

THE BOOK OF DANIEL

Historical Background

The book of Daniel opens with the following statement, “In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it” (1.1; NASB). The time was the year 605 BC. The last date mentioned in the book of Daniel is “the third year of Cyrus king of Persia” (10.1; NASB) or 537 BC. Daniel, then, represents a collection of memoirs compiled by the prophet himself at the end of a long and eventful career that stretches from the reign of Nebuchadnezzar to the reign of Cyrus the Great. The most likely date for the final edition of the book would be around 530 BC.

Josephus, the Jewish historian who lived roughly from AD 37 to 100, regards Daniel as “one of the greatest of the prophets” who prophesied “of future events, as did the other prophets, and he also determined the time of their accomplishment” (*Antiquities* 10.11.7).

A good knowledge of Ancient Near Eastern history is essential to an understanding of the book of Daniel. Below is a list of important dates for a study of Daniel. All dates are BC.

	612	Fall of Nineveh. End of Assyria.
BABYLON	605	Battle of Carchemish. Nebuchadnezzar defeated Egypt and deported Daniel and his friends (Daniel 1.1). Accession of Nebuchadnezzar II (605-562).
	597	Jerusalem taken by Nebuchadnezzar; many Jews exiled; Jerusalem subjugated but not yet destroyed.
	587	Fall of Jerusalem.
	562-560	Amel-Marduk (Evil-Merodach, 2 Kings 25.27-30), king of Babylon.
	560-556	Neriglissar, son-in-law of Nebuchadnezzar.
	556	Labashi-Marduk.
	556-539	Nabonidus (Belshazzar acting king in Babylon).
	539	Fall of Babylon.
PERSIA	539-530	Cyrus—the Achaemenid dynasty.
	530-522	Cambyzes.
	522-486	Darius I.
	486-465/4	Xerxes I (Ahasuerus).
	464-423	Artaxerxes.
	423-404	Darius II.
	404-359	Artaxerxes II.
	359-338/7	Artaxerxes III.
	337-336/5	Arses.
	335-331	Darius III.
GREECE	334-331	Conquests of Alexander of Macedon, also called Alexander the Great (331-323).
	323	Death of Alexander whose empire was divided into four areas of which the Egyptian and the Syrian become the most prominent.

EGYPT (Ptolemies)		SYRIA (Seleucids)	
323-285	Ptolemy I.	312-281	Seleucus I.
285-245	Ptolemy II.	281-260	Antiochus I.
245-221	Ptolemy III.	260-246	Antiochus II.
221-203	Ptolemy IV.	245-223	Seleucus II and III.
203-181	Ptolemy V.	222-187	Antiochus III (“the great”).
198	Syria took control of Palestine from Egypt.	187-175	Seleucus IV.
		175-164	Antiochus IV (“Epiphanes”).
ROME is the rising power.		168	Antiochus expelled from Egypt by the Roman consul (Daniel 11.30).
		167	On December 25, Greek altar set up in the temple in Jerusalem.

Structure of the Book of Daniel

Like the book of Ezra, Daniel is written in both Hebrew and Aramaic. Aramaic is a close cognate language to Hebrew which uses the same script. Daniel begins (1.1–2.4a) and ends (8.1–12.13) in Hebrew with an Aramaic section (2.4b–7.28) in between. This gives the book an overall Hebrew–Aramaic–Hebrew structure (i.e., ABA in terms of parallelism).

In addition to this overall pattern, the Aramaic part of Daniel displays a clear literary arrangement. Chapters 2 and 7 present four kingdoms; chapters 3 and 6 are narratives that demonstrate the power of God to deliver his servants; and the middle two chapters, 4 and 5, reveal the judgment of God on proud rulers. This central section (chapters 4 and 5) contains the climax of the message of Daniel. The six chapters, all written in Aramaic which was the *lingua franca* or common language during the time of Daniel, present a theology of history, addressed to the kings of the earth, and therefore are written in the international language. The remaining chapters are written in Hebrew, because they primarily are addressed to the Jewish people. The Aramaic section, thus, portrays in terms of parallelism a Kingdoms–Deliverance–Judgment / Judgment–Deliverance–Kingdoms structure (i.e., ABC / CBA).

In Daniel, we find this deliberate pattern discernible, and we also encounter a form of apocalyptic (i.e., vivid description of catastrophic or portentous occurrences) called “progressive parallelism.” Chapters 2, 7, 8, 9, and 11 are, to some extent, parallel, with chapter 2 being the least complex and chapter 11 the most detailed. The revelation, or revelations, that were given to Daniel, and to the kings, are therefore progressive.

To sum up, the structure of the book itself compels us to believe that it was the work of one individual who presented his overall theme with meticulous care.

Outline of the Book of Daniel¹

- I. Introduction: the setting, 1.1-21.
 - A. The rise of Nebuchadnezzar, 1.1-2.
 - B. The requirements of Nebuchadnezzar, 1.3-7.
 - C. The resolution of Daniel, 1.8-16.
 - D. The reward of God, 1.17-21.

- II. The nations of the earth and the Most High God, 2.1–7.28.
 - A. Nebuchadnezzar dreams of four kingdoms and of God’s kingdom, 2.1-49.
 - B. Nebuchadnezzar, the tyrant, sees God’s servants rescued, 3.1-30.
 - C. Judgment on Nebuchadnezzar, 4.1-37.
 - C. Judgment on Belshazzar, 5.1-31.
 - B. Darius the Mede sees Daniel rescued, 6.1-28.
 - A. Daniel has a vision of four kingdoms and of God’s kingdom, 7.1-28.

- III. The vision of the ram and the he-goat, 8.1-27.
 - A. The scene, 8.1-14.
 - B. The solution, 8.15-27.

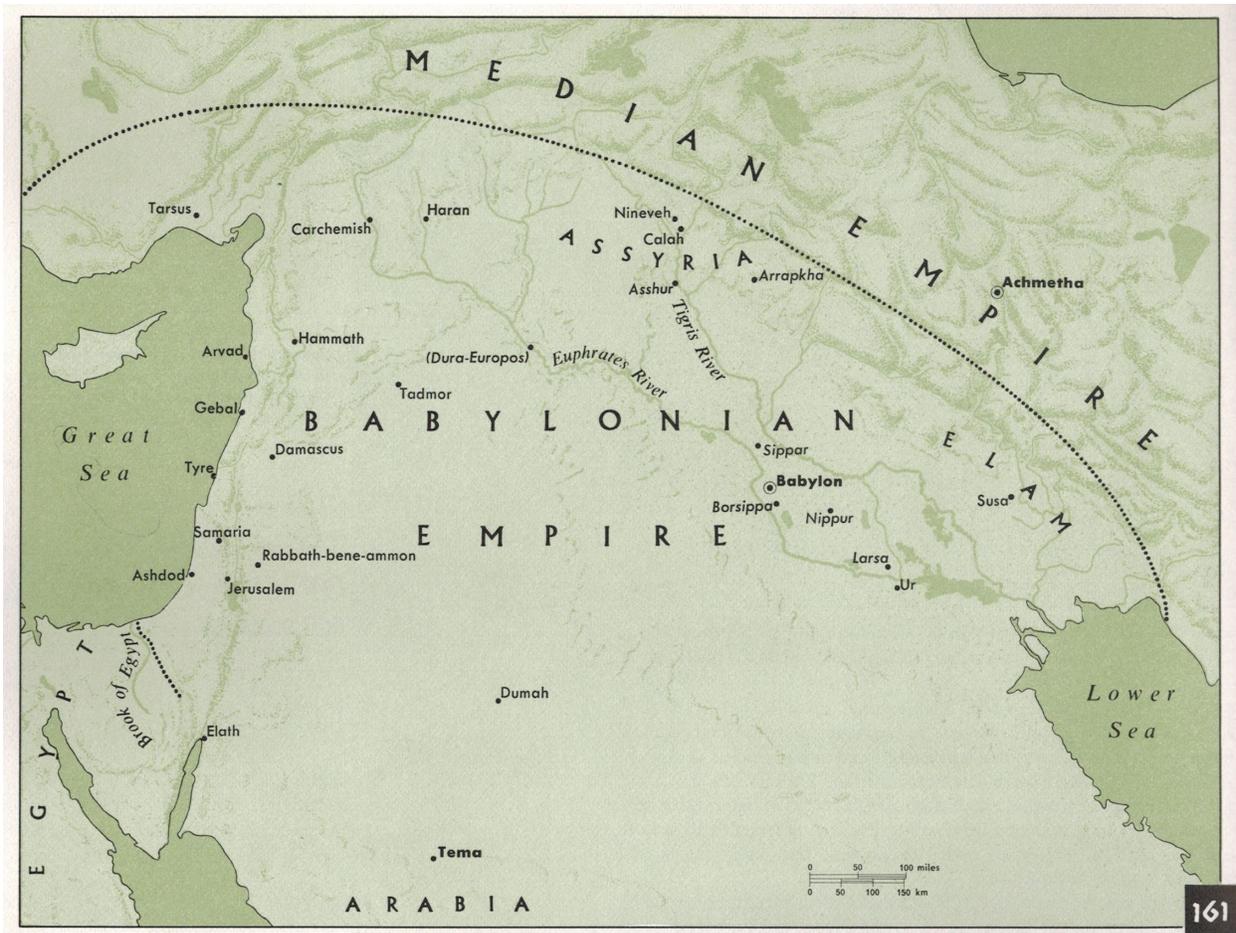
- IV. The vision of the seventy weeks, 9.1-27.
 - A. The appeal of Daniel, 9.1-19.
 - B. The appearance of Gabriel, 9.20-27.

- V. The last vision, 10.1–12.13.
 - A. The comforting angel, 10.1–11.1.
 - B. The conqueror–Alexander the Great, 11.2-4.
 - C. The conflicts between the Ptolemaic and Seleucid empires, 11.5-20.
 - D. The contemptible Antiochus Epiphanes, 11.21-45.
 - E. The consummation, 12.1-4.
 - F. The conclusion, 12.5-13.

¹Source unknown.

The Kingdom of Babylon: Early 6th Century BC²

The kingdom of Babylon inherited most of the Assyrian Empire and reached its zenith under Nebuchadnezzar. In the east and the north, it bordered on the kingdom of the Medes, and in the south stood Egypt, its rival. A petty kingdom like Judah needed in this period a king like Manasseh, who submitted to the yoke of the mighty power, sufficing in the minor role given him. The sons of Josiah were more ambitious. Even Jeremiah, the great prophet who rose in Judah in this period, could not curb their rash adventures with his harsh warnings.



Jehoiakim the son of Josiah remained on the throne after the Holy Land had come under Babylonian control and continued to aspire toward freedom from the Babylonian yoke with the aid of Egypt. Further proof of his daring ambitions can be seen in the remains of the magnificent palace uncovered at Ramat Rahel (probably the biblical Beth-haccherem). This was intended for the garrisoning of large military forces close to the capital. For this construction, he did not refrain from using much forced labor, earning the hatred of the people of Jerusalem (2 Kings 24.4; Jeremiah 22.13-19). Three years after his surrender to Nebuchadnezzar, he felt ready to

²Text and map from Yohanan Aharoni and Michael Avi-Yonah, *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*, revised edition (New York: Macmillan, 1977), 104.

revolt against Babylonian rule. The reaction was swift: at first the Babylonians directed the unrest of Judah's neighbors toward her, mainly in the east, and the Chaldean army came up against Jerusalem in 598 BC. Jehoiakim died at the start of the siege; he may have been murdered (Jeremiah 22.18-19; 36.30). His son Jehoiachin surrendered and was exiled to Babylon together with many of his family and the notables of the kingdom, "all the princes, and all the mighty men of valor, even ten thousand captives, and all the craftsmen and the smiths; none remained, save the poorest sort of the people of the land" (2 Kings 24.14).

Purpose of Daniel³

After the death of King Solomon, the northern tribes rebelled and renounced the covenant promises between God and Israel. From this time forward, both in the northern and southern kingdoms, wickedness characterized the people, and God announced his intentions to destroy them. The instruments which the sovereign God employed to carry out his purpose of bringing the theocracy to an end were the Assyrians and the Babylonians. By the power of these nations, the theocratic peoples of both Israel (northern kingdom) and Judah (southern kingdom) were carried into captivity, and the exile or period of "indignation" came.

The exile itself later gave way to a period of expectancy and preparation for the coming of the Messiah. It was revealed that a period of seventy sevens had been determined by God for the accomplishment of the Messianic work (Daniel 9.24-27). The book of Daniel, a product of the exile, serves to show that the exile itself was not be permanent. Rather, the very nation which had conquered Israel would disappear from the scene of history, to be replaced by three more earthly, or human, empires. While these kingdoms were in existence, however, the God of heaven would establish another kingdom which, unlike the human kingdoms, would be both universal and eternal. It is the purpose of the book of Daniel to teach the truth that, even though the people of God are in bondage to a heathen nation, God himself is the sovereign and ultimate Disposer of the destinies both of individuals and of nations.

³Adapted from Edward J. Young, "Daniel: Introduction," *The New Bible Commentary*, editors, D. Guthrie and J. A. Motyer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 688.

EXCURSUS: THE CAREER OF THE PROPHET DANIEL⁴

Daniel was the son of a prominent family in Judah, born about 620 BC. In 604 BC, King Jehoiakim of Judah surrendered the city of Jerusalem, agreeing to pay tribute to Nebuchadnezzar, who was the crown prince of Babylon. Daniel and three friends—Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah—deported to the Chaldean capital in the first wave of captives. The Babylonian policy was to take sons of the royal family and princes as hostages and indoctrinate them in the Babylonian language (Aramaic), culture, and religion with the intention of returning them to their native land to be loyal administrators for the empire.

Daniel, while a teenager, distinguished himself in his dedication to Yahweh through intellectual prowess and by refusing to eat non-Kosher food at the “cadet academy.” When King Nebuchadnezzar had a disturbing dream, he used it to test his priests, requiring a demonstration of their ability to divine an interpretation. But beyond that, he required that they tell him the content of the dream first. The ancients believed dreams were communication from the gods. The usual interpretive protocol was for the priests (diviners) to be told the dream, after which they consulted an extensive dream–interpretation document that “revealed” its meaning to the dreamer—with a good dose of subjectivism on the part of the priests.

Nebuchadnezzar gave his cabinet of spiritual advisers—magicians, astrologers, diviners / seers, and exorcists—a single day to meet his demands or be executed. They were shocked at this breach of divining protocol. But young Daniel, a student advisor with deep devotion to Yahweh, already was gaining a reputation as an extraordinary dream solver. He was able to reveal the details of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream and its interpretation. This event catapulted Daniel to prominence. His loyal, diligent work for the Babylonian administration kept him at the highest levels of government for more than 60 years, during which he served 4 kings—Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar (son and coregent to King Nabonidus) of Babylon, and the Medo-Persian kings Cyrus and Darius.

Daniel’s book resides in the Writings (*Ketuvim*) portion of the Hebrew Bible. Throughout his Mesopotamian career he remained a rigorously pious follower of Yahweh, experienced visions, and publically interpreted dreams and visions for his royal overlords on at least three occasions. His main career, however, was in civil administration. While Daniel was an honored author of a canonical work, his book does not appear in the collection of Old Testament prophets (seers). Nevertheless, Jesus, in the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24.15), identified Daniel as a prophet.

Bible critics challenge both author and date of Daniel’s book (written about 530 BC), and claim it must have been written later during the Hellenistic or Hasmonean period (332-63 BC). This is because chapters 10 and 11 of Daniel contain prophecies detailing the history of wars between the Seleucid and Ptolemaic dynasties, who ruled the small province of Judah from 320 to 167 BC. If we accept that God can provide authentic revelation to his prophets, then the visions of Daniel accurately describe beforehand those political and military events that impacted Judah many years later.

⁴By Harry Gullet and Steven Collins, from *The Harvest Handbook of Bible Lands*, general editors, Steven Collins and Joseph M. Holden (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2019), 226.