

Overview of the Life of the Prophet Daniel

From *The Story of Daniel, the Prophet in the Bible* by Avrohom Bergstein: The Chaldean king Nebuchadnezzar conquered the Land of Judea in 3319 (442 BCE) and destroyed the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. As was the standard practice of invading rulers, Nebuchadnezzar deported the Jewish intelligentsia and forced them to relocate to Babylon. Among them were Daniel, Chananya, Mishael and Azaryia (from the tribe of Judah), all extraordinarily gifted young princes, selected to serve as chamberlains in the royal court. Under the tutelage of the chief officer, Daniel, who was already an accomplished scholar, achieved remarkable proficiency and expertise in many disciplines along with his three colleagues. Their insight and erudition in all areas, especially in the realms of mystical and esoteric knowledge, far outshone those of the other wise men of the kingdom. According to the Talmud, Daniel was endowed with an incredible gift of wisdom such that if one were to weigh his wisdom against the wisdom of all the wise men of the gentile nations, the wisdom of Daniel would outweigh them all. In order to augment the honor people would accord the idols of Nebuchadnezzar, all four of them were assigned new names associated with idolatry, but Daniel was designated the name of the most prestigious idol, Belshazzar. This had a galvanizing effect on the four of them, which further strengthened their resolve to abstain from the non-kosher royal cuisine that was available for their consumption. Instead, they survived on a meager diet of legumes and water, and miraculously their appearance was even healthier than those who partook of the royal dishes. Being a master interpreter of dreams, Daniel heroically averted a royal decree issued in 3340 (421 BCE) to slay all the wise men of the kingdom for their failure to help Nebuchadnezzar recall a mysterious dream he had seen. Daniel and his colleagues entreated Heaven that the dream be revealed, and their request was granted. After expressing gratitude to the Almighty and attributing his insight to God, Daniel proceeded to remind the king of his dream and provided him with a striking prediction of the future, describing the successive kingdoms that would rise

to power and dominate the civilized world, including the Median-Persian, Greek and Roman empires. The recollection of the dream and its accompanying interpretation so impressed the king, that he began to treat Daniel as though he were a deity, prostrating himself and attempting to offer libations and sacrifices before him. Daniel spurned these efforts of deification, so Nebuchadnezzar instead promoted Daniel to the position of governor of the entire province of Babylon and prime minister over all the wise men of Babylon, who of course were spared. The sages of the Midrash equate Daniel's contribution with Joseph's invaluable leadership of Egypt: "Had it not been for the Joseph, all of Egypt would have disintegrated, and without Daniel, all of the wise men of Babylon would have been destroyed." Twelve years later (3352, 410 BCE), Nebuchadnezzar had another disturbing dream. Instead of summoning the other wise men of the empire, the king immediately sent for Daniel and requested his interpretation. The implications of the dream were alarming, but Daniel shared them with the king. He informed the king that he would be struck with insanity for seven years and would be reduced to the level of an animal. His kingdom, though, would remain intact and he would return to his reign upon recognizing the ultimate authority of God. Daniel advised Nebuchadnezzar that to prevent the dream from turning into reality, he should distribute charity to the poor in abundance, and in the merit of these righteous deeds he might be spared from this fate. The king accepted the suggestion and proceeded to open his treasury to distribute funds to the poor Jewish exiles who would ordinarily beg for alms. This act of benevolence delayed the fate that awaited him for 12 months. Once the year had passed, Nebuchadnezzar proudly surmised that the decree had been nullified and returned to the pomposity that had characterized his behavior before the dream. As soon as he uttered his first words of conceit, the Divine decree was implemented, and he began to conduct himself as though he were an animal. Ultimately, at the end of seven years, Nebuchadnezzar returned to his senses and reclaimed the throne. Nebuchadnezzar died in the year 3364 (397 BCE) and was succeeded by his son Evil [pronounced eh-vil] Merodach whose reign extended for 23 years. He was followed by King Belshazzar who ascended the throne in 3387 (374 BCE). As predicted by the vision of Daniel, the kingdoms of Medes and Persia began to rebel against the rule of Babylon. After initially warding off the attacks and declaring victory, King Belshazzar and one thousand of his noblemen threw a great feast in celebration. While under the influence of wine, Belshazzar called for the gold and silver vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the Holy Temple in Jerusalem to be brought so that he, his nobles, wives and concubines could

drink from them. After the vessels of the Temple were desecrated in such a manner, the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace. The king watched in alarm as the disembodied hand wrote a coded message that no one seemed to understand. Belshazzar declared, "Whoever can read this inscription and tell me its meaning will be attired in [royal] purple, wear a golden chain and reign third in the kingdom." Despite their best efforts, the wise men of the kingdom could not unlock the mysterious message. On the advice of the queen, Daniel was summoned to the palace to interpret the inscription. Daniel declined the reward but proceeded to censure the king for his brazen use of the Temple vessels, which would be the cause of the ill fate about to befall him. Reading the cryptic words, "*mene mene tekel ufarsin*" (literally, "measured, measured, weighed and divided"), Daniel explained: *mene* – God has measured the duration of your reign, and it has come to an end; *tekel* – you have been weighed in the balance and been found wanting; *preis* – your kingdom is to be divided and given to Media and Persia. As Daniel portended, the disintegration of the Babylonian empire was soon to come. That very night, Belshazzar was assassinated by one of his own bodyguards. With the death of Belshazzar, the combined armies of the Medes under Darius and the armies of Persia under Cyrus, were free to march into Babylon and conquer it. Darius was first to rule, in keeping with the prophecy that Mede would reign first. It was important for Darius to quickly assert control over the vast kingdom, so he appointed 120 functionaries to conduct the affairs of the many lands under his dominion. A supervisory council of three, one of whom was Daniel, would preside over all the activities of the functionaries. With time, it became increasingly clear that Daniel was much wiser than his colleagues, which prompted Darius to consider appointing him over the entire kingdom. When his colleagues became aware of this, they conspired to make Daniel guilty of treason. Purporting to act in the king's best interests to solidify control over the empire, they proposed a decree that no citizen of the kingdom be permitted to address any request to any god or human other than the king for 30 days. Disobeying this command would be punishable by being thrown into a lions' den. The decree was approved by the king, who signed the proclamation and issued the prohibition. Daniel was unfazed. He proceeded to climb to the upper story of his home where his windows faced Jerusalem, to pray three times a day as he had always done (a proof, incidentally, that Jews have prayed three times a day since time immemorial). His enemies lost no time in reporting his illegal prayers to the king. Darius, who had come to value and respect Daniel, was deeply disturbed by this development, because he

recognized that he would now be compelled to act upon his decree. After initially attempting to delay the order, Darius ordered Daniel to be thrown to the lions, wishing him “May Your God, whom you worship continually, rescue you!”

At dawn, Darius rushed to the lions’ den and called out, “Daniel, was the God Whom you continually worshipped able to rescue you?” Miraculously, Daniel was not harmed. “My God,” said Daniel, “sent His angel who shut the mouths of the lions so that they wouldn’t harm me!” Having witnessed this miraculous occurrence, Darius ordered those who slandered Daniel, along with their families, to be condemned to the lions’ den. In his unceasing quest to ensnare his Jewish subjects into idol worship, king Nebuchadnezzar erected an idol in whose mouth he inserted the diadem—the tzitz (or golden diadem worn on the forehead) of the high priest bearing God’s ineffable name, which he had plundered from the Beit Hamikdash, the Holy Temple—and as a result the idol began to utter astounding thing, including the words, “I am the Lord your God.” Daniel moved close to the idol and commanded, “I am the emissary of the Master of the Universe. I decree upon you to emerge from inside the idol!” Daniel uttered one of the Divine names; the tzitz emerged, and the idol collapsed and broke.

Overview of Themes in the Book of Daniel

From *The Book of Daniel* in the New Advent: The Book of Daniel, as it now stands in the ordinary Hebrew Bibles, is generally divided into two main parts. The first includes a series of narratives which are told in the third person (chaps. i-vi), and the second, a series of visions which are described in the first person (chaps. vii-xii). The opening chapter of the first series may be considered as a preface to the whole work. It introduces to the reader the Hebrew heroes of the book, Daniel and his three fellow-captives, Ananias, Misael, and Azarias, and records the manner in which these noble youths obtained a high rank in Nebuchadnezzar's service, although they had refused to be defiled by eating of the royal food. The second chapter relates a disquieting dream of the king which Daniel alone was able accurately to set forth and interpret.

Nebuchadnezzar's dream was that of a great statue made up of various materials and broken in pieces by a small stone which became a mountain and filled the whole earth. Daniel's interpretation was to the effect that the several parts of the statue with their various materials symbolized as many monarchies with their respective power, while the stone which destroyed them and grew into a great mountain prefigured a universal and everlasting kingdom which would break in pieces all the other kingdoms, and which, of course, is no other than that of the Messiah.

The next section (iii, 1-30, Vulgate, iii, 1-23, 91-97) narrates how Daniel's three companions, having refused to worship a colossal statue set up by Nebuchadnezzar, were cast into a highly heated furnace in which they were preserved unharmed, whereupon the king issued a decree in favour of their God and promoted them to places of dignity. The following section (iii, 31-iv, Vulgate, iii, 98-iv) contains Nebuchadnezzar's letter to all peoples and nations, recounting his dream of a mighty tree cut down at God's bidding, and its interpretation by Daniel, together with its fulfilment in the form of a seven years' madness which befell the king, and the recovery from which was the occasion of his thankful letter. The fifth chapter (Heb. Bible, v-vi, 1) describes Balthasar's profane banquet, the mysterious handwriting on the wall, Daniel's interpretation of that writing, and the overthrow, on that same night, of Balthasar's kingdom. In the sixth chapter Daniel is represented as the object of the special favor of Darius the Mede, and also of the persistent jealousy of the other officers of the Crown, who finally succeed in having him thrown into the lions' den, because of his faithfulness in praying to God three times a day; upon Daniel's miraculous preservation, Darius decrees that all in his kingdom should "dread and fear the God of Daniel."

The second main part of the book in the Hebrew Bible (vii-xii) is taken up with four visions which Daniel describes in the first person. The first of these visions (ch. vii) is referred to the first year of Balthasar's reign and offers a close parallel to the dream set forth and explained in the second chapter of the book. The nightly vision was of four several beasts coming out of the sea, and symbolically of the Gentile powers judged in due time by "the Ancient of days" and finally replaced by the universal and everlasting Messianic kingdom. Like the first, the second vision (ch. viii) is ascribed to the reign of Balthasar and represents worldly powers under the figure of animals. Daniel sees a ram with two horns (the Medes and the Persians) pushing

victoriously towards the west, north and south, until it is struck by a he-goat (the Greeks) with a great horn (Alexander) between its eyes. This great horn is soon broken in its turn and gives place to four others (the Greek kingdoms of Egypt, Syria, Macedonia, and Thrace), from one of which grows out a "little horn", namely Antiochus Epiphanes. This prince is not, indeed, named by the Angel Gabriel, who explains the vision to Daniel, but is clearly designated by the description of the doings of the "little horn" against the host of heaven and its prince (God), desecrating "the sanctuary", interrupting the daily sacrifice for about three years and a half, and finally "broken without hand."

The next chapter contains the prophecy of the seventy weeks, which is referred to the first year of Darius, the son of Assuerus. As Daniel was supplicating God for the fulfilment of His promises of mercy in Jeremiah, xxix, 10 sq., or xxv, 11, he was favored with the vision of the Angel Gabriel. The heavenly messenger explained to him how the seventy years of desolation foretold by Jeremiah should be understood. They are seventy weeks of years, falling into three periods of seven, sixty-two, and one week of years, respectively. The first period one of seven weeks, or forty-nine years, will extend from the going forth of "the word" for the rebuilding of Jerusalem to "an anointed one, a prince". During the second of sixty-two weeks or four hundred and thirty-four years, the Holy City will be built, though "in straightness of times". At the end of this period "an anointed one" will be cut off, and the people of a prince who shall come will "destroy" the city and the sanctuary, he will make a firm covenant with many for one week (or seven years), and during a half of this week he will cause sacrifice and oblation to cease and the abomination of desolation to be set up, until he meets with his fate. The last vision, ascribed to the third year of Cyrus, is recorded in chapters x-xii. Its opening part (x-xi, 1) gives a description of the vision with a reference to Media, Persia, and Greece. The second part (xi) announces many events connected with four Persian kings, with Alexander and his successors and more particularly with the deeds of a king of the North, i.e. Antiochus Epiphanes, against Egypt, the Jews, the Temple, etc., until he should come to an end. The conclusion of the vision (xii) declares how Michael (the guardian angel of Israel) will deliver the people. Mention is made of a resurrection of the dead, followed by rewards and punishments. For 1290 days, or about three and one half years, the daily sacrifice will cease, and the abomination of desolation will be set up. Blessed is he who continues steadfast for 1335 days.

From these contents it readily appears that the Book of Daniel has not for its object to give a summary historical account of the period of the Babylonian Exile, or of the life of Daniel himself, since both its parts profess to give only a few isolated facts connected with either the Exile or the Prophet's life. From the same contents it can also be readily seen that the object of that sacred writing is not to record in substance prophetic addresses similar to those which make up the works ascribed to distinct prophets in the Old Testament literature. In respect to both matter and form, the contents of the Prophecy of Daniel are of a peculiar kind which has no exact parallel in the Bible, except in the Apocalypse of St. John. In Daniel, as in this last book of the Bible, one is in presence of contents whose general purpose is undoubtedly to comfort God's people under the ordeal of a cruel persecution, chiefly by means of symbolical visions bearing on "the time of the end". This is the obvious purpose of the four visions recorded in the second part of the Book of Daniel (chaps. vii-xii), and also of Nebuchadnezzar's dream as given and explained in the second chapter of the first part of that inspired writing: the persecution therein in view is that of Antiochus Epiphanes, and the Jews are to be comforted by the assured prospect both of the fate that awaits their oppressor and of the setting up of God's universal and eternal kingdom. Nor have the narratives in chapters iii-vi a different general purpose: in each and in all of them the generous and constant servants of the true God — Daniel and his fellow captives — triumph in the end, while their oppressors, however mighty or numerous, are ultimately punished or made to acknowledge and promote the glory of the God of Israel. This apocalyptic object of the Book of Daniel is admitted by most scholars of the present day and is in harmony with the place assigned to that sacred writing in the Hebrew Bible, where it appears not among "the Prophets", or second great division of the original text, but among "the Writings", or third main division of that text.

As apocalyptic writings usually bear the impress of compilation, one might naturally be tempted to regard the Book of Daniel — whose apocalyptic character has just been described — as a compilatory work. In fact, many scholars of the last century — some of whom were Catholic — have set forth positive grounds to prove that the author of the book has actually put together such documents as could make for his general purpose. At the present day, however, the opposite view, which maintains the literary unity of the Prophecy of Daniel, is practically universal. It is felt that the uniform plan of the book, the studied arrangement of its subject matter, the strong

similarity in language of its two main parts, etc. are arguments which tell very powerfully in favor of the latter position.

From *Main Themes of Daniel* by Philip J. Long:

First, the main theme of Daniel is God's Sovereignty. That God is sovereign over the world is a theme found throughout Scripture, but it is in the forefront of the book of Daniel. This theme begins in the first few verses of chapter 1. When Nebuchadnezzar captures Jerusalem and takes Daniel and his three friends captive to Babylon, the writer is clear it is the Lord who handed Jehoiakim into the hands of Babylon. It is the Lord who gives favor to Daniel and gives prosperity to the four young exiles. It is the Lord who protects them and gives them advantage over all of the other exiles being trained for service to Babylon. The Lord gives Daniel his special ability to interpret dreams.

Second, God cares about the suffering of his people. There are several stories presenting Daniel and his friends in difficult situations where their faith is tested. There is potential for suffering in the first chapter. Daniel 3 and 6 put the characters to the test in life threatening situations (a fiery furnace and a lion's den). In each case, God protects them even though they are willing to die than break important boundaries of their faith in God.

From *The Temple Theme in the Book of Daniel* by Greg Goswell: The book of Daniel continues to spawn numerous studies, and the present article aims to contribute to scholarly efforts at a theological integration of its contents. Such efforts are needed because of the obvious bifurcation of the book into stories (chs. 1–6) and visions (chs. 7–12), a generic division that threatens to compromise the canonical integrity of the book. My thesis is that one of the major themes of the book is that of the temple and that this theme assists in the theological unification of the stories and visions, for it has a prominent place in both halves of the book and is handled in a similar way in both. The more obvious references to the temple in Daniel are as follows. The book of Daniel opens with the taking of the temple vessels by Nebuchadnezzar and their transportation to Babylon (1:2). Their later sacrilegious use by Belshazzar is described in chapter 5 (5:2). In

chapter 8, the “little horn” stops the Jews worshipping their God and overthrows the sanctuary (8:11–12), but then God’s sanctuary is restored (8:13–14). The prayer recorded in Daniel 9 complains of the desolate state of the sanctuary and contains earnest prayer for its restoration, and the sanctuary is still the focus in the angelic revelation in 9:24–27. According to Collins, “there is no doubt ... that the desecrated temple dominates both chaps. 8 and 9 and that its restoration was the primary focus of the author’s hopes in these chapters.” Finally, chapters 10–12 give prominence to the future profanation of the temple (11:31; 12:11). Carla Sulzbach goes as far as to say that the temple is the main theme that runs through the entire book.

The Death and the Tomb of Daniel

The last mention of Daniel in the Book of Daniel is in the third year of Cyrus (Daniel 10:1). Rabbinic sources suppose that he was still alive during the reign of the Persian king Ahasuerus (better known as Artaxerxes – Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 15a, based on the Book of Esther 4, 5), but he was killed by Haman, the wicked prime minister of Ahasuerus (Targum Sheini on Esther, 4, 11). While some scholars claim he lived to be 85, others claim a life of over 100 years. The 1st century Jewish writer Josephus reported that Daniel's body lay in a tower in Ecbatana in Parthia, alongside the bodies of the kings of the Medes and Persians; later Jewish authorities said he was buried in Susa, and that near his house were hidden the vessels from the Temple of Solomon. Muslim sources reported that the Muslims had discovered his body, or possibly only a box containing his nerves and veins, together with a book, a jar of fat, and a signet ring engraved with the image of a man being licked by two lions. The corpse was reburied, and those who buried it were decapitated to prevent them from revealing the spot. Today six cities claim Daniel's Tomb: Babylon, Kirkuk and Muqdadiah in Iraq, Susa and Malamir in Iran, and Samarkand in Uzbekistan. The most famous is that in Susa, (Shush, in southern Iran), at a site known as Shush-e Daniyal. According to Jewish tradition the rich and poor of the city quarreled over possession of the body, and the bier was therefore suspended from a chain over the center of the river. A house of prayer open to all who believed in God was built nearby, and fishing was prohibited for a certain distance up and down the river; fish that swam in that section of the river

had heads that glinted like gold, and ungodly persons who entered the sacred precinct would miraculously drown in the river. To this day the tomb is a popular site of pilgrimage.