

Study 16: A Guide for the Perplexed

Introduction.

In both the *Septuagint* and the *Vulgate*, the Book of Daniel is mentioned as the fourth of the major prophets, after Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The Hebrew Bible places it in the *Writings*, between Ezra and Esther, but includes only the first 12 chapters. Prior to the 1st Century B.C. it was likely included among the *Prophets* which is the source the Septuagint would have used.

Interestingly, Daniel was written in both Hebrew and Aramaic. Chapter 1, the first few verses of chapter 2, and chapters 8 through 12 were written in Hebrew, while the remainder [Daniel 2:4b – 7:28] was written in Aramaic. This odd mixture of languages has always intrigued scholars. Some think it was originally written in Hebrew and the Aramaic parts were the result of later changes made to fill in for damaged or lost portions. Others think it was originally written in Aramaic but then translated into Hebrew so it could be included in the Hebrew Canon. While this may be an interesting argument among Scriptural scholars, it matters little to us. Christian tradition has always held the Book of Daniel to be canonical, and it was solemnly declared so by the Council of Trent.

The name, Daniel, means *God is my judge*, and everything we know about him comes from this book. He was of the royal family of Zedekiah and in 605 B.C. was taken into captivity in Babylon, along with other Jewish children, as a result of Nebuchadnezzar's order. Like some other young, male exiles, he was chosen by the king to be brought up and educated at court, where he was given the name, Belteshazzar.

God gave Daniel special gifts which soon led him to enjoy the king's favor. Indeed, he was so adept at interpreting the king's dreams that he was appointed ruler of the province of Babylon. King Darius even wanted to make Daniel his prime minister [Dan 6:4], but the envy of the other ministers frustrated this plan. The ministers then plotted Daniel's death, but God's miraculous intervention saved him [Dan 6:23].

Today, as we live out our lives in the face of many different threats to our freedom and our way of life, some that could conceivably alter our world in unimaginable ways, the Book of Daniel is surprisingly timely. Fear of the future loomed very large in the minds of the author's contemporaries, and many succumbed to the temptation to compromise conviction for the sake of personal comfort or safety. As a people they were fast losing their grip on the awareness of purpose and meaning in human history as well as in their own lives. In this brief study guide, we will examine how Daniel grapples with the perplexing problems that arose in his time, and how we can deal with similar problems today.

The Book.

It would seem the book's primary purpose is to demonstrate that the God of Israel, the one true God, is greater than the pagan gods. This is proved both by Daniel's personal experiences and by prophecy which runs through the entire book. The prophecy relates to the establishment of the kingdom of God, a universal, eternal kingdom, a kingdom of peace and justice for all who prove faithful to Him. In Daniel we encounter the mystery of the future messianic kingdom, the kingdom of heaven which the Messiah, Jesus Christ, will inaugurate through His incarnation.

In some respects the Book of Daniel contains the fullest revelation of God's plan for our happiness contained in the Old Testament. And in a very concrete way, the author presents some of the most important themes found in the Bible.

The book consists of two distinct parts:

1. Chapters 1-6 in which Daniel describes his personal experiences at the royal court, with the aim of showing that the God of Israel is almighty and the only God that lives
2. Chapters 7-12 relate the four prophetic apocalyptic visions which Daniel received

Daniel and the King (Dan 1-6).

We encounter Daniel at the royal court where he is called on to interpret the king's dreams, with the help of special revelation from God. In Daniel's vision of the image or statue (Dan 2) he predicts the four successive kingdoms which will precede the coming of the Messiah:

1. Babylonian Kingdom (gold)
2. Medes and the Persians (silver)
3. Greek (bronze)
4. Ptolemaic Kingdom (iron)

Remembering that the New Testament is hidden in the Old, we Christians see the meaning of all this: The Kingdom of God, inaugurated by Jesus Christ [See Mt 4:17], will oppose the various pagan kingdoms, which are the personification of the kingdom of Satan. (Now there's something you won't hear very often from the pulpit these days.) This kingdom of God, which St. Augustine believes is the Church, is symbolized by the "*stone which was hewn from a mountain without a hand being put to it, struck its iron and tile feet, breaking them in pieces*" [Dan 2:34] Beginning in a small insignificant way, the Church will spread throughout the world, thanks to the power of God who sustains it.

The king is so amazed by Daniel's wisdom – which far exceeds that of all his wise men – that he recognizes the power and justice of Daniel's God. The cryptic words – *Mene, Tekel, Parsin* – [Dan 5:25] which a mysterious hand writes on the wall are also interpreted by the prophet and immediately his prediction comes true: Babylon falls to the Persians.

This first part of the book ends with an amazing episode which can be explained only by God's miraculous intervention. After being thrown into the lions' den, Daniel survives without a scratch. In the same way his three companions are saved from the fiery furnace where they had been put for refusing to worship the golden image.

Daniel's apocalyptic visions (Dan 7-12).

The second part of the Book of Daniel relates four prophetic apocalyptic visions which Daniel received:

1. In the first vision (Dan 7), in the first year of King Belshazzar's reign, Daniel sees four great beasts arising from the sea. They represent four successive kingdoms. From the last kingdom a king will emerge who will try to exterminate the people of God. He will, however, be destroyed and "the power of the saints of the Most High" will be given an everlasting kingdom" [Dan 7:27].
2. The second vision (Dan 8), in the third year of Belshazzar's reign, symbolizes the downfall of the empire of the Medes and the Persians, the rise of the empire of Alexander the Great, and the sacrilegious arrogance of its successor, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who will attack God's people and profane and destroy the Temple.
3. In the third vision (Dan 9), in the first year of Darius the Mede, while Daniel is meditating on the prophecy of Jeremiah about the 70 years which Israel will spend in exile in Babylonia, the angel Gabriel reveals to him that the full restoration will come about after 70 weeks of years (490 years), with the coming of the kingdom of God. This prophecy opens at the time of Jeremiah's prophecy (Jer 25:12; 29:12) and ends with the persecution by and death of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. At the end of the 70 weeks sacrifice and offering will cease until the decreed destruction of the destroyer. Then there will be an end to sin and the kingdom of the Messiah will come.
4. The fourth vision (Dan 10-12), in the third year of Cyrus, reveals events involving those who rule over the people of God up to Antiochus IV, whose conquests and persecutions are vividly described. Despite this the people have hope because their deliverance, the predicted messianic

era, is at hand. Some think that Dan 12 refers to the resurrection of all men prior to the Last Judgment, a subject previously addressed by Isaiah (Is 26:19). Others think it refers to the time the dead will spend in Hades (*sheol*), after which the blessed will enter heaven and the unjust will be condemned. This will take place much later, when Jesus Christ “descends into hell” after His resurrection.

Throughout Daniel we encounter one primary teaching: the God of Israel, the one true, omniscient and omnipotent God, the sovereign Master of human affairs, is the King of kings, the Lord of heaven and earth. This one God, in His infinite wisdom and power, governs the course of human history, saving those who are faithful to Him and overthrowing kings who try to frustrate His plans. Resistance to God ends only in war and destruction; while obedience and faithfulness to His laws will always, despite any obstacles, lead to victory and eventual peace.

Although God is transcendent, He also governs the world and lovingly cares for His creatures. He does this through angels, whose mission is to protect men. Should God occasionally allow the just man to be persecuted, it is only to test his faithfulness and reward him for his good works. It distresses Daniel to see Israelites suffering in their exile, but his sadness is mitigated not so much by the memory of past glories but by the hope of a much more secure future.

Daniel’s messianic teaching is unlike that of other prophets since it focuses almost totally on the eschatological -- the end times. He describes the destruction of all hostile powers prior to the coming of the Messiah. The kingdom, although at first almost imperceptible, will eventually spread throughout the world. It will be a spiritual kingdom of peace and justice and the acknowledgement of the one true God. The messianic king will not conquer the world by the sword; He will be the “Son of man” and receive royal authority from God Himself.

Daniel’s prophecy is the culmination of God’s intervention in history up to that time. Now something new is coming, a future is predicted in which the kingdom of God (the Church) will spread, during its earthly phase, to all people. This will precede the final heavenly stage which will last forever. This, along with the book’s teaching on the resurrection of the dead and final judgment, is a doctrinal advance compared to the earlier prophets, and foreshadows the teaching of Jesus Himself.

Historical Background.

“For eight days they celebrated the dedication of the altar and joyfully offered holocausts and sacrifices of deliverance and praise.” [1 Macc 4:56]

When the first excitement of the Maccabean revolt had waned, around 163 B.C., many of the people had second thoughts. Yes, the revolt had been remarkably successful so far, but what of the future? They had defeated a relatively small Syrian army, little more than a military police unit; but what would happen when they went up against the full force of the mighty Seleucid Empire?

Many scholars believe that it was at about this time that a now unknown Jew gathered various traditions about a certain Hebrew named Daniel. Daniel had lived through another difficult period in the life of God’s People; he had survived the Babylonian Exile 400 years earlier in the 6th Century B.C. What God had done for Daniel and the other exiles, He could do again! The message of this book, then, is one of encouragement and hope.

Despite how most scholars view Daniel, the Church has always included Daniel among the prophets, and its position in the Bible points to an important fact: regardless of when the book was written, the author was writing with a truly prophetic purpose. He did not intend to explain the meaning of the Exile to the people; this had already been done by Isaiah and Ezekiel. He did not intend to recount the history of the return to Jerusalem; this has been done by Ezra and Nehemiah. His intent was to give the people hope, whether they suffered in Babylonian exile or under the persecution of the Seleucids. Daniel is unique in its insights into the essential character of tyranny, pride, the role of Satan in political tyranny, and the

ultimate triumph of God. Daniel is truly a *theology of history*; i.e., an explanation of historical events in the light of faith. The author was privileged to announce the “latter days” and describe the realization of the “world to come.”

Reading. Now open your Bible and read:

Daniel 1-7; 13

(Once again, I recommend that you return to the book at some time and read it in its entirety.)

Behind the Words.

The Events and Visions. The first part of Daniel differs substantially from the second part (Dan 7-12). In the second, under the form of various visions, the author conveys his magnificent theology of history for which he had prepared them in Dan 2. The images used were, for the most part, familiar since they appeared in other prophetic works. Each of the visions follows a definite pattern. We are shown a struggle between the forces of good and evil. Then God intervenes in a decisive triumph which brings about a sort of climatic revolution. This in turn inaugurates the Divine Kingdom through a resurrection and general judgment.

Some Key Passages. In your Bible make a notation or mark the following key passages from Daniel:

Daniel, his life and times – Dan 1-6

The visions of the four beasts – Dan 7

The Story of Susanna – Dan 13

Highpoints of these Passages.

The third year of Jehoiakim [Dan 1:1]. Each of the first six chapters of Daniel is a complete event in itself. All are drawn from the period of the Babylonian Exile in the 6th Century B.C. Dan 1-4 are set in the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, Dan 5 in the time of Belshazzar, and Dan 6 in the reign of the Persian conqueror, who is called Darius, the Mede. All six emphasize the fact that Jews were often highly placed in the pagan courts, and underscore the importance of faithfulness to God and the Law, particularly under the most difficult circumstances.

The Dietary Laws [Dan 1:8]. Here the author alludes to the Jewish practice of eating only those foods prescribed by the Law; i.e., kosher or “clean” or “ritually pure” foods. [See Lev 11-16 & Dt 14:3-8] For us it might seem strange for Daniel to make an issue out of what could be considered a secondary point of law; but to the orthodox, believing Jew the dietary laws were an external, concrete sign of loyalty to God and to His Covenant.

Daniel’s prayer [Dan 2:20]. This is striking testimony of the true religious outlook and shows a gratefulness for gifts that we do not deserve. Nothing is hidden from God, the source of all light; and so we must humbly go to God when we seek light.

The stone from the mountain [Dan 2:31-45]. This vision and its interpretation are keys to understanding the later visions in Dan 7-12. It depicts the triumph of God’s kingdom in the fulfillment of all history. Although it challenges every empire and judges all that we do as humans, it is not merely an agent of judgment; it is also an agent of salvation. As we see in the Gospels this kingdom begins with the Church and is fulfilled with the Christ’s glorious return. [See Mt 28:18-20 & Rev 22:20]

The handwriting on the wall [Dan 5]. This dramatic account and the events it predicted were confirmed by such notable Greek historians as Herodotus and Xenophon, who reported that the city of Babylon fell by a surprise attack at night.

The lions' den [Dan 6:1-28]. Here the author addresses such timeless questions as: "What shall a man give in exchange for his integrity?" and "To what extent is compromise justified?" Ancient monarchs often took pride in the size and variety of their private menageries, another indication of the authenticity of this and other traditions preserved by the author.

Daniel's vision [Dan 7]. Now the other turns his prophetic eye to the future. He counsels his fellow citizens to bear up under the present trials as God is making ready the definitive revelation of His great plan. Soon God will establish the kingdom, and it will be kingdom without end. In Dan 7:13 we find a striking reference to the "son of man" a title which Our Lord Himself uses as a reference to His second coming [Mt 26:63-64].

Daniel the judge [Dan 13]. Most scholars think that chapters 12 and 13 were added at a later date by some unknown author acting under the influence of divine inspiration. They are certainly in harmony with the theme and purpose of the preceding chapters and probably represent other venerable traditions associated with Daniel.

Unity of the Two Testaments.

In Dan 7 we find the appearance of "one like a son of man coming on the clouds of heaven." We see another reference using almost the exact same words in St. John's Revelation. And Jesus, throughout the Gospels, refers to Himself as the "son of man." Indeed, no other messianic title is used more frequently in the Gospels. The title itself points to Jesus as the representative of humanity in His great work of redemption. Check the following New Testament references and consider their relationship to the message found in Daniel.

- ✠ Mk 2: 10
- ✠ Mk 2:28
- ✠ Rom 5
- ✠ Rom 8
- ✠ Rev 1:13

Questions. Reflect on the following questions offered for discussion:

1. Do you feel any kinship with Daniel and his friends in Dan 1? If so, describe it.
2. Does the remark of the young men to the King of Babylon [Dan 36-18] add anything to the overall message of the book? What in particular?
3. What events in the life of Daniel illustrate the place of pride in political tyranny and the brutalizing effects of absolute power?
4. What message to the events of Dan 6 have for the individual faced with a conflict between the demands of divine and human authority?
5. In Dan 5 God gave the Babylonian king and the royal house a warning to mend their ways, but it went unheeded. Do you believe that also God gives warnings to individuals like you and me so that we might avoid personal destruction? Any examples?