

Daniel

St. Matthew Parish Bible Study

The Book of Daniel, one of the most influential and controversial of the Old Testament prophetic writings, is a collection of biographical narratives and prophecies concerning Daniel—a pious Jew exiled in Babylon (Iraq) during the persecution of Antiochus Epiphanes, king of Syria (167-164 B.C.)—and his prophecies about the sequence of kingdoms, events, and chronology until the coming of the Kingdom of God (7-12). Daniel's six prophecies or stories are of faithful Jews practicing their faith and who, by God's grace, were able to triumph over their enemies.

First part

Daniel was born into the Jewish royal family of Zedekiah (previously known as Jehoiachin), the last king of Judah (597-587 B.C.). When King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon deported the Jews from Judah in 605 B.C., young Daniel was among them. Later Daniel was chosen with other men his age—Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah—to be brought up and educated in the court of Nebuchadnezzar.

Daniel and companions enter the Babylonian court (1)

In court Daniel and his friends of course cannot worship as they once did in Jerusalem; still, they are determined to keep the Jewish laws. Accordingly, though now members of the royal household, they avoid “defiling” themselves when offered the king's “rich food” of “unclean” meat and wine (1:8). That is, while the food and wine itself does not violate the Mosaic law, it would first be offered up to pagan idols before its consumption. Therefore Daniel and his friends ask for water and vegetables only. As a result of this diet, the king is pleased as he finds Daniel and his friends “ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters of his kingdom” (1:20).

The four pagan kingdoms and the Kingdom of God (2)

One night King Nebuchadnezzar has a disturbing dream and calls his advisers interpret it for him. His advisers come but naturally ask the king to recount the dream for them. Nebuchadnezzar demands they prove their worth by recalling the dream *without* the king telling them! The advisors confess they cannot, which so enrages the king that he orders their execution, including Daniel and his friends. Daniel however asks for time to pray, seeking to know the king's dream and its correct interpretation (2:17-24). Daniel tells the king that “a great God has made known to the king what shall be hereafter” (2:45). That is, the “great image, mighty and of exceeding brightness” (2:31) represents the kingdom of man and his false worship, contrasted with the Temple-mountain of God and its true worship; and that one day true worship will prevail over the pagan kingdoms of the world. Daniel says that Nebuchadnezzar's dream means that four successive kingdoms will precede the one true kingdom established by God.

The four kingdoms in Nebuchadnezzar's dream

- 1) the Babylonian king (gold);
- 2) the king of the Medes and Persians (silver);
- 3) the king of the Greeks (bronze);
- 4) the king of Ptolemy or Egypt (iron).

Daniel's interpretation of the king's dream aims to show that the God of Israel is the only true God. In fact, these kingdoms will be established and later destroyed to make way for the Kingdom of God (2:44-45).

King Nebuchadnezzar is humbled by Daniel's interpretation and rewards him and his companions with positions within the empire. The king also changes their names. Daniel is renamed Belteshazzar; Hananiah is Shadrach; Mishael is Meshach; and Azariah is Abednego.

The three young men in the fiery furnace (3)

King Nebuchadnezzar erects a gigantic golden idol of himself and compels all his royal officials to offer worship before it. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refuse. Furious, the king orders them thrown into a blazing furnace. Miraculously they are spared and emerge unharmed. Again, the king is humbled and issues a decree that no one speak against "the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego" (3:29). The king then promotes Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego within his royal service.

The great tree cut down and the Kingdom of God (4)

Nebuchadnezzar has another dream, this time of a tree that towers above the earth that becomes a haven for birds and beasts. An angel from heaven descends and calls for the tree to be cut down, leaving behind only a stump. Daniel is summoned and reluctantly informs the king that the dream means the king will soon lose his mind and be driven into the wilderness to live like an animal. One year later that's exactly what happens. While walking on the roof of his palace and praising himself for his greatness, King Nebuchadnezzar is struck by God with madness. He is driven out and lives like an animal in the fields. However seven years later the king regains his reason and praises God as he returns to take up his throne.

King Belshazzar's feast and the writing on the wall (5)

After Nebuchadnezzar's reign, King Belshazzar ruled Babylon with his father, Nabonidus, between 553-539 B.C. One day the king gives a great feast for his court and foolishly brings out the sacred vessels that were taken by Nebuchadnezzar from the Jerusalem Temple (1:2). While the king and his courtiers are drinking from the sacred vessels and praising their gods, a hand appears and writes on the wall, "MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN (PERES)." The king is greatly frightened and summons Daniel to decipher the message. Daniel's interpretation is that God has judged and weighed King Belshazzar and found him wanting; therefore his kingdom will be divided and given to "the Medes and Persians." Despite this terrifying news, the king rewards Daniel by making him the third ruler of his kingdom (after his father and himself). That same night, the message is fulfilled and the king is slain as the Medes and Persians capture Babylon. Darius the Mede becomes King of Babylon.

In these passages, the Book of Daniel is suggesting that God's wrath is provoked due to Belshazzar's profanation of the sacred vessels, and therefore God's judgment on Babylon and Belshazzar's himself.

King Darius - Daniel in the lion's den (6)

Immediately after assuming control of Babylon, King Darius appoints 120 "administrators" (Grk, *satraps*) over his realm. He places now aged Daniel among the top three administrators with an eye toward making him a sort of prime minister. However the courtiers are jealous of Daniel's standing and urge the king to pass a law forbidding prayer to any god but himself (Darius) for thirty days. The courtiers know that since Daniel is a faithful Jew, his conscience will not allow him to follow the law. Indeed, when they later discover Daniel in prayer, the courtiers tell the king and compel him to enforce the death penalty. With great reluctance, the king complies and Daniel is thrown into the lion's den. Overnight however the Lord sends an angel to calm the lions' hunger and in the morning Daniel is still alive. Greatly relieved the king has Daniel raised up from the pit and his accusers cast in. Darius issues a decree commanding the people's reverence for Daniel's God and, like Nebuchadnezzar before him, Darius utters a hymn about the kingdom of the true God. Daniel's heroic virtue is that though the Temple no longer stands and he is unable to worship and offer sacrifice, he has yet consented to become himself a sacrifice. Once again, God vindicates those who worship Him, and with "signs and wonders," shows that He is the true God and King.

The four beasts, the son of man, and the Kingdom of God (7)

In Daniel's dreams he sees "four great beasts" rise from the sea: a winged lion, a lopsided bear, a leopard with four wings and four heads, and a great dragon-like beast. These beasts are symbols of the world's kings and their kingdoms; and for a time they dominate, only to be followed by a great dragon with ten horns. While Daniel watches, the "ancient of days" appears and sets up his throne, surrounded by angelic servants and worshipers. He convenes this court, passes judgment on the beasts, destroys the dragon, and strips the others of their authority. Then one "like a son of man" is presented before the "ancient of days" and receives world authority. Once again the kingdom of God is front and center.

The vision of the ram and the goat (8)

Two years later, Daniel is in Susa, the capital of Persia (Iran), and sees a "beastly" vision on the banks of a river: a ram with two horns, one larger than the other. From the west a goat comes at great speed, with a single horn with which he smashes the ram to the ground. The goat enlarges himself but his great horn is broken and replaced with four others. From one horn grows a small horn that becomes greater still and rises up to heaven, encircling "the glorious land" and overthrowing the sanctuary and the "continual burnt offering." The ram is the kingdom of Media and Persia (8:16). The goat is the king of Greece. The four horns are the four successor kingdoms of Alexander's empire. The small horn is a boastful king who will rise, prosper, and persecute the "people of the saints," but he will meet his end. Daniel becomes ill by the vision, and even when he recovers, he does not understand it.

The seventy weeks of years until "the Messiah" (9)

This vision is the result of Daniel's meditation on the Book of Jeremiah and the prophet's prediction of the seventy years when "the nations" will serve Babylon. After seventy years Babylon will be punished and the Lord will "visit" the Judeans and bring them back to their land (Jeremiah 25:11-12; 29:10). Daniel understands Jeremiah's prophecy to be *conditional upon the repentance of the people* (Jeremiah 29:12-14). According to Jeremiah, the restoration from exile will take place "if" the people of God repent; but Daniel knows that the exiles have not yet sought the Lord with "all their heart." Indeed, Daniel declares, "All this calamity has come upon us, yet we have not entreated the favor of the Lord our God, turning from our iniquities and giving heed to your truth" (9:13). Very much like Moses before him (Exodus 32:11-13), Daniel repents on *behalf* of the people of Israel, pleading for God to have mercy on them in the "holy city."

The increase by a factor of seven (seventy weeks) is a principle found in the Book of Leviticus in which Yahweh says: "**If by this discipline you are not turned to me . . . I myself will strike you sevenfold for your sins**" (Leviticus 26:23). Subsequently there is the only prophecy in the Old Testament in which a future king is explicitly called an "anointed one" or "Messiah." Gabriel describes the coming of this "Messiah" after seven weeks, and also the rebuilding of the Temple, the cutting off (killing) of the "Messiah," the destruction of the city and sanctuary, the making of a "strong covenant" with many, the ending of sacrifice and offering, and the end of the "desolator" (9:25-27). Here Gabriel connects a number of key expectations: the forgiveness of sins, the restoration of the Temple, the coming of the messiah King, and the establishment of a New Covenant.

The tribulation, the resurrection, and the end of days (10-12)

In Daniel's final vision, it is the "third year of Cyrus, king of Persia," and Daniel is fasting and praying when he sees a "man clothed in linen," beaming with light, coming to him as he stands on the banks of the Tigris River. Daniel faints and the man revives him. The "man" has come from God to reveal to Daniel what is about to take place. The "man" describes the ebb and flow of the struggle over the land of Israel that will be waged by the two successor empires of Alexander the Great and the "kings of the south" (the Ptolemies, i.e., the Egyptians). The "man" traces this conflict up through the reign of a certain "contemptible person" who is almost certainly Antiochus IV Epiphanes, king of Syria (175-164 B.C.). After the end of the reign of Antiochus, the "man" informs Daniel about the final tribulation and the general resurrection of the dead.

Susanna and Bel and the Dragon (13-14)

The story of Susanna is simple. Susanna is a beautiful young wife of a wealthy and important member of the Jewish exile community. Two Jewish elders enter her private garden while she is alone and bathing and urge her to have relations with them, or else they will accuse her of adultery with the young man. Susanna refuses their advances and screams for help. The threesome are discovered, and the two elders claim they caught Susanna in the very act of adultery. Susanna is promptly condemned. But before the sentence is carried out, young Daniel steps forward. He insists that the two elders be separated for interrogation. Once isolated, their stories about exactly what kind of tree they saw Susanna committing adultery beneath do not agree. Susanna is exonerated and, in keeping with “the law of Moses” (giving false witness in a capital case), the two elders are put to death.

Cyrus’ deliverance from idolatry/Bel and Dragon

Daniel discusses idolatry with King Cyrus of Persia. Cyrus insists that the idol of the god Bel or Baal is alive, because it consumes the food offered to it. Daniel urges the king to spread dust on the floor of Bel’s Temple. In the morning, the footprints of Bel’s priests and their families are visible in the dust. They are the ones who have been consuming the sacrifices. Cyrus executes the priests, and the idol is destroyed.

In another story, Daniel slays the sacred Babylonian Dragon by feeding it cakes of pitch, fat and hair until it bursts. The enraged Babylonians insist that the king punish Daniel, so he is again thrown to the lions for a week. This time he is sustained by soup brought to him by “the prophet Habakkuk” who was in Judea. At the end of the week, the lions have still not attacked Daniel, so the king withdraws him and instead casts in his accusers.

Conclusion

From beginning to end, the Book of Daniel presents the conflict between two mutually exclusive kingdoms: the kingdom of man and the kingdom of God. The Catholic Church includes readings from the Book of Daniel at the beginning and end of the Church’s liturgical year in anticipation of the Second Coming of Christ, the final Advent and the end to world history.



Rembrandt (1635 Belshazzar’s feast)



Daniel interpreting Nebuchadnezzar’s dreams