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GLIMPING THE MYSTERY

THE BOOK OF DANIEL

TRANSFORMATIVE WORD

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Edited by Craig G. Bartholomew



Glimpsing the Mystery: The Book of Daniel

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*To the Leung Sisters: Christine, Grace, Gladys
Family, Friends, Fellow Pilgrims*

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INTRODUCTION

On the evening of September 11, 2001, I began teaching a course on Daniel and apocalyptic literature. Students were stunned by the tragic events still unfolding through the afternoon hours into the evening. A student whose husband, daughter, and son-in-law were working in the World Trade Center was sitting in the corner of the room. When asked, she refused to go home and wait for phone calls. Instead, she chose to stay with the class through those agonizing hours. (She would later learn that her immediate family all survived, but she lost her niece in the tragedy.) It was more than a coincidence that I had adopted my course's subtitle from the theme identified by Tremper Longman III in his commentary on Daniel: "In spite of present appearances, God is in control."¹

The book of Daniel was written at a time of great national peril to encourage Jews by reminding them that the sovereign God is still in control, despite their current situation. This timeless message has appealed to generations of saints—from the exilic community of the sixth century BC to the faith communities of today. It spoke to the rise and fall of kings and empires in Daniel's time, and it speaks to the turbulent and

chaotic situations on the current world scene. Wars and conflicts among nations, global catastrophes that are beyond human control, and the magnitude and intensity of senseless human suffering—all these have the potential to shake our faith to its core. We share the same genuine need as Daniel (12:6), and with him as well as the prophets and psalmists we ask: “How long?” (Pss 80:4; 82:2).

Engaging the Book of Daniel “In Times Like This”

I am Chinese-Canadian, with a ministry primarily among the Chinese faith communities in the Toronto metro area. In my faith community, we have strategically used the book of Daniel to help members come to terms with the realities of the new world after the tragedy of September 11, 2001. Studying this profoundly pastoral book, people often find comfort and strength in applying Daniel’s message to their own contexts. The book has proven meaningful when read as a survival manual for immigrant families, for those who are under hostile rule, or for those who are facing extreme trials of faith.²

I am also in the prime of my life, with a ministry among my privileged peers—well-educated, middle-class professionals, Chinese and non-Chinese prime-timers. Within this context, one reality persistently disturbs the community: Our collective Canadian culture, our professional lives, and our social and economic status cannot adequately provide answers to the senselessness and absurdity of human suffering. As in the case of Daniel’s community in captivity, we look to the future with a high degree of

uncertainty but glimpses of hope. In our view of God, we need to include the idea that God is the one who reveals and yet, by his sovereignty, leaves us in a certain degree of suspense about end-time mysteries.

As we read Daniel, we are reminded that a great deal is happening “underwater,” though oftentimes we see only ripples. God’s greatness and sovereignty can be experienced through everyday stories in our lives but also go beyond them.

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This understanding is, potentially, a transformative path leading to enduring faith and perseverance.

Toward the end of the book, after beholding extraordinary visions of God and going through an exotic visionary experience, Daniel is given a

calming assurance: “But you, Daniel, go on to the end; for you shall rest and stand in your lot at the end of the days” (12:13, my translation). The book ends suddenly and unexpectedly with a serene but assuring hope. As Longman has stated, “The book of Daniel masterfully demonstrates God’s sovereignty over his people’s past, present, and future. God’s sovereignty infuses his people with confidence and hope in the midst of a difficult world.”³ In our own faith journeys, perhaps an assuring hope is enough—in spite of current appearances.

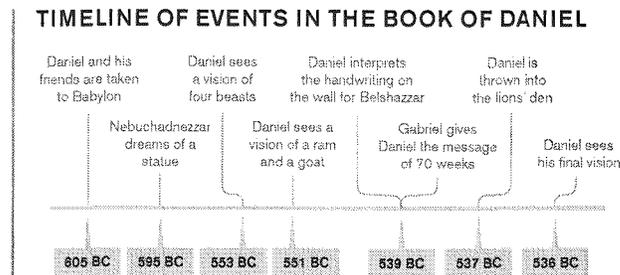
The Book and Its Background

The twelve chapters of Daniel are set within a historical framework that extends over three empires—

Babylonian, Median-Persian, and Greek—and four kings: the Babylonian kings Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar, the Median king Darius, and the Persian king Cyrus the Great. It is written in two distinct biblical genres: court tales (Dan 1–6) and apocalyptic literature (Dan 7–12). Court tales are stories set within a royal court and usually feature an underling character who is put in precarious positions by the king, only to be delivered by God (compare the story of Joseph in Genesis 39–41). “Apocalyptic” is a genre of writing that particularly focuses on revealing future actions and divine judgment in symbolic terms. The designation “apocalyptic” comes from the Greek word *apokalypsis*, which means “revelation, unveiling.” The genre is especially concerned with unveiling details about the last things. Daniel is the most characteristically apocalyptic book in the Old Testament; the genre remained popular into the early Christian era (AD 200).

According to Daniel 1:1–2, 21; 6:28; and 10:1, the book was written in the sixth century BC—from the exile that occurred in the third year of King Jehoiakim (1:1; 605 BC) to the latest reference in the fourth vision given to Daniel, “in the third year of Cyrus king of Persia” (10:1; 536 BC). These references to particular dates and figures at the beginning of each of the court tales (1:1–2; 2:1; 3:1; 4:4; 5:1; 6:1) and more precisely at the beginning of each of the four visions (7:1; 8:1; 9:1; 10:1) are characteristic of the book of Daniel. If the reader pays close attention to the historical references that frame the court tales, a consistent pattern emerges: Each chapter begins with a concrete historical setting (1:1–2; 2:1; 3:1–2; 4:4–5; 5:1–3; 6:1–3) and ends with an appraisal of Daniel’s (and his friends’) status

as it is continuously elevated by the kings he serves (1:18–21; 2:47–49; 3:30; 5:17–18; 6:28).⁴



Supported by ancient Near Eastern sources, the historical landscape plays an important role in understanding the book as well as the setting of its first audience: Jews living in exile in Babylon in the sixth century BC. The rise and fall of kings and empires, in fairly quick succession, characterizes the turbulent world context of that time. Daniel 1 begins with Babylon's rise as a world power following its defeat of the Assyrian Empire at the Battle of Nineveh (612 BC). When Nebuchadnezzar II took the throne in 605 BC, Babylon began its ascent to the height of its power, only to decline soon after his death in 562 BC. Another power, Media-Persia, arose next; the Persian king Cyrus the Great took the capital city of Babylon in 539 BC. As reflected in the stories of chapters 1–6, Daniel, his three friends (Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego), and the Jewish community in captivity had to endure the hostile ruling of these powerful empires, the most extreme of which was Babylon.

The main characters in the court tales are Daniel and his friends, who interact with three foreign kings—Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar of Babylon, and Darius of Persia. Daniel takes center stage in the apocalyptic section of the book (Dan 7–12). The last six chapters are written in the first-person voice of Daniel and presented as Daniel’s authentic, first-hand vision reports. These chapters include both his visions and their interpretation revealed by angelic beings to Daniel. Through this first-person voice, the author of Daniel invites all readers to engage in his visionary experiences and to take his accounts at face value (for instance, 7:15, 28; 8:27).⁵ The book is also written in two languages: 2:4b–7:28 in Aramaic, and the rest in Hebrew.⁶

Date and Author

The dating and authorship of Daniel are debated, with the two most popular options being the sixth or second century BC. Three factors need to be considered:

1. Chapters 1–6 and, to some extent, 7–9 describe things that occurred in the sixth century BC, though the book itself doesn’t directly claim a sixth-century date of composition.
2. Writing under the name of a better-known person (a pseudonym—in this case, “Daniel”) was a common writing convention in the ancient Near East, especially during the period of Greek, or Hellenistic, rule (323–148 BC). In light of this, we, as readers, should ask: If someone other than the sixth-century Daniel wrote or composed the book, why is the emphatic,

self-referential “I, Daniel” included (7:15, 28; 8:27; 10:2, 7; 12:5) in the first-person, visionary section of the book (Dan 7–12)? How would the original audience have understood and been impacted by it?

3. Reading the text straightforwardly, the vision in chapter 8 extends the scope of the visions to the Greek Empire (especially 8:21, which directly references Greece: “The shaggy goat is the king of Greece, and the large horn between its eyes is the first king”).

But ultimately—whether the author’s standpoint is from the sixth or second century BC—it makes surprisingly little difference when interpreting the book of Daniel.⁷ Though we won’t go into a detailed defense of a sixth-century date or Danielic authorship here, we can reach two conclusions from the factors above.

1. While writing under an assumed name was a popular convention in the ancient Near East, the emphatic, self-referential “I, Daniel” is unique among the first-person texts of the Old Testament. (Compare the “I”-voice of the preacher in Ecclesiastes and the four portions of the Nehemiah memoir in Nehemiah [Neh 1:1b–2:20; 4:1–7:73; 12:27–43; 13:1–31]). This uniqueness should be taken into account when determining the authenticity of the sixth-century Daniel behind the “I”-voice.
2. The view that God could reveal to a sixth-century author events that would come to pass in the second century (for example, the direct reference to Greek rule in 8:21), or that a

second-century author/composer could record events that were disclosed by God to Daniel back in the sixth century, would each affirm that God is in control throughout human history and beyond (especially chapters 10–12). A parallel example: If we understand the “I”-voice that occurs sporadically throughout the book of Isaiah to be the first-person voice of the eighth-century prophet Isaiah (Isa 5:3, 13; 6:1; 8:1–4; 15:5; 16:4, 9, 11; 21:2–4, 6, 10; 22:4–5, 14; 24:16; 25:1; 26:9, 20; 40:6; 49:1–5; 50:4–9; 61:10; 63:7), then the mentions of Cyrus’ name in 44:28 and 45:1 is another powerful witness to a God who reveals future events to the eighth-century audience, because the Persian king Cyrus was born about two centuries *after* the passage was written.

Arrangement of Chapters

As noted previously, one of the characteristics of the book is that the six court tales and the four visions are all prefaced by a precise historical reference (see 1:1–2; 2:1; 3:1; 4:1; 5:1; 6:1; 7:1; 8:1; 9:1; 10:1). However, the chapters are not arranged in chronological order—which highlights the connection between the earthly witnesses in the daily life of the court and the anticipation of God’s eternal sovereignty over all evil powers, as revealed through the heavenly visions.

The visions in chapters 7 and 8 occur during the reign of Belshazzar, who reigned as coregent over Babylon with his father Nabonidus (who reigned 556–539 BC). These visions take place before the events of chapter 5. Chapters 6 and 9 take place during

OUTLINE

Six Court Tales (Dan 1–6)

- a. Daniel and His Three Friends in Nebuchadnezzar's Court (Dan 1)
- b. Daniel as Wise Man (Dan 2)
- c. God Saves the Three Friends from the Blazing Furnace (Dan 3)
- d. Nebuchadnezzar's Dream of a Tree and Its Interpretation (Dan 4)
- e. The Writing on the Wall and Its Interpretation (Dan 5)
- f. Daniel in the Lions' Den (Dan 6)

Four Visions (Dan 7–12)

- a. The Vision of the Four Beasts (Dan 7)
- b. The Ram and the Goat (Dan 8)
- c. Daniel's Prayer of Repentance and the Prophecy of the Seventy "Sevens" (Dan 9)
- d. The Vision of a Heavenly Messenger and the Revelation of the Scope and End of History (Dan 10–12)

the reign of Darius the Mede, while the last vision (chs. 10–12) occurs during the reign of Cyrus. The significance of this arrangement is twofold. First, it provides a smooth transition from God's intervention in earthly events through protecting and preserving the life of Daniel and his friends under the reign of the three foreign kings (chs. 1–6) to the mystery of God unfolded in the more sophisticated, heavenly realm presented in chapters 7–12.

Second, this transition is seamless: The community in captivity witnesses God's miraculous work on earth while, at the same time, the heavenly secrets of the sovereign and triumphant God are communicated to Daniel through visions. When told as first-person

RULERS IN THE BOOK OF DANIEL

Ruler	Chapters Present
Nebuchadnezzar	Daniel 1–4
Belshazzar	Daniel 5; 7–8
Darius the Mede	Daniel 6; 9; 11–12
Cyrus the Great	Daniel 6:28; 10

reports, chapters 7–12 are meant to favorably present the recountings as reliable, firsthand accounts.

Case in point: In chapter 8, Daniel is given a vision of the rage between a “ram and a goat” (with the ram as a symbol of the Median and Persian kings/kingdom, 8:19–20; and the goat as the king/kingdom of Greece, 8:21). From the perspective of the sixth-century exilic community (the book’s original audience), these historically specific aspects of the vision wouldn’t be realized for at least another few centuries. Daniel was so appalled by the vision that he lay ill for several days. Yet he still had to attend to the king’s business in the court of Belshazzar (8:1, 27). Daniel’s earthly reaction and God’s heavenly revelation blend seamlessly together within the same timeframe—the one set by the text of chapter 8.

How to Read the Book

Three reading strategies may be applied to the book of Daniel. First, as Old Testament apocalyptic literature, Daniel may be interpreted according to the guidelines for interpreting apocalyptic literature.⁸ We’ll talk about these in more detail at relevant moments in the discussion to come.

Second, Daniel can also be read as prophetic literature. Biblical prophecy contains both “forth-telling” (proclamation-making) and “fore-telling” (prediction-making) elements. In the case of Daniel, the forth-telling passages are Daniel’s interpretations of royal dreams (chs. 2, 4, 5) and the explanations of Daniel’s visions by angelic beings (chs. 7–12). Chapter 5 demonstrates the shortest time frame between a fore-telling prophecy and its fulfillment (immediately that night in 5:30–31). Daniel 4:28–34 is another example of the fulfillment of a fore-telling prophecy as “forth-told” (proclaimed) by Daniel through his interpretation of King Nebuchadnezzar’s dream (vv. 24–27).

Third, chapters 1–6 could be read as a form of wisdom literature. The idea of wisdom in the Old Testament is rooted in the “two-way doctrine” or “blessing and cursing” as spelled out in Proverbs 3:33 (“The LORD’s curse is on the house of the wicked, but he blesses the home of the righteous”) and Deuteronomy 11:26–28 (see also Deut 28). The first half of the book could be read from a perspective that emphasizes God’s protection of and enabling power on Daniel and his three friends as rewards for their piety and fidelity before him.

Major Theological Themes

One overarching theme of the book of Daniel is the sovereignty of God, as exhibited both on the earthly scene and in the heavenly realm. This emerges from both of the two distinct portions of the book: the court tales (chs. 1–6) and apocalyptic visions (chs. 7–12). God is in control amidst the evil powers of

the world, and he is triumphant over the cosmic heavenly conflicts.

A second theological theme throughout the book is the idea that God is the revealer of mysteries.

God is in control amidst the evil powers of the world, and he is triumphant over the cosmic heavenly conflicts.

He is truly an “apocalyptic” (revealing) God. At the same time, while God reveals mysteries, he also leaves us in suspense regarding heavenly secrets.

While these themes run throughout the book, the search for a single theological center of the book should not delimit its significance for the faith community today. As we walk the interpretive path of Daniel’s twelve chapters, we will uncover other theological themes brought up by the book’s multifaceted view of God and the inner life and probing spirit of Daniel. As we move from an approach that tries to find a single, central theme to a more self-engaged way of reading the book, we will find that reading Daniel can be an ever-enriching and meaning-expanding experience for readers today.

SUGGESTED READING

- Daniel 1
- 2 Chronicles 36:15–23
- Ezra 1
- Isaiah 44:24–28

Reflection

What does it take for you to feel engaged in reading Daniel?

What is chaotic and crazy about your own life right now? In what ways can we draw on our faith to embrace the realities of life in the twenty-first century?

Reflect on the following quote from John Goldingay, which was referenced in this chapter: "Whether the visions are actual prophecy or quasi-prophecy [i.e., prophecy written after the events], written by Daniel or someone else, in the sixth century BC, the second, or somewhere in between, makes surprisingly little difference to the book's interpretation." Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?
