SHAPED BY SCRIPTURE

The God We Serve

DANIEL

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Contents

Introduction

THE *SHAPED BY SCRIPTURE* SERIES

The first step of an organized study of the Bible is the selection of a biblical book, which is not always an easy task. Often people pick a book they are already familiar with, books they think will be easy to understand, or books that, according to popular opinion, seem to have more relevance to Christians today than other books of the Bible. However, it is important to recognize the truth that God's Word is not limited to just a few books. All the biblical books, both individually and collectively, communicate God's Word to us. As Paul affirms in 2 Timothy 3:16, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." We interpret the term "God-breathed" to mean inspired by God. If Christians are going to take 2 Timothy 3:16 seriously, then we should all set the goal of encountering God's Word as communicated through all sixty-six books of the Bible. New Christians or those with little to no prior knowledge of the Bible might find it best to start with a New Testament book like 1 John, James, or the Gospel of John.

By purchasing this volume, you have chosen to study the Old Testament book of Daniel. You have made a great choice because this book presents a fascinating mixture of narratives filled with compelling characters, political intrigue, and dangerous exploits; and apocalyptic visions that reflect the world stage in cosmic proportions. Ultimately, these pieces of Daniel's story come together to address some of humanity's deepest, most enduring concerns, such as the meaning of suffering, the struggle against evil, and our ultimate destiny. The goal of this series is to illustrate an appropriate method for studying the Bible, so instead of a comprehensive study of Daniel, this volume will be limited to a few select chapters that have been chosen as representative of the stories and the biblical genre found in the book of Daniel.

How This Study Works

This Bible study is intended for a period of seven weeks. We have chosen a specific passage for each week's study. This study can be done individually or with a small group.

For individual study, we recommend a five-day study each week, following the guidelines given below:

1	On the first day of the study, read the relevant passage several times until you become fully familiar with the verses, words, and phrases.
2	On the second day, we will review the setting and organization of the passage.
3	On the third day, we will observe some of the realities portrayed in the passage.
4	On the fourth day, we will investigate the relationship of the individual passage to the larger story of God in the Bible.
5	On the fifth day, we will reflect on the function of the story as we hear it today, the invitation it extends to us, and our response to God, who speaks through God's Word.

If this Bible study is done as a group activity, we recommend that members of the group meet together on the sixth day to share and discuss what they have learned from God's Word and how it has transformed their lives.

You may want to have a study Bible to give you additional insights as we work through the book of Daniel. Other helpful resources are *Discovering the Old Testament* and *Daniel: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, available from The Foundry Publishing.

Literary Forms in the Bible

There are several literary forms represented throughout the Bible. The divinely inspired writers used various techniques to communicate God's Word to their ancient audiences. The major literary forms (also known as genres) of the Bible are:

- narratives
- laws
- history
- Wisdom literature (in the form of dialogues and proverbial statements)
- poetry (consisting of poems of praise, lament, trust in God, and more)
- prophecy
- discourses
- parables
- miracle stories
- letters (also known as epistles)
- exhortations
- apocalyptic writings

Within each of these forms, one may find subgenres. Each volume in the *Shaped by Scripture* series will briefly overview the genres found in the book of the Bible that is the subject of that study.

When biblical writers utilized a particular literary form, they intended for it to have a specific effect on their audience. This concept can be understood by examining genres that are familiar to us in our contemporary setting. For example, novels that are comedies inspire good and happy feelings in their readers; tragedies, on the other hand, are meant to induce sorrow. What is true of the intended effect of literary forms in contemporary literature is also true of literary forms found in the Bible.

Introduction

THE BOOK OF DANIEL

The book of Daniel is one of the most beloved books of the Old Testament. Perhaps no other book is filled with as many memorable stories about ordinary people overcoming danger and persecution while remaining faithful to God. Yet there is a considerable cultural chasm between the modern reader and the book of Daniel. We are too far removed from harems, kings, and ancient court intrigues to fully understand and appreciate these stories.

The latter half of Daniel is even further removed from the modern reader. While the first half of the book contains popular stories we know and love, the latter half is filled with unfamiliar imagery and predictions about events in a world we do not understand. Though many people approach this book with the belief that it prophesies the future, it is far more fruitful to analyze Daniel in the context of apocalyptic literature. A renewed appreciation for history, context, and literary style is important for any student of Scripture, and especially for the reader of such a rich and intriguing book as Daniel.

As we read Daniel, there is a barrier we must overcome. While this barrier exists in any biblical text, it is perhaps more pronounced in Daniel than in any other Old Testament book. Most Western Christians live in powerful nations in which comfort and wealth are a given. But for the first readers of Daniel, hardships and political oppression were a daily reality. The ancient Jews had very little control over any aspect of their lives. In order to understand these stories, we must enter their world of oppression and stark political imbalance. While this might be a difficult task for us, it is necessary. Even if our personal circumstances differ from those of the characters in this text, the book of Daniel has theological significance for modern Christians.

Another barrier in our reading is the idea that Daniel predicts the future. As a result, many modern readers pore over details in Daniel, searching for clues that point to modern political identities. However, this is not how Daniel or other ancient prophetic books functioned. While this book does not predict the future, it does give the modern reader confidence that God will ultimately triumph.

Who Wrote Daniel?

One of the first problems a modern reader confronts in this book is the author's identity. Traditionally, the author has been identified as Daniel however, that view has been seriously challenged for some time. The main evidence for Daniel as the author is the fact that Daniel's visions are described from a first-person perspective in chapters 7 12. Although this fact ends the conversation for some people, this view is not without its problems: the first six chapters of Daniel are written in the third person. What is a reader to make of this split between the first- and third-person perspectives?

Who is this Daniel our text describes? There may have been a Daniel who existed during the time of the Babylonian exile and around whom these heroic stories sprung up. If that is the case, we know nothing more about him. There are other instances of the name in the Old Testament, but these seem to refer to an ancient Daniel, not this hero who is faithful during the exile. In Ezekiel 14:14, the prophet refers to Noah, Daniel, and Job. Noah and Job are people from Israel's distant past and would hardly be contemporaries of Daniel. This instance of the name is also spelled differently and would be better rendered Danel.

There is another problem with the theory that this book was written by a single author: half of Daniel is written in Aramaic, while the other half is written in Hebrew. More precisely, chapters 2 7 are written in Aramaic, and chapters 1 and 8 12 are written in Hebrew. Most of the familiar stories about Daniel and his three friends are written in Aramaic; the introduction to the book and the strange visions of the latter half are written in Hebrew. Chapter 7 is the only chapter that breaks this pattern: it is the first chapter that describes Daniel's visions, and it is written in Aramaic. We will address this anomaly in more detail later.

Why would a single author decide to write a literary work in two starkly different languages?

There are many possible explanations for this difference in language. However, the simplest explanation is that there are multiple authors. An author living in the time of the exile writes about Daniel and the other three faithful heroes in the third person; a later author then writes the last five chapters in Hebrew, in the first person. This second author incorporates the heroic stories from the exile into the apocalyptic sections in the latter half of the book. These two works are then combined into a single literary work: the book of Daniel that we have today.

The possibility of multiple authors bothers some people they feel it undermines the veracity of the Bible. They believe that because Daniel is mentioned, he must be the sole author. In our modern conceptions of authorship, the involvement of anoth-

er writer might seem fraudulent. However, it is vital that we not impose our modern perspectives on people who lived in a far different time and place than our own. The idea of copyrighted material was foreign in ancient times, and most works of literature were composed anonymously. Whole genres of literature were written in the names of prominent people, especially heroes from the past. This is particularly true of apocalyptic literature. Most scholars see the second half of Daniel as an early apocalyptic work, so ascribing these visions to Daniel would be an expected part of an apocalypse.

If the Daniel from the sixth century BCE is not the author of this book, then who is? It is impossible to trace this book back to any specific author. However, we can trace it to a group: it seems likely that the author would have been part of a group of faithful Jews living in a time of extreme duress. These Jews would have observed the traditions and laws of Judaism and would have been resistant to the encroaching influence of Hellenization. As they lived beneath another kingdom that sought to end their religious practices, the stories of Daniel and his friends gained a new importance for these Jews. Later, another author composed an apocalyptic work in Daniel's name and combined it with the earlier stories from the exile.

Historical Context

It is helpful to understand the time period we will reference throughout this study. The hero stories in chapters 1–6 are straightforward and powerful, but it is easy to get lost in the kings and kingdoms that are described. When we enter the book of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar is a relatively new king of the Babylonian Empire. The Babylonians were the world power at the time and had destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BCE. As a result of this defeat, many Jews were deported to Babylon and forced to live there in exile.

Around the time of Israel's exile, the new Persian Empire adjacent to Babylon was expanding rapidly and becoming increasingly powerful. The last Babylonian king, Nabonidus, had provoked an internal crisis by leaving Babylon for ten years. In his absence, he appointed Belshazzar as co-regent. This absence sparked internal strife which in turn weakened the morale of the Babylonian people and army. While Belshazzar reigned, the end of Babylon came swiftly: in 539 BCE, the Persian army easily defeated the dispirited Babylonian army, and Cyrus, the Persian ruler, entered Babylon. This was a positive development for the Jews in exile—the Persians ruled with much greater sensitivity and autonomy than the Babylonians and allowed the first of the Jews to return to their homeland.

Persia ruled until 333 BCE, when Darius III and the Persian Empire were defeated by Alexander the Great, and the Greek Empire reached its widest sphere of influence. This conquest also began an era in which the Greek culture and philosophy began to influence the whole region, known as the period of Hellenization. A few years later,

when Alexander the Great unexpectedly died in 323 BCE, the Greek Empire was suddenly divided into many parts. Alexander's kingdom was divided among different military leaders, all of whom had their own territorial ambitions. These rival leaders included the Ptolemaic rulers in Egypt and the Seleucids in what is now modern-day Syria. The Jews who had returned to Palestine were located directly between these competing factions of the former Greek Empire. These factions frequently went to war with each other, and Palestine was pressured from both sides.

Eventually, the Seleucids pushed back the Ptolemaic rulers and governed Palestine starting in 200 BCE. While the Seleucids were never nearly as powerful as the great kingdoms that came before them, they ruled more harshly and threatened the Jews' existence in the mid-second century BCE. Their oppressive rule ended in 164 BCE when the Jews rebelled and regained their independence from the Seleucids. This timeline will be important to keep in mind as we read Daniel.

Date

Along with differing perspectives on authorship, the reader is faced with further questions and considerations when it comes to dating the book of Daniel. It is helpful to discuss these questions in tandem with the book's authorship, since the date of Daniel's composition is intertwined with determining the book's author.

When it comes to assigning a date to the book of Daniel, there are only two possibilities: the sixth century or the second century BCE. If Daniel himself penned the book, then it was written in the sixth century BCE. If the book was written later, a date in the second century BCE seems likely.

There is another option that might satisfy adherents of both views: It is possible that the first half of Daniel was compiled during the Babylonian exile in the sixth century. Many scholars have noted that it is highly unlikely a Palestinian Jew would have written or collected a series of tales that describe an exilic setting it is not likely that the struggles of exile would have concerned Jews living in Palestine. On the other hand, for the Jewish community living in exile, the struggles portrayed in Daniel were a matter of daily concern. Daniel 2, for example, describes the achievements of Jews in a foreign court and emphasizes the benefits of remaining faithful to God in a gentile land. This perfectly describes the situation of the Jews in Babylon. In this scenario, we imagine that a later author compiled the hero stories from Israel's earlier history alongside the content of the latter half of Daniel, which was a product of the second century BCE.

There is considerable evidence that favors a later author or editor. As we discussed earlier, one of the questions we encounter in Daniel considers why the latter half of the book is written in Hebrew. The use of Hebrew would match the prevailing zealotry

of the Maccabean period, would be a way to reclaim some of Israel's great history, and would be a purer expression of their Jewishness. Another piece of evidence that supports second-century composition is the type of Hebrew that is used — it reflects the type of Hebrew used in the second temple period, which imported words and phrases gained after the exile. If the latter part of Daniel were written in the sixth century BCE, a reader would have expected an older form of Hebrew. All of these clues point toward a later composition.

Either way, the answer to whether the book was written in the sixth or second century BCE does not change how a reader interprets the great hero stories found in the first half of Daniel — in both periods, the Jews were tested by an existential crisis. In Babylon, the Jews found themselves in a modern culture with great wealth and influence — it would have been easy to become enthralled with the size and wealth of this unrivaled world power. The three young Jewish men in Daniel had the opportunity to adopt Babylonian customs in pursuit of becoming part of the ruling class. In this context, the first half of Daniel would have served as a reminder that those who remain faithful can also find success.

The second century exemplified a different type of threat: the Jews were under the control of the Seleucid Empire, which stretched from the Mediterranean coast, through Persia, to modern-day Afghanistan. The Seleucid Empire was one of four major sub-kingdoms left over after the breakup of the Greek Empire. The Seleucids were in frequent conflict with the Ptolemy kingdom in Egypt, and this conflict frequently flared throughout Palestine. In 168 BCE, Antiochus IV, the latest Seleucid on the throne, invaded Egypt, and his campaign was thoroughly defeated. Newly humiliated, Antiochus returned home only to discover that an insurrection had started in Jerusalem. These pesky Jews were difficult to rule, and they constantly appealed to their God instead of the proper ruling authorities. His answer to this problem was to plunder the temple, set up an image of Zeus on the altar, and outlaw the Jewish faith altogether. A modern Seleucid ruler would teach these Jews how to worship a modern, approved god.

The faithful Jews in Jerusalem now faced a serious threat to their lives. Should they worship the false idol in the temple, or remain loyal to the one true God of Israel? One can easily see the parallels between this dilemma and the decision the three young men faced with Nebuchadnezzar's statue in Daniel 3. Whether our time frame is the exile in Babylon or the later oppression of the Seleucids, the stories from the first half of Daniel resonate equally well. Moreover, these stories still resonate today. While most of us do not face a life-or-death decision before a pagan king, we are tempted to drift away from God to better follow a host of lower deities. Our deities may not be stone idols on an altar, but they demand just as much of our loyalty as the old idols did, and they are just as contrived.

It is fair to say that the date we assign to Daniel does make a difference in how we read the latter half of the book — and this is where the main point of contention exists. If Daniel was written in the sixth century, then most of the latter half of Daniel is not only predictive in nature, but spectacularly accurate as well. If it was written in the second century, the latter half of Daniel is history written from the perspective of people who have witnessed these events. Many scholars have noticed that the second half of Daniel resembles a form of literature that was rapidly developing during this period: apocalyptic literature. We will discuss the apocalyptic genre in more detail below.

Some Christians believe that God is somehow diminished if we claim a second-century author; these believers take comfort in the thought of a God who knows the precise details of future events and how they will unfold. But the issue is not that simple, as much as we might like it to be. Rather, there has been a divide in Christianity for centuries.

First, there are those who believe that God knows every detail of the future and every decision that will create that future — in other words, God knows and has ordained the future and decisions of every person who lives. Conversely, those on the other side of this divide believe that God has granted each person the ability to make decisions for themselves. Those of us in the Wesleyan/Arminian tradition adhere to the latter view. We should be very careful before choosing to embrace the other side of this debate there is much that hangs in the balance.

Literary Form

One of the enduring questions of Daniel is this: how did it come to be in its present form? As we discussed before, Daniel is a composite book. The first half of the book contains stories of heroes told in the third person; the second half is written in Hebrew from a first-person perspective and describes mysterious visions that are foreign to a modern reader. The book of Daniel as it exists today, then, appears to be the product of an effort to combine two separate writings into one text. The question is whether this was done during the exile or sometime during the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes in the second century BCE.

The heroic tales in the first half of the book center around four young Jewish men named Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, who were taken from Palestine and forced to relocate to Babylon. While in Babylon, these men were noticed for their appearance, intellect, and talent, and were selected to participate in training that would prepare them for service within the Babylonian Empire. The text even gives us their new Babylonian names in chapter 1: Daniel was given the name Belteshazzar, Hananiah was named Shadrach, Mishael was called Meshach, and Azariah was named Abednego. As we are given their Jewish and Babylonians identities in the book's

opening lines, the structure of these narratives is revealed: these stories will show the reader which identity these young men will cultivate and claim.

The first half of Daniel reflects the stories that most Jewish and Christian believers hold dear. Believers in every era have turned to these stories for encouragement and inspiration in the face of hardships, difficult decisions, and cultures that threaten to pull them away from their faith. Likewise, the four heroes' bravery is a model for modern-day believers who face similar crises of faith.

As we read, we are confronted with the question of what to make of the second half of Daniel. After an awkward third-person introduction in 7:1, Daniel's visions are written from a first-person perspective. Those who uphold that Daniel himself is the author point to this first-person perspective as evidence for their argument still, they must explain the need for a third-person introduction. Likewise, those who believe that a later author wrote this section of the book point to the third-person introduction as evidence yet they must also account for the first-person narrative that follows. The origins of the book of Daniel are not easily explained and present many important questions that we must navigate. Even more important than these questions are the content of these latter chapters.

It is hard to read the Bible without taking apocalyptic literature into account the book of Revelation is the biggest example, but it is not the only one. By the time of the New Testament's composition, apocalyptic literature was well established, and there are many examples of the genre found outside of the Bible.

Many people mistakenly believe that apocalyptic literature describes what will take place at the end of the world. However, this narrow definition does not capture the term's true meaning. The word "apocalypse" simply means "the revealing." When someone goes to a play and the curtain is pulled back, that is an apocalypse. Like theater, an apocalypse does not reveal the future but, rather, unveils what has been hidden.

An apocalypse is written during times of persecution and is meant to inspire hope within its readers. This type of literature developed during and after the exile, as the Jews were dominated by a series of world powers. Typically, an apocalypse features an important figure from a marginalized group being sent on a supernatural journey or receiving visions that communicate a larger message. Most apocalypses were ascribed to Jewish heroes. In Daniel, for example, the fact that the final chapters are written in the first person is not necessarily evidence that it was written by a person named Daniel rather, such an attribution is a convention of the apocalyptic genre.

As one of our first and best examples of an apocalypse, the book of Daniel calls the reader to participate in the hero's journey and see that God is still at work. Therefore, we can be encouraged as we enter its pages.

Entering the Story

Part of the reason why the stories in Daniel are so popular is because the first six chapters are so accessible. When we read these stories, we enter the world of the underdog. It is easy for us to place ourselves in circumstances where everything seems to be stacked against us. We imagine that with the Lord's help, we can overcome just as these young Jewish men did. Their journey encourages us to stay faithful. However, if this is our only response to these stories, we do not fully comprehend them.

While the modern reader, especially in the West, tends to read these narratives from a highly personal standpoint, the author's perspective is collective: these stories of Daniel and his companions express the plight and frustration of a powerless minority group. The Jewish captives in Babylon have no power to control or alter their circumstances, and success seems contingent upon giving up their identity. There is much that hangs in the balance — success in Babylon might mean the death of the Jewish people and the failure of the God of Abraham.

The difference between the Jewish exiles and the Babylonians was much more than a racial or ethnic distinction — there was a huge power imbalance as well. Babylon was the world power at the time, and the Jews were a conquered backwater. The only reason these Jewish men were in Babylon was because the Babylonians took them against their will. Whatever standard of living the Jews had was because the Babylonians allowed it to happen. Babylon had everything, and the Jews had nothing.

Even though the events in Daniel happened over 2,000 years ago, there is one key way that we can relate to the characters and enter the story. The Jews have found themselves in a completely foreign world, but that world is not dark and foreboding — rather, Babylon was powerful, rich, and alluring. For Jews with the talent and opportunity, there was a clear path to comfort, wealth, and power — far more power than would have been available to them had they remained in Jerusalem. They were in Babylon against their will, but if they played their cards right, there were riches and status to be gained.

The problem seems to be that while power and comfort were available to the exiles, the price for these gains was the abandonment of their Jewish identity and the Jewish God. While no one likes to experience intense hardship, it is relatively easy to understand how people remain faithful during difficult times. The scenario in Daniel is a little different: What does it mean to stay faithful in times of tremendous opportunity?

Doesn't God want me to be rich? Doesn't God want me to represent my people in powerful positions? How far can a follower of God go to gain an influential position? Undoubtedly, many people would have celebrated their fellow Jews' rise to power, even if it meant cutting a few corners to get there. Most people would have understood that there was a religious price to pay.

The writer of Daniel has a different view. For the heroes in these stories, the goal is not positions of power, but continued faithfulness to God. These are not stories that always have a happy ending in view — rather, these stories demonstrate that faithfulness means taking risks. These heroes declare, "We will not eat the king's food, even if it means being removed from the leadership program. Even if God doesn't save us from burning today, we still will not bow down to your idols." Their story shows us that faithfulness is not always easy, and we can't always predict the consequences of standing up for our beliefs. Remarkably, the young heroes in Daniel gain success through their faithfulness and obedience, and they do not have to abandon their identity in the process. This is the main point of Daniel's early chapters, and it provides an opening for the modern reader to enter the story.

The latter half of Daniel remains more elusive for the modern reader. While the early chapters resonate with readers, the strange visions in the second half of the book are harder to navigate. How we treat these chapters determines our ability to enter the story. As we previously discussed, our dating of Daniel is an important consideration here: if Daniel wrote the latter half of the book in the sixth century BCE, then Daniel takes on the role of predictive prophecy. In that case, the reader does not enter the story at all, but merely observes the unfolding of a predetermined series of events.

If Daniel is apocalyptic, however, the reader will respond to the text differently. Apocalyptic literature is not futuristic, nor does it teach the reader about the end of the world. At its heart, apocalyptic literature is written by marginalized people in times of great persecution or hardship in an effort to provide hope and encouragement. Again, in apocalyptic stories, a well-known figure is taken on a supernatural journey in which events are revealed to the figure in order to bring hope to a community. Thus, apocalyptic literature does not reveal the future, but reveals present-day events in a new light in hopes that the revelation will result in a change of behavior. A modern example of this type of literature is Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. In the novella, the Ghost of Christmas Present appears to Scrooge and takes him on a journey to Bob Cratchit's home on Christmas Day. While there, Scrooge is able to see the family's modest belongings and the meager meal they share on this sacred holiday. The hope is that Scrooge will see how his meager pay has left the family in poverty, and later change his behavior as a result of his supernatural journey.

This is an important distinction when we read Daniel. If we read Daniel as predictive, the text becomes a historical puzzle to be solved — therefore, if we can decipher

who the text addresses, we can determine the events that will take place. There are numerous presuppositions one must make in order to read the text in this way: First, the reader must believe that the predictions are specific and accurate. Then, they must believe that God has executed specific plans that cannot be altered. Lastly, the reader must believe that human freedom is not an active force in the world, but rather, events occur exactly as God planned beforehand.

Apocalyptic literature operates at a different level — again, it attempts to provide hope to a marginalized group. How does apocalyptic literature accomplish this? In our book, Daniel is the famous figure who is taken on a supernatural tour — in this case, he receives a vision. The kingdoms in this vision are described in terms of what is to come — however, the reader recognizes three of these kingdoms from the past. This leaves a fourth kingdom that we do not recognize as historical. While this may lead the modern reader to speculate about the kingdom's identity, the ancient reader would have taken away a different lesson: if God has overcome these three kingdoms throughout history and has preserved the Jews through it all, then he will surely overcome the fourth kingdom as well. Therefore, stay faithful to the God who overcomes all earthly kingdoms.

This is a message that still resonates today. We still serve a God who overcomes and blesses his people in the midst of hardship — we can have hope because God has done this in the past, and will still do it today.

Once again, some people are troubled because Daniel seems to be the self-identified author. They fear that the involvement of another author would lead to the conclusion that the Bible is unreliable. However, nothing could be further from the truth. Daniel is credited as the author not in an attempt to deceive readers, but in order to honor and emphasize the importance of these stories.

Some might ask more specifically why the authors chose to link Daniel to the apocalyptic visions in the latter half of the book. This leads to the more serious question of *why* a Jewish author (or authors) living in Palestine would choose to attach their apocalyptic writings to texts of an entirely different genre (Diaspora tales). The answer is that Daniel is the figure who speaks most meaningfully to their present situation in the midst of the Jews' ongoing persecution by the Seleucids, the story of Daniel overcoming the Babylonians is profoundly resonant.

Context of the Book

As we previously discussed, there are two options for the timeframe of Daniel's composition. The good news is that regardless of which option we choose, the broad contextual events are remarkably similar: In both eras, the Jews are persecuted by greater powers, and their future as a distinctive people is threatened.

The earlier era, the sixth century BCE, is the far better known of the two options. In this era, after Nebuchadnezzar conquers Jerusalem, a large number of Jews (not all of the Jewish people, but the best and brightest among them) are taken to Babylon in captivity. When the modern reader hears the word "captivity," images of deprivation spring to mind. However, this is not the case in Babylon — the Jews' material circumstances are better in captivity than they would have been in Jerusalem. Babylon is more influential, more powerful, and certainly far wealthier than Palestine. The challenge for these prisoners is to remain faithful to God in a land that is far more comfortable and prosperous than the land they left behind.

There is another sixth-century event described in the first half of Daniel. Not long after the captives arrive in Babylon, the Persians defeat the Babylonians, and the Persian Empire rises to dominance. This is good news for the Jews, because the Persians are far more accommodating to weaker nations than the Babylonians were. Immediately, Cyrus (the Persian ruler) allows the Jews to slowly begin returning to their homeland. Two world-dominating powers tower within the first of half of Daniel, and the young Jews remain faithful through both.

There is universal agreement about the historical context of the heroic tales in Daniel's first half — the disagreement centers on the context of the second half. There are some who still hold that Daniel, or a contemporary of Daniel, is the author of the second half. However, the majority of scholars believe that the textual evidence supports a second-century author for the latter chapters. In the second century BCE, another power has risen, and the Jews are threatened again.

One of the divided portions of the Greek Empire, the Seleucid Empire, controls Palestine during this era. In 168 BCE, the Seleucids launch a disastrous military campaign in Egypt and are defeated. With this, the Seleucids' territorial ambitions are defeated, and in the wake of that loss, the Jews begin a revolt in Jerusalem. Still stinging from his Egyptian defeat, the ruler of the Seleucid Empire, Antiochus IV, decides to teach these rebellious Jews a lesson. From his perspective the problem is obvious: these uncivilized Jews do not worship the proper, accepted Greek gods, and their temple seems to be a focal point for this rebellion.

Thus, Antiochus IV decrees that the Jewish temple should be plundered and an image of Zeus erected on the altar. Once again, the distinctiveness of the Jewish people is at stake. How will the Jews survive and thrive if a foreign leader abolishes the worship of God and forces the people into worship of false gods? The situation is different, but it is the same old problem that the Jews faced in exile.

One of the major questions Daniel evokes regards the identity of the kingdoms represented by the statue in chapter 2 and the beasts in chapter 7. There are four major parts of the statue: the head, constructed from gold; the chest, made of silver;

the thighs, fashioned from bronze; and the legs and feet, made of iron and clay. Most scholars assert that the head represents the Babylonians, the chest represents the Medes, the bronze thighs represent the Persians, and the legs and feet represent the remaining Greek kingdoms of the Seleucids and Ptolemies. No other combination seems to fit. The same empires are in view in the beast imagery of Daniel 7. The prevailing interpretation is that these beasts represent (in order) Babylon, Persia, Greek, and finally Rome. But this interpretation has problems: First, Persia cannot be described as inferior to Babylon in any way — rather, this is an obvious description of the Medes. The primary motivation behind the prevailing theory is for Rome to be the fourth kingdom, an interpretation that stems from modern interpretive desire more so than a sound hermeneutic. We must remember the first readers' perspective: while the Seleucid Empire is by far the weakest of the empires described, it is also the problem that presently looms over the Jews and which compromised the temple. From this perspective, their immediate presence and power over the temple would make the Seleucids a threatening power.

There is one more thing to say about those who want to make Daniel into a predictive prophecy: Chapter 11 does not read like any predictive literature. Rather, its rich historical details make it read like a history book or a journalistic account from second-century Palestine — its details match events that occurred in this time and during this period. For these reasons, it is hard to imagine this section emerging from any period besides the second century BCE — that is, until verse 40. When we hit verse 40, the historical description stops, and the events that are described simply do not and did not happen. This may reflect the author's attempt at prediction, including the fact that — like most attempts at specific predictive literature — it failed since these events never happened.

Some commentators try to argue that in chapter 11, Daniel skips forward to a description of the future antichrist — some theological circles uphold this view today. However, this interpretation is likely incorrect for two reasons: First, it is difficult to imagine that the writer goes into great detail about second- and third-century kings only to abruptly jump to descriptions of a vague future that readers cannot envision. Second, neither the concept nor the title of "antichrist" is introduced until some 250 years later, in 1 John. The author of Daniel cannot be referring to a concept that does not yet exist in any other literature.

The theme of Daniel is a question: how will the Jews survive as a people? As these stories move through a series of leaders, we see that God is sovereign over the Babylonians as well as their Persian successors. Throughout the years, many have attempted to identify the kingdoms represented in the visions described in the book of Daniel. Some argue that these visions do not represent a sequence of kingdoms, but rather a composite of all kingdoms that stand against God and lead his people astray. When the rock smashes the statue in Nebuchadnezzar's dream, it symbolizes that Daniel and his friends would rather die than worship at the altar of any earthly kingdom.

The First Readers

The first readers of Daniel lived in a far different world than ours. As a result, it is difficult for us to enter their story. We have discussed the possibility that Daniel was written in either the sixth or second centuries BCE. In either century, the first readers lived in oppressive conditions. The nations around them were large and powerful, and the Jews did not control their own destiny — they were either in captivity or under foreign occupation. Daniel was written in response to that feeling of powerlessness.

The problem for the modern reader is this: we cannot imagine their plight. Babylon and Persia were unrivaled as world powers. We struggle with Daniel because we live in the modern Babylon. This is not a moral judgment, but a simple observation of the power of Western Europe or North America. While we are used to voting and pursuing careers of our own choosing, Daniel and his contemporaries had no comparable opportunities. They were in Babylon because they were captured in a military invasion, and they had access to specialized training only because they were selected by their captors. Their lives, their safety, and their faith hung in the balance, and the threat was very real.

Yet there are times when we too face hardship and persecution — and this is where most readers will appreciate Daniel. As we read about Daniel's response, we are emboldened to be faithful. There are also times when we wonder if our own faith will survive. This is the point at which the apocalyptic sections are valuable — apocalyptic literature assumes that faith hangs in the balance. If Daniel merely reveals a future that is set in stone, we cease to be actors in our own world — instead, we simply observe the events that God has set in motion. The second half of Daniel calls us to remember that God has acted on his people's behalf in the past. When we remember, we know that God is still working in this way. While God is not surprised by any of humanity's actions, the exact events are not fixed. We are also reminded that God's kingdom will prevail. This fact gives us courage to stay faithful to the true God and not the false idols of kingdoms that will crumble and fall away.

Major Theological Themes

The narratives and apocalyptic visions in the book of Daniel come together to illustrate several key theological themes:

The kingdoms of this world are corrupt. We live in a world where earthly kingdoms still wield great power, and where we often encounter evil. These kingdoms often act in unjust ways.

False gods threaten to lead us astray. We are not immune to the influence of false gods in our time—false gods can be literal idols, but they can be other things as well. Both in ancient times and today, power, wealth, and popularity can lead us away from God.

God is sovereign. There are times when it seems that earthly powers and kingdoms have all the power. But God is not surprised or threatened by these powers, and he still has supreme authority over them all.

Idolatry and blasphemy lead to ruin. The worship of false gods and the use of sacred things for profane purposes results in the downfall of those who flout God's holiness.

God distributes judgment and provides opportunities for repentance. God sees and will judge the actions of every earthly power. He honors those who repent—even those as selfish and proud as Nebuchadnezzar.

God calls us to obedience and faithfulness. We are called to be faithful, even in times of great difficulty. In doing so, we honor God—and God honors those who remain faithful.

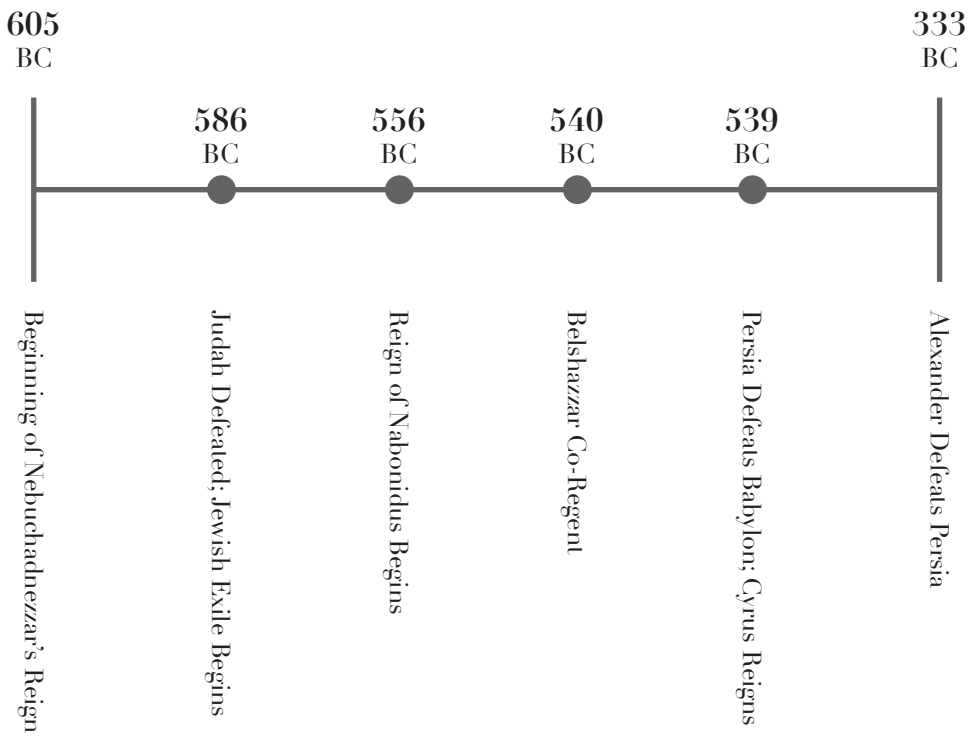
Obedience leads to success. God offers us opportunities to find success in the world around us by remaining faithful and obedient to him and his commands.

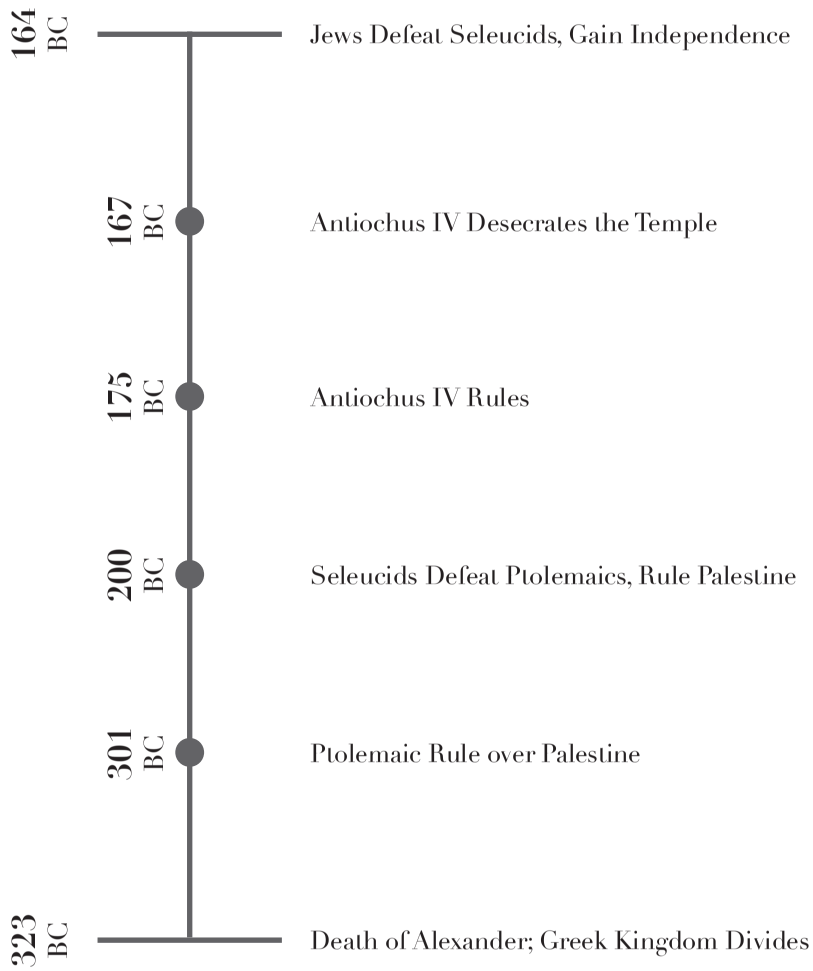
We will face persecution. In this world, persecution is both expected and constant. However, persecution will never have the last word when it comes to God's people.

God is powerful. While overt divine intervention is not guaranteed to us, God can show up and do miraculous things in the midst of our circumstances.

God's kingdom is coming. We should not trust in worldly kingdoms, because eventually, they will all fail. Instead, we should place our faith in the coming kingdom of God.

Timeline for the Study of Daniel




164 BC
Jews Defeat Seleucids, Gain Independence
167 BC
Antiochus IV Desecrates the Temple
175 BC
Antiochus IV Rules
200 BC
Seleucids Defeat Ptolemaics, Rule Palestine
301 BC
Ptolemaic Rule over Palestine
323 BC
Death of Alexander; Greek Kingdom Divides

Week One: Obedience in Exile

DANIEL 1

This introductory chapter is a story about a foreign palace court and is political in nature: Those in power will give these young men a chance at political advancement if they assume the practices and identity of Babylonian culture. The modern reader often fails to appreciate the opportunity these young men have they are captives, but have the chance to be part of the ruling class of the foremost world power. All they need to do is adopt Babylonian customs. Which will these young men choose: faithfulness to God, or loyalty to a powerful, wealthy kingdom?

WEEK 1, DAY 1

Listen to the story in Daniel 1 by reading it aloud several times until you become familiar with its verses, words, and phrases. Enjoy the experience of imagining the story in your mind, picturing each event as it unfolds.

WEEK 1, DAY 2

DANIEL 1

The Setting

This is the story that sets the stage for the rest of Daniel. Here we learn that the Jews are not in control of their own political fortunes and are exiles in the foreign land of Babylon. The king chooses four of the best of the Jewish youth for their talent and potential, and begins training them for future leadership positions.

The Plot

This is fundamentally a story about identity. The author purposefully gives the reader both of the Jewish men's names: their Hebrew names, and their Babylonian names. This subtly raises the question of which identity these young men will choose.

Some people read this chapter as a set of dietary guidelines, as if the issue were one of calories. The ancient reader, however, would have been aware of the Jewish food laws in the background of this narrative. Thus, the issue at stake here is faithfulness to Judaism. For the young men in our story, eating meat from the king's table would have meant abandoning their Jewish identity. Which identity will they choose, and what will be the result of that choice? There are communal consequences that hang in the balance.

To discover the plot of Daniel 1, let's examine the passage by dividing it into six sections. **Below, summarize or paraphrase the general message or theme of each grouping of verses (following the pattern provided for verses 1–2 and 3–5).**

1. Daniel 1:1–2

Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, besieges Jerusalem and plunders the Jewish temple.

2. Daniel 1:3–5

Nebuchadnezzar brings some exemplary young Jewish men to his court to be trained for service.

Meanwhile, he feeds them from his table.

3. Daniel 1:6 7

4. Daniel 1:8 14

5. Daniel 1:15 17

6. Daniel 1:18 21

WEEK 1, DAY 3

What's Happening in the Story?

As we notice certain circumstances in the story, we will begin to see how they are similar to or different from the realities of our world. The story will become the lens through which we see the world in which we live today. In our study today, you may encounter words and/or phrases that are unfamiliar to you. Some of the particular words and translation choices for them have been explained in more detail in the **Word Study Notes**. If you are interested in even more help or detail, you can supplement this study with a Bible dictionary or other Bible study resource.

1. Daniel 1:1–2

These opening verses tell us that Nebuchadnezzar removes some articles from the temple in Jerusalem and takes them back to Babylon, where he places them in a temple to the Babylonian gods. While the modern reader might interpret this as either simple theft or the collection of wartime spoils, the ancient reader knew that the stakes were much higher Nebuchadnezzar's plundering of the temple immediately puts him at odds with the God of Israel.

2. Daniel 1:3–5

Why train these Hebrew youth? At one point, Babylon tried to control Palestine without actually taking it over. The idea was that these capable young men who were selected for their talent, appearance, and intellect[1] would be influenced by Babylon's wealth and culture and become assets for the Babylonian Empire. Then, after their training, these men could work as liaisons or return to their homeland to help govern Palestinian affairs for Babylon.

WORD STUDY NOTES #2

[1] There is considerable evidence that these young men were employed as eunuchs. At one point in his writings, the ancient Jewish historian Josephus mentions that young men were made eunuchs in order to serve in foreign courts. While Josephus does not specify which young men he is referring to, there is a distinct possibility that this description applies to Daniel and his friends. The notion that these men were eunuchs was also common in Rabbinic literature. If this is true, it would fulfill the words of Isaiah 39:7: "they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon."

3. Daniel 1:6–7

One of this story's prominent features is that the young men are given new names in Babylon. Hebrew names carried great significance for the Jewish people, often describing them in relationship to God. In order to survive in exile, these young men would have to form new allegiances to Babylon and its gods, and these new names were meant to prompt the men to adopt new identities. It is not entirely clear why Daniel proceeds to tell the story using their Babylonian names rather than their Hebrew names — perhaps this detail is meant to highlight the alienation these men felt in a foreign land.

4. Daniel 1:8–14

The majority of this chapter describes the men's response to being offered food from the king's table. We do not know why their resistance begins here. They seem to have accepted their new names and entry into a foreign educational system — but for some reason, they draw a line when it came to food. There is a clue in the text: The writer states that they choose not to "defile" themselves with this food.[1] It seems that the young men decide to keep the kosher food laws. Eating unclean meat is a part of Babylonian identity that they cannot accept. Some commentators note a political motivation for abstinence from Babylonian food: If the men succeed in their new roles in the Babylonian court, the gods of Babylon will get credit for their success. But this is not acceptable — their God must receive the credit for their achievements. The author further indicates the men's loyalty to the God of Israel by using their Hebrew names during their ten-day trial period of refusing Babylonian food. The friends' refusal to eat the king's food is a subtle but clear rejection of Babylonian identity — they may be in Babylon, but they will never be of Babylon.

WORD STUDY NOTES #4

[1] This language does not mean that Daniel was motivated by ascetic concerns—later, in Daniel 10:3, it is clear that the men have no trouble eating meat when it does not come from the king's table. The word "defile" refers to impurity in a religious or ceremonial context. Thus, Daniel avoids the meat because he fears it is unclear according to Jewish law.

WORD STUDY NOTES #5

[1] One message is clear in this story: even in a pagan world, faithfulness to God is the best path to success. This is because success is a gift from God. We should also note that God grants Daniel wisdom and the ability to interpret visions. This description draws a subtle connection to the visions and interpretations contained in Daniel's second half.

5. Daniel 1:15–17

It is important that we do not miss the point of this story. The message is not that vegetarians are healthier than those who eat meat; nor is it that those who avoid pork are superior to those who eat it. The point here is that the men's condition is not the outcome that the average reader would expect Daniel and his friends should not have been healthier than the other men, but they were. Thus, divine intervention is assumed: the only explanation for this unexpected outcome is God's involvement.[1]

6. Daniel 1:18–21

Eventually, the four friends are rewarded for their faithfulness to keeping kosher. While they still remain in the Babylonian court system, their success is a victory for the God of Israel and a testimony that obedience is worth it. This would have comforted the early readers of Daniel, especially those who were in the midst of persecution. This is the central message of the book of Daniel. Thus, this story is a great introduction to the rest of the book.