

READING AND INTERPRETING THE BIBLE SERIES

DANIEL

BARRY L. ROSS



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Abbreviations

General

| | |
|--------|---------------|
| cf. | compare |
| ch(s). | chapter(s) |
| Gk. | Greek |
| HB | Hebrew Bible |
| Lat. | Latin |
| lit. | literally |
| n.p. | no page |
| NT | New Testament |
| OT | Old Testament |
| r. | reigned |

Modern English Versions

| | |
|------|--------------------------------|
| AT | Author's Translations |
| ESV | English Standard Version |
| ISV | International Standard Version |
| KJV | King James Version |
| NASB | New American Standard Bible |
| NIV | New International Version |
| NJPS | New JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh |
| NKJV | New King James Version |
| NRSV | New Revised Standard Version |

Apocrypha

| | |
|-----------|---------------|
| 1–2 Macc. | 1–2 Maccabees |
|-----------|---------------|

PART I

INTRODUCTORY MATTERS

1

Historical Background

The book of Daniel is a very ancient book. It has twelve chapters. Chapters 1–6 tell stories of Daniel at the Babylonian court, serving both Babylonian and Persian rulers. Chapters 7–12 describe Daniel receiving visions from God concerning the future rise and fall of kingdoms.

The Babylonian and Persian Empires

As you can guess, the main human character of this book is Daniel, a Jew from Judah. The events of his life are set within the (Neo-)Babylonian and Persian Empires, beginning in 626 BC. In that year, a royal prince named Nabopolassar defied the power of the Assyrian Empire, taking over rule of the province of Babylon. From then on, Babylonian expansion was unstoppable; within two decades all the former Assyrian-controlled territories were under Babylonian control. Thus began the Babylonian Empire about which the Old Testament speaks.

But in the overview of history, world rulership is fickle. Less than a century later, world dominance passed to the Persians when, in 539 BC, a Persian named Cyrus conquered Babylon, taking control from the Babylonians. Thus began the Persian Empire. This empire expanded until it became geographically the largest known in the biblical world up to that

time. It ultimately extended eastward to the edge of India and westward to the edge of Europe. The Persian Empire lasted twice as long as the Babylonian Empire.

But, alas, a Macedonian military general named Alexander the Great brought the Persian Empire to its knees after its two hundred years of world rule. In two great battles in 333 BC at Issus and again in 331 BC at Gaugamela on the northeast Mediterranean seacoast, Macedonian Alexander fought and defeated Persian king Darius III. By 326 BC, Alexander had conquered Persian territories and cities all the way eastward to India.

Daniel's Early Life

Judean Daniel lived more than twenty-six hundred years ago, far removed from our modern times! We have no written details of Daniel's early life. Yet we may speculate that he was born around 620 BC.¹ This would have been during the reign of Judah's righteous king Josiah, who reigned in the last half of the seventh century BC, from 640 to 609 BC. Keep in mind the name Josiah because we'll speak of him again later.

Daniel was born in the ancient land of Judah (see Dan. 1:6), with its capital city of Jerusalem. Judah was located in the same area as present-day Israel, bordering on the eastern seacoast of the Mediterranean Sea. Yet Daniel lived most of his eighty-year life in the ancient city of Babylon, in the south of present-day Iraq.

Throughout the seventh century BC, the period that included Daniel's birth and early life, the power broker of the biblical world was Assyria. The Assyrian armies went out in all directions from the city of Nineveh, located on the Tigris River in northern Mesopotamia, in present-day Iraq. The power of Assyria had influenced life in Judah for decades.

In the decade prior to Daniel's birth, and during the first decade of his life, however, profound changes were taking place that were affecting

1. Jim Edlin, *Daniel*, New Beacon Bible Commentary (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2009), 28.

Daniel's smaller world of Judah. The power and influence of Assyria was declining. This great power was being squeezed and ripped apart by two powerful competing forces: Babylon from the southeast and Egypt from the southwest.

So, how did Daniel, born in Judah, end up in Babylon far to the east?

The Assyrian Takeover of Northern Israel

Here we must go back to a century before the birth of Daniel and the reign of Judah's king Josiah. In 743 BC, Assyrian power from Nineveh, under King Tiglath-Pileser III (r. 745-727 BC), began expanding westward into the kingdoms on the eastern side of the Mediterranean Sea, including Israel. Tiglath-Pileser's practice, after conquering a resistant kingdom, was usually to rename it and then make it a province of the Assyrian Empire. He would deport a significant number of that kingdom's citizens to other Assyrian-controlled lands far away, mixing them with the local populations. A series of Assyrian incursions into northern Israel continued over two decades, until northern Israel and its capital city, Samaria, succumbed to the armies of Assyria in 722 or 721 BC. The Assyrian army deported 27,290 of northern Israel's citizens to far northeastern regions of the Assyrian Empire.² The kingdom of northern Israel was absorbed into the Assyrian Empire and renamed the province of Samaria.

What happened in the southern kingdom of Judah over the century following the demise of northern Israel (and much did happen!) does not overly concern us here for the book or story of Daniel. We must note, however, that Assyria continued to rule the biblical world throughout, with Judah existing in a somewhat vassal relationship with Assyrian power.

2. John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 4th ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 275.

The Crowning of Josiah as Judah's King

In an incident of Judean palace conspiracy, in 640 BC, some servants of the then-reigning, idol-worshipping Judean king, Amon, “assassinated him in his palace” (2 Chron. 33:24). Why? The Chronicler does not say. A group of power brokers, whom the Chronicler calls “the people of the land” (v. 25), however, quickly nipped this rebellion in the bud: they killed the conspirators! And though Amon’s son Josiah was at the time only eight years old, these power brokers immediately crowned him king in his father’s place (33:24–34:1).

King Josiah’s Religious Cleanup

When Josiah was sixteen years old, in his eighth year of rule, “he began to seek the God of his [fore]father David” (2 Chron. 34:3). Four years later, in his twelfth year of rule, “he began to purge” all the places of worship from Judah and Jerusalem that his father and other earlier kings had set up in competition with or in place of worship at “the temple of the LORD [*yhwh*] his God” (vv. 3, 8). This purging was no half-hearted affair. Josiah did it violently: he tore down, cut and broke to pieces, smashed, scattered, burned, and crushed high places, Asherah poles, altars, bones, and idols. He then extended his religious cleanup northward beyond Judah into the towns of four tribal areas of the former northern Israel: Manasseh, Ephraim, Simeon, and Naphtali (vv. 3-7).

At this time, as mentioned earlier, Assyrian power was declining, leaving somewhat of a power vacuum in Judah and the Assyrian province of Samaria (the former northern Israel). Neither of the other two wannabe replacement powers, Egypt or Babylon, had yet won the day for world domination. Josiah took advantage of this power vacuum to expand his religious cleanup into former northern Israel. John Bright interprets this action as Josiah’s declaration of independence from Assyrian power.³

3. *Ibid.*, 317.

After his cleanup action in the north, King Josiah returned to Jerusalem (v. 7) to continue further religious reforms throughout Judah. This included a renovation of the Jerusalem temple and restoration of temple worship. As an interested reader, you would do well to read the details of these reforms in 2 Kings 22:3–23:25 and 2 Chronicles 34:1–35:19. Josiah essentially completed them by about 622–621 BC, but their positive effects continued on into the first decade of Daniel’s life.

King Josiah’s Death

Tragically, King Josiah’s life was cut short a little over a decade later when, in 609 BC, he was killed in a battle at Megiddo while meddling in the great military struggle between Egypt and Babylon for world dominance (see 2 Kings 23:28–30; 2 Chron. 35:20–24).⁴ Four years later, in 605 BC, the Egyptian and Babylonian armies fought a great chariot battle at Carchemish on the river Euphrates. The Babylonian army, under the military leadership of Nebuchadnezzar, the son of Babylonian king Nabopolassar, defeated the Egyptian pharaoh Necho, winning the title for world dominance. You can read Jeremiah’s poetical account of this decisive battle in Jeremiah 46:2–12, in which Jeremiah names “the Lord, the LORD Almighty” (v. 10 [2x]) as truly the one deciding the outcome of this decisive battle.

Daniel Taken to Babylon

Daniel would have been fifteen to seventeen years of age when Nebuchadnezzar was crowned king of Babylon in late 605 BC, following the death of his father. Soon after this, and continuing until at least 601 BC, he brought his army west and then southward down the Mediterranean seacoast several times, destroying towns in Syria and the Philistine plain.⁵ Daniel 1:1 appears

4. Ibid., 324–25.

5. Ibid., 326. See also John Goldingay, *Daniel*, Word Biblical Commentary 30, ed. Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 152; Ernest Lucas, *Daniel*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary 20, ed. David W. Baker and Gordon J. Wenham (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 51.

to reference one of these campaigns of Nebuchadnezzar when the author speaks of Nebuchadnezzar's threat against Judah's capital city, Jerusalem.

It seems that King Nebuchadnezzar continued to do what the former Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser and other Assyrian kings had done when conquering foreign kingdoms: he selected many of the best of those kingdoms' young men and women, deporting them to Babylon and its environs. There were several possible reasons for doing so. In this context, giving them a Babylonian education and a position in the service of the king was an apparent desire to strengthen the home base with their skills.⁶ Though we have no written record of Daniel's selection and journey from Judah to Babylon, the book of Daniel opens with Daniel and three other named "Israelites from the royal family and the nobility . . . from Judah" (1:3, 6) in Babylon in the time of Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar. These other three are "Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah" (v. 6).

King Jehoiachin's Deportation to Babylon

In 597 BC, some two and a half decades after Daniel was taken to Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar again came against Jerusalem. The current Judean king, Jehoiachin, surrendered. Nebuchadnezzar deported him, his family, and ten thousand Judean citizens to Babylon (2 Kings 24:8-17). Though the book of Daniel makes no mention of this large influx of Jews into Babylon and its environs, Daniel surely would have been aware of them.

An archaeological discovery, an administrative document in the Babylonian language, lists deliveries of oil to various persons dependent on the Babylonian royal household. These included 10 *сила* of oil for Jehoiachin, 2½ *сила* of oil for his sons, and 4 *сила* of oil for eight men from Judah.⁷

6. Goldingay, *Daniel*, 154.

7. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. James B. Pritchard, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1955), 308.