing kings as he pleases (2:21 and 4:34-37). All of the kingdoms of this world will come to an end and will be replaced by the Lord's Kingdom, which will never pass away (2:44 and 7:27). Although trials and difficulties will continue for the saints up until the end, those who are faithful will be raised to glory, honour and everlasting life in this final Kingdom (12:1-3).

## Purpose

The Book of Daniel is made up of two halves, each of which has its own genre. The first half (Chapters 1-6) contains narratives from the lives of Daniel and his three friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. These court stories exemplify faithful living in exile and provide models of how God's people should live as strangers and exiles in a world that is not their home (Hebrews 13:14). They show Daniel and his friends serving their pagan masters loyally, as Jeremiah 29:5-7 had commanded, yet without compromising their greater loyalty to God. The second half of the book (Chapters 7-12) contains apocalyptic visions, which are designed to reassure God's people that in spite of their present persecution and suffering, God is in control and will ultimately be victorious. The Lord is aware of the suffering of his people and will bring their trials to an end on the day when he establishes his Kingdom. The final victory belongs to the Ancient of Days and his representative, the Son of Man (Chapter 7). When they triumph, the powers and authorities of this world will be defeated and judged, while the saints will be vindicated and rewarded (7:26-27).

The two parts of the book are linked by a variety of literary features:

1. The dates attached to the visions locate them during the same period of history as the narratives of Chapters 1-6.
2. The book begins in Hebrew, switches into Aramaic from 2:4-7:28, and then returns to Hebrew for Chapters 8-12.
3. The vision of the four beasts in Chapter 7 mirrors in a number of ways Nebuchadnezzar's dream in Chapter 2
4. The message of the visions of Chapters 7-12 reinforces the message of the narratives in Chapters 1-6: God's ultimate victory over the powers and authorities of this present evil age is sure, so the wise will be faithful to the Lord in the meantime, whatever pressures are brought to bear upon them.

## Key Themes

1. It is possible to live a faithful life in exile, surrounded by pagan influences and propaganda, if one sets one's mind to serving the Lord wholeheartedly (Chapter 1).
2. God can vindicate his faithful servants in front of pagan rulers by giving them unusual wisdom and insight into divine mysteries and by miraculously protecting them against the enmity of their pagan neighbours (Chapters 2, 3 and 6). Nevertheless, divine rescue from martyrdom cannot be assumed (3:16-18).

3. God humbles the proud and raises up the humble; even the hearts of the greatest kings are under his control (Chapters 4 and 5).
4. This world will be a place of torment and persecution for the saints until the end, getting worse and worse rather than better and better (Chapters 2 and 7). Yet the Lord will judge the kingdoms of this world and bring them to an end, replacing them with his own Kingdom that will never end. This Kingdom will be ruled by 'one like a son of man' who comes 'with the clouds', a figure who combines the distinctive traits of humanity and divinity (7:13 NIV).
5. God is sovereign over the course of history, even over those who rebel against him and seek to destroy his people (Chapter 8).
6. The exile was not the end of Israel's history of rebellion and judgement. In the future, Israel would again transgress against the Lord, and Jerusalem would be handed over into the power of her enemies, who would trample her temple and do abominable things (Chapters 8, 9 and 12). Eventually, though, the anointed ruler would come to deliver her from her sins (9:24-27).
7. These earthly events are mirrors of a great cosmic conflict in the heavenly realms between angelic forces of good and evil (Chapter 10). Prayer is a significant weapon in that conflict (9:23).
8. God rules over all of these conflicts and events, he limits their scope, and he has a precise timetable for the trials of the saints to be completed, when he will finally intervene to cleanse and deliver his people (Chapter 12).
9. In the meantime, the saints must be patient and faithful amid a hostile world, looking to the Lord alone for deliverance (11:33-35).

### **History of Salvation Summary**

The people of Judah could have interpreted their exile to Babylon as the end of their special relationship with God. However, not only does the Book of Daniel show them that it is possible to be faithful to God even away from the Promised Land, it also shows them that God has not abandoned his plan for the whole world: he controls all of history, even the most dire conflicts, to bring his Messiah's rule to all nations

### **Literary Features**

The Book of Daniel is unique in the Bible in falling decisively into two distinct genres in its two halves. The first six chapters are hero stories comprised of six self-contained ordeals. The last six chapters are a series of visions that employ highly symbolic images to portray vast stretches of political and spiritual history. The visions that deal with the end times are apocalyptic visions. The techniques of symbolic reality figure prominently in all of the dreams and visions, including those

in the first six chapters; in symbolic reality, the world that is entered consists largely of great symbols instead of literal characters and places.

The prophet Daniel provides the greatest point of unity in the book, since he figures in most of the separate episodes in the narrative half of the book and is the first-person narrator of the visions in the second half. The sovereignty of God is a unifying element in the plot and theme. The world of the story is constant, and its main features include the political and courtly arena of action, a world of courts and kings; supernatural and miraculous happenings and characters; dreams and visions; and striking and famous images, i.e. the fiery furnace; a disembodied hand that writes on a wall; a lions' den; and a gigantic statue of a man composed of various materials.

## Outline

- I. Daniel and the Three Friends at the Babylonian Court (1:1-6:28)
  - a. Four Young Israelites at the Babylonian Court (1:1-21)
    - i. Daniel and his Friends taken into Exile (1:1-7)
    - ii. Daniel and his Friends remain undefiled (1:8-17)
    - iii. Daniel and his Friends promoted and preserved (1:18-21)
  - b. Nebuchadnezzar's Dream of a Great Statue (2:1-49)
    - i. Nebuchadnezzar's Dream (2:1-16)
    - ii. God reveals Nebuchadnezzar's dream (2:17-23)
    - iii. Daniel interprets the dream (2:24-45)
    - iv. Daniel and his friends promoted (2:46-49)
  - c. Nebuchadnezzar builds a great statue (3:1-30)
    - i. The Golden Image (3:1-18)
    - ii. The Fiery Furnace (3:19-30)
  - d. Nebuchadnezzar's Dream of a Toppled Tree (4:1-37)
    - i. Nebuchadnezzar's Second Dream (4:1-18)
    - ii. Daniel interprets the second dream (4:19-27)
    - iii. Nebuchadnezzar's humiliation (4:28-33)
    - iv. Nebuchadnezzar praises God (4:34-37)
  - e. The Fall of the Empire (5:1-31)
    - i. Belshazzar's Feast (5:1-4)
    - ii. The Writing on the Wall (5:5-12)
    - iii. The Writing on the Wall interpreted (5:13-31)

- f. Another Miraculous Delivery (6:1-28)
  - i. The Plot against Daniel (6:1-9)
  - ii. Daniel in the Lions' Den (6:10-18)
  - iii. Daniel Saved from the Lions (6:19-28)
- II. The Visions of Daniel (7:1-12:13)
  - a. The Vision of Four Great Beasts and the Heavenly Court (7:1-28)
    - i. Visions of the Four Beasts (7:1-8)
    - ii. Judgement before the Ancient One (7:9-14)
      - 1. The Ancient of Days Judges the Beasts (7:9-12)
      - 2. The Coming of the Son of Man (7:13-14)
    - iii. Daniel's Visions Interpreted (7:15-28)
  - b. The Vision of the Ram, the Goat, and the Little Horn (8:1-27)
    - i. Vision of a Ram and a Goat (8:1-14)
    - ii. Gabriel Interprets the Vision (8:15-27)
  - c. Daniel's Prayer and its Answer (9:1-27)
    - i. Daniel's Prayer for the People (9:1-19)
    - ii. The Seventy Weeks (9:20-27)
  - d. Daniel's Vision of Final Conflict (10:1-12:13)
    - i. Conflict of Nations and Heavenly Powers (10:1-11:39)
    - ii. The Time of the End (11:40-45)
    - iii. The Resurrection of the Dead (12:1-13)
      - 1. The Promise of Resurrection to Glory or Shame (12:1-4)
      - 2. How long until the End? (12:5-13)