

Daniel

"I have heard of you that a spirit of the gods is in you, and that enlightenment, understanding, and excellent wisdom are found in you." (DANIEL 5:14)

The Book of Daniel presents itself as a collection of stories and visions set during the Babylonian Exile and the early Persian period. Daniel 1 anchors the narrative between the deportations of Judean elites under Nebuchadnezzar II (597-587 BCE) and the rise of Cyrus the Great, who conquered Babylon in 539 BCE. The book also refers to figures such as Belshazzar, the last Babylonian crown prince and co-ruler, and Darius the Mede, a ruler otherwise unknown to history and likely confused with a later figure. Within this setting, Daniel appears as a wise and faithful exile who navigates imperial courts while remaining loyal to Israel's God. Through both court tales and apocalyptic visions, he demonstrates that divine sovereignty ultimately governs the rise and fall of kingdoms.

Most modern scholars, however, date the book's composition to the mid-second century BCE during the persecution of the Jews under Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164 BCE). Unlike earlier imperial suzerains who generally tolerated local religious traditions, Antiochus pursued an aggressive program of Hellenization designed to reshape Judean identity around Greek culture and Seleucid political interests. Antiochus's policies were not incidental pressures but a strategic assault on Jewish religious life, practices that reveal a deliberate effort to erode the social and theological structures that sustained Jewish resilience.

Antiochus's program of forced hellenization provoked widespread resistance, culminating in the Maccabean Revolt led by Mattathias and his sons. This revolt brought harsh reprisals through public executions, bans on Torah observance, and the desecration of the temple, capped by the installation of a Zeus statue fashioned to resemble Antiochus himself. As oppression intensified, Mattathias the Hasmonean and his sons initiated an armed revolt against Seleucid rule (see 1–2 Maccabees), transforming scattered defiance into a sustained struggle for religious and political survival.

While not achieving independence, the revolt produced a decisive shift in Judea through the Roman–Jewish Treaty of 161

BCE. Judea was recognized as a Roman vassal and the Hasmoneans were given a measure of self-rule. More importantly, religious autonomy was restored and Judea regained control of its temple, priesthood, and internal governance. Hasmonean authority continued until Herod the Great became a Roman client king in 37 BCE, which ended native rule and inaugurated a new political order.

NARRATIVE UNITS in DANIEL

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| 1–6 | Hagadah – stories about the exploits of Daniel and his companions |
| 7–12 | Apocalyptic Visions |
| [13–14] | Hagadah – part of the Deuterocanon or Apocrypha |

Against this backdrop, Daniel emerges as a work of resistance literature. By placing its message in the mouth of a revered exile from an earlier age of foreign domination, the book invites readers to interpret their own crisis through Israel's collective memory of faithfulness under oppression. The distinction between the book's literary setting in the sixth century BCE and its historical setting in the second century BCE is therefore essential for understanding its purpose. Daniel uses the past to speak to the present, assuring a persecuted community that earthly empires are temporary, but God's kingdom endures forever.

THEMATIC & LITERARY CONSIDERATIONS

Haggadah — *Haggadah* (Hebrew for “telling” or “setting forth”) is a narrative form that communicates theological and moral truth through stories that are either non-historical or creatively shaped around historical memory. In Daniel, the Haggadic narratives of chapters 1-6, along with the later additions in chapters 13-14, employ memorable court tales, deliverance stories, and contests of wisdom to dramatize faithful living under foreign rule. Their purpose is not primarily to recount history but to interpret it. Through vivid storytelling, these narratives portray God as sovereign over kings, empires, and idols, while presenting Daniel and his companions as models of covenant faithfulness. The stories function both pastorally and polemically: they encourage perseverance amid persecution, strengthen Jewish identity in the face of cultural and religious pressure, and proclaim the superiority of Israel's God over the claims of imperial power and foreign religion. In this way, Haggadah becomes a vehicle of resistance, using story to sustain hope and inspire steadfast obedience within an oppressed community.

Apocalypticism — Apocalypticism (from the Greek, meaning “to reveal”) is a literary genre and theological worldview that interprets history through revelation, cosmic conflict, and divine intervention. Apocalyptic literature arose in communities whose known or anticipated reality was destroyed or otherwise replaced by a conflicting reality. The traumatic dissonance created by such a loss demanded a new understanding of reality. It assumes that ordinary perception cannot grasp the true nature of reality; instead, God unveils hidden truths about the present age and its destined end. Apocalyptic literature features symbolic visions, angelic mediators, heavenly journeys, and a sharp contrast between the present world of oppression and the coming world of divine justice. Its purpose is not prediction for its own sake but moral formation—to sustain the faithful under persecution by revealing God's ultimate sovereignty.

For the book of Daniel, the dissonance arose during the worsening political and social situation in Judea during the 2nd century BCE during the rule of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, including Jewish collusion, the Maccabean revolt (167-160 BCE), and Roman suzerainty. The Danielic apocalypse was written between 168 and 164 BCE.

God's Sovereignty & Faithful Resistance — Daniel weaves its central themes into a unified theological vision centered on God's sovereignty over history. Empires rise and fall, kings exalt themselves and are brought low, yet God's rule alone endures. Within this world of competing powers, Daniel and his companions embody faithful resistance, demonstrating that covenant loyalty remains possible even under intense political and cultural pressure. Their stories of deliverance establish a pattern that echoes throughout the book: the faithful may suffer, but God ultimately vindicates them, while arrogant rulers and oppressive kingdoms face judgment.

The apocalyptic visions deepen this perspective by unveiling the hidden realities behind historical events. Political struggles are revealed to be part of a larger cosmic drama in which God's purposes are at work despite appearances. History is therefore interpreted not through the ambitions of rulers but through divine agency and providence. All of these themes converge in Daniel's climactic hope for the kingdom of God, an everlasting reign that will overthrow the violent empires of the world, vindicate the faithful, and establish divine justice. The book's ultimate message is one of endurance and hope: earthly powers are temporary, but God's kingdom is eternal.

TYPOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

SELECTED USES OF DANIEL IN THE IMAGINATION OF EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITERS

Daniel was an important generative text for the early Christian imagination, shaping how New Testament writers and early Christian authors understand Jesus, persecution, history, and hope. Its images, characters, and theological grammar form a kind of apocalyptic lexicon through which the early church interprets its own moment.

The most enduring influence of Daniel on the New Testament is the Son of Man vision of Daniel 7. Jesus repeatedly adopts this title for himself, and the Gospels draw on Daniel's imagery to portray his authority, suffering, vindication, and future coming in glory. Daniel's promise of resurrection and final judgment in chapter 12 likewise becomes foundational for Christian hope in the last day and the ultimate triumph of God's justice.

Daniel's broader apocalyptic imagination also leaves a deep mark on the New testament. Its visions of beasts, cosmic conflict, heavenly courts, and the struggle between earthly kingdoms and God's reign shape the language of Mark 13, 2 Thessalonians, and, above all, Revelation. These writings interpret the church's trials through Daniel's symbolic world, reading political events as manifestations of a deeper spiritual drama. In this way, Daniel provides the New Testament not only with individual images and titles, but with an entire framework for understanding history: earthly empires are temporary, God's sovereignty remains hidden yet active, and the faithful can endure present suffering in confidence that God's kingdom will ultimately prevail.

Early Christian writers extend this pattern. Origen and other pre-Constantine writers interpret Daniel's kingdoms spiritually, seeing Christ as the stone that shatters oppressive powers. Post-4th century writers (e.g. Augustine and John Chrysostom) use Daniel to argue that history is ordered toward God's final justice and highlight Daniel's courage in the face of oppression. Across these traditions, Daniel offers a way of seeing history governed by God, empires judged, the faithful vindicated, and the Son of Man enthroned.

MORAL IMAGINATION

QUESTIONS TO HELP DISCOVER DANIEL'S RELEVANCE TO THE CONTEMPORARY READER

- Where do you see empires, systems, or powers claiming ultimate authority in our world, and how does Daniel's vision reframe those claims?
- Daniel and his companions remain loyal under pressure. What forms of courageous resistance are Christians called to practice in contemporary life?
- What habits, disciplines, or communal practices help us maintain covenant identity when cultural forces pull in other directions?
- Daniel's apocalyptic visions reveal unseen dimensions of conflict and hope. How might the church discern "hidden realities" beneath today's political or social events?
- Daniel shows boldness without arrogance. How can Christians cultivate moral courage that remains humble, prayerful, and wise?
- Daniel interprets history through God's purposes. How might his lens help the church read its own cultural moment with clarity and hope?

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