

Bible Book Reading: Daniel

Background Comments:

Our Christian tradition places Daniel in the prophet section of the Bible. It follows the Book Ezekiel which also contains symbolic visions. In the Jewish tradition Daniel follows Esther, a book that also addresses the experiences of the exiles from Judah and Jerusalem. The book of Daniel focuses specifically on Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, not on any other of the exiled people of God. Daniel was written in two languages: 1:1 to 2:4a and 8:1 to 12:13 were written in Hebrew, while 2:14 to 7:28 were written in Aramaic. These divisions are broadly applicable but leave in question the language of chapters 1-6 and 7-12.

The Storyline

The first six chapters of Daniel are stories which include some visions. The last six chapters contain mostly visions. Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego interact with various kings in the first book. With the help of God Daniel interprets the dreams of other kings, dreams that are their destiny. The evil of the kings has immediate impact on Daniel and his friends. Daniel's work takes place during the rule of several kings, but his life does not get any better from one ruler to the next. God blesses Daniel and his friends, abides with them, and rescues them from the violence and jealousy directed against them. But the chaos continues and evil persists.

In the second half of the book, Daniel speaks with heavenly beings as he seeks to interpret his own visions. These visions concern the future of God's people ("The holy ones of the Most High," according to 7:25). These visions exceed the time of the exile (587 to 538 B.C.E.) and the world of the Babylonians, the Medes, and the Persians. The main action in this part moves back to Judah and Jerusalem. The final scenes take place in the centuries after Alexander the Great (d. 323 B.C.E.) With their ever-increasing intensity, the chaos and violence are beyond comparison. Even the faithful will die, but God's abiding faithfulness is extended to life after death (12:1-4).

Several puzzling questions in this book have not been resolved. The language of the visions has been interpreted in many different ways. For example, the final king or kingdom (the last "horn" in 7:20, the "little" horn in 8:9, and the "king of the north" in chapter 11) have been interpreted in various ways, from political powers such as the Romans to figures such as the Antichrist. Smaller puzzles include where Daniel is when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego face the fiery furnace (chapter 3) or where the three men are when Daniel refuses to bow to Nebuchadnezzar's statue in chapter 2.

The Message of Daniel

Daniel is a book of consolation. The message is clear: evil will not have the last word. Evil is usually seen in Daniel as the arrogant kings and kingdoms, and it is both upended in the stories and foreseen in the visions. Kingdoms collapse from overextension or are directly defeated by other kingdoms. Ultimately they face God's judgment, but in the short term the people of God live in a chaotic and even violent world.

In addition to consolation Daniel also gives us a model for prayer. When he is puzzled by Jeremiah's reference to seventy years, he turns to prayer (chapter 9). He confesses his and his people's sin, then makes several requests of God: listen, open your eyes, hear, forgive, act, do not delay, and more.

When read as literature, it could be published in a paperback under the genre of "scientific lit." But read as scripture with our Christian Lutheran eyes, it gives us consolation and assurance that God, in God's never ending love for us, keeps us safe into eternity. Enjoy the reading and be blessed!

Chapter 1: Four Young Israelites at the Babylon Court

vs. 5-8: How did the King of Babylon attempt to capture the mind, the body, and the loyalty of the four young Israelites? And why does Daniel resist these attempts?

vs. 9-21: Daniel stood up for what he believed in. Think back to when you did that: how did you feel?

Chapter 2: Nebuchadnezzar's Dream

vs. 14-16: Daniel embraces the death-defying challenge of the king. What role is played in this by the other three friends?

vs. 20-23: Daniel praises God in this Psalm. Does this express his personal faith or corporate worship? Why do you think so? What gifts does he praise God for and what does that say about God, Daniel, intercession and counting our blessings?

Is there any conflict between working under a ruler like Nebuchadnezzar and being a person of faith? Why or why not?

Chapter 3: The Golden Image and the Fiery Furnace.

v. 3:8 The king's decree denounces and challenges the faithfulness of the Jewish people. Do you think there are equal conflicts between faithfulness to Christ and the laws and rules of our society/country? Why or why not?

vs. 16-18: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego defied the king in his face so as to not deny their faith convictions. Our Christian Martyrs did the same, Is there an example you may identify of a similar case in our world today?

vs. 26-30: The king releases the friends of Daniel from the fire because he recognises the miracle that has happened. The convictions of the three are vindicated, and the king worships their God. Do you think that the unconditional faithfulness of the three, more than the miracle, or both, caused the transformation in the king? Why or why not? How does this story impact our call to be witnesses to Christ?

Please, let us pray:

Most powerful, gracious, and loving Father God. While most of us no longer believe in miracles, we do believe that your power is active in our world because of the unwavering faith and loyalty of your people. You enabled the friends of Daniel to face and commit to certain death because of their unwavering faith in your mighty power to save. Over the millennia of Christian faith, you have worked your miracle of growth and expansion of the gospel in the world through the faithful work of your committed children. The world is changing, and the past ways of the churches are no longer accepted by the majority in our present societies. We pray that you may grant us a new vision for being the church, but that you also grant us individual Christians the will and the energy to persist in our personal call to witness to your love and mercy in the Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen