

Above All

An Introduction to the Book of Daniel

Teenagers. Kings. Dreams. Statues. Magicians. Prayers. Astrologers. Lions. Visions. Horns. Flames. Eunuchs. Numbers. Kingdoms. Goats. God. Welcome to the glorious book of Daniel. Named after its primary human character and author, Daniel conveys timeless truths for troubled times.

As a teenager, Daniel and several of his friends were captured and relocated to Babylon. In the seat of the world's dominant, polytheistic superpower, these teens were trained to serve in the royal court. Daniel would do so with distinction well into his eighties, after Babylon ceased to be in power and the Persians began to reign. But neither King Nebuchadnezzar nor King Cyrus, and as the forward-looking visions of the book recount, neither Greece nor Rome, would rule and reign forever. God alone is the eternal King, and his kingdom will never end. He is above all, and he is merciful to his own. This is the best possible news.

Daniel is a beautiful and complex blend of literature and language. Part story and part vision, the 12 chapters never disappoint. Parts of it were written in Hebrew—designed specifically for the Jews—while other parts were written in Aramaic, the language of the masses. It's a book about the sovereign Lord and everlasting King building his unending kingdom. Though often hard to see—and never operating according to worldly expectations—this divine King rules and reigns today. Worldly kings come and go, but this heavenly King governs with permanence.

How shall we live for our heavenly King when earthly kings are all we see? Can God's people be faithful to him, steady and sure, even in the storms of life? In what way are strange visions infused with symbolism the most practical literature for building courageous Christians? These things and more await us as we embark on our journey through the pages of Daniel.

In the paragraphs that follow, you'll find tips on reading Daniel. Whether you read it daily for your personal devotions, discuss it in your Gospel Community, brave it with a non-Christian between classes, or read its famous stories to your kids before bed, this brief guide will hopefully turn on a headlamp to light your way in the mysterious world of Old Testament narrative and apocalyptic literature.

A Guide to the Book of Daniel

Below you will find a brief guide to each chapter of the book of Daniel. Additionally, where symbolism and imagery appear, tips for interpretation are provided. Think of these as “Spark Notes” to Daniel that focus on giving historical background and explaining symbols that are foreign to us. You may find these particularly helpful in the second half of the book, where each overview may be used as a key or legend to grasp its unusual imagery.

Daniel 1:1–21

Jehoiakim was the king of Judah. During the third year of Jehoiakim’s reign (605 B.C.), Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, invaded Judah and captured their capital city, Jerusalem. When Babylon defeated Judah, they captured and took the best and brightest Israelite men (including Daniel and his friends) with them back to Babylon to serve in the royal court.

For a frame of reference, the events of the book of Daniel take place roughly six or seven hundred years after the time of Moses, and about six hundred years before the birth of Jesus.

Daniel 2:1–49

Daniel 2 centers on King Nebuchadnezzar’s dream and its interpretation. He dreams of a giant statue made of different metals. Each part of the statue represents a different kingdom that will rule over Israel until the coming of God’s kingdom.

Babylon would be conquered by Persia-Media; Persia-Media would be conquered by Greece, and Greece would be conquered by Rome. Gold was considered the most valuable metal, and iron the least valuable, so the order of the metals on the statue symbolizes that these coming kingdoms will go from bad to worse in their wicked reigns.

The dream ends with a stone destroying the statue. The stone grows into a mountain that fills the whole earth. Compare this image to the mountain where the Lord gathers all of his people to himself (see Isaiah 2:3 and Micah 4:1).

Daniel 3:1–30

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are friends who were taken into Babylon with Daniel in chapter 1. This story happened while they were serving in Nebuchadnezzar’s court in Babylon.

Daniel 4:1–37

Daniel 4 switches abruptly to a first-person account. Surprisingly, this chapter is written from King Nebuchadnezzar’s perspective, although Daniel still plays an important role in this story.

Chapter 4 begins with King Nebuchadnezzar addressing the nations, as if he is beginning a letter or a speech. He praises God for what God has done in the story Nebuchadnezzar is about to tell. He then tells the story and concludes by praising God again.

The story he tells is as follows: Nebuchadnezzar dreamt (v 4–18); Daniel interpreted (v 9–27); and the dream was fulfilled (v 28–36). In the dream, a tree represented Nebuchadnezzar, and its falling represented his tumble into temporary insanity.

Daniel 5:1–31

Daniel 5 jumps ahead in time to the reign of Babylon’s final king, Belshazzar.

The death of Belshazzar at the end of this chapter marks the end of the Babylonian empire. Darius the Mede came to rule the city of Babylon on behalf of the Persian king, Cyrus. Daniel and the other Israelites remain in exile, but now the Median-Persian empire is the ruling government.

Daniel 6:1–28

Daniel 6 begins with Darius the Mede governing Babylon under the authority of the Median-Persian empire.

The statue in Daniel 2 depicted that the golden head representing Babylon would be replaced by another kingdom, represented by the statue’s silver shoulders. That kingdom is the Median-Persian empire seen in this chapter.

Daniel 7 marks the beginning of the second half of the book, moving from stories (chapters 1–6) to apocalyptic visions (chapters 7–12). Consequently, the summaries of each chapter below will be slightly longer than the preceding ones.

Daniel 7:1–28

Daniel 7’s vision is about the same four kingdoms from Daniel 2.

The beginning of the chapter recounts Daniel’s vision of four creatures: a lion, a bear, a leopard, and a final, terrifying beast. The final beast has ten horns, but three of these ten are replaced by one. “The Ancient of Days” subdues the first three creatures and destroys the final creature. He then gives all authority to “one like a son of man.”

These creatures directly correspond to the parts of the statue in chapter 2. The characteristics of the beasts confirm that they represent the earthly kingdoms that would dominate that part of the world in the coming years.

Lion → The lion had eagle’s wings: Jeremiah used both of these animals to depict Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon in Daniel 1–4.

Bear → The bear had three ribs in his mouth, symbolizing the nations conquered by Persia before they conquered Babylon. The bear was told to devour more, representing Persia’s conquest of Babylon.

Leopard → The leopard’s four heads possibly depict Alexander the Great’s Greek empire: after Alexander died, his empire was split into four kingdoms ruled by his generals.

Final Beast → The final beast is characterized as “terrifying, frightening, and very powerful,” forecasting the brutal military rule of Rome. Horns are symbols of power, so the ten horns (and the boastful horn) emphasize the power and ruthlessness of the final kingdom.

Here are two more important figures to watch for as you read:

“Ancient of Days” → This is a depiction of God as a wise and powerful ruler. The white clothing and hair symbolize wisdom and purity, while the fire around him symbolizes power. Him taking a seat on his throne and a court assembled before him depict his authority to judge.

“A Son of Man” → The term son of man is a way of saying “a human.” So, verses 13–14 are showing someone who appeared like a human entering the presence of the Ancient of Days and receiving authority.

Daniel 8:1–26

In the first two major visions of the book (Daniel 2 and Daniel 7) we saw depictions of four earthly kingdoms: Babylon, Persia-Media, Greece, and Rome.

Daniel 8’s vision is about how the Greek empire led by Alexander the Great will conquer the Median-Persian empire and come to rule over Israel’s part of the world.

Daniel’s vision begins in Susa, Persia. He watches a battle between a two-horned Ram and one-horned Goat. The Ram charges westward, but is overcome by the eastward charging Goat. The Goat then “becomes very great,” but at the height of its power, its horn is divided into four horns.

One of these four horns moves south to rule over the “Beautiful Land,” Israel. This horn interferes with the worship of the LORD in the Temple.

Horns represent kingdoms here. The Ram has two horns, representing the joint kingdom of Persia and Media. The horn of the Goat represents the Greek king, Alexander the Great. The four horns that replace this single horn at the height of its power show how Alexander’s empire would be divided up into four kingdoms after his death. Later, in one of these four kingdoms, Antiochus IV, arises as a powerful king and persecutes Israel.

Daniel 9:1–27

In Daniel 9:2, Daniel reads the book of Jeremiah and sees that Jeremiah prophesied that after 70 years of exile, the LORD would bring his people back to Jerusalem. Daniel realizes that the 70 years are almost up, so he responds by praying for return from exile. This is a high point in the book.

An angel responds to Daniel at the end of chapter 9, and gives a prophecy explaining that Israel’s exile is more complicated than Daniel thinks. Exile is not ultimately a physical matter. Rather, exile is a spiritual condition involving separation from God. So, for exile to end, God’s people need to do more than simply go back to the land: they need to be reconciled to God.

The angel says there will be 70 “weeks” until God’s people finish returning from exile. The number 7 represents God’s perfect works and 10 represents completion, so 70 here represents God’s perfect work being completed.

In terms of an actual timeline, these “weeks” begin with the first decree for the Israelites to return to Jerusalem. The first 69 “weeks” were completed with the coming of the Anointed One, who is Jesus. The Anointed One inaugurates the 70th “week,” which will last until he returns again.

Bonus Symbol:

Daniel 9 alludes to the Year of Jubilee, a celebration commanded in Leviticus 25:8–55. Leviticus explains that God’s people were supposed to observe this celebration every 49 years. In the Year of Jubilee, God’s people were supposed to free all slaves, cancel all debts, and restore all justice.

When the angel talks about 70 “weeks,” a “week” is 7 years. That means 70 “weeks” totals 490 years. 490 years makes 10 Jubilee cycles. In other words, the angel’s 70 weeks point to an ultimate, perfect fulfillment of God delivering his people.

Daniel 10:1–11:1

The last vision(s) in chapters 10–12 focuses on the coming rule of the Greek empire. Daniel 10 introduces the vision in Daniel 11.

In Daniel 10, an angel comes to talk to a discouraged Daniel on a riverbank. Verses 4–6 describe the angel’s appearance and verses 12–13 describe his angel itinerary. When the angel talking to Daniel recounts his fight with other angels, it shows us that the earthly wars described throughout the book connect with ongoing spiritual conflicts. Other angels are called “princes” in this chapter, and are designated to fight on behalf of certain earthly kingdoms.

Daniel 11:2–12:4

The vision of Daniel 11 is about the Greek kingdoms that will rule in the coming centuries and bring persecution to Israel.

The events foretold in Daniel 11 would take place between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament.

The Greek Kingdom’s reign over Israel began when Alexander the Great conquered the Median-Persian empire. When Alexander died, his kingdom split into four kingdoms. Chapter 11 describes the conflict between two of these four kingdoms, “the king of the North” and “the king of the South.” Israel is located between these two kingdoms and will be caught in the middle of the power struggle between them.

The final section of chapter 11 describes the “contemptible” king of the North, who we know to be Antiochus IV. History tells us that King Antiochus persecuted Israel, defiled the God’s Temple, and set up pagan idols in the sanctuary, which Daniel 11 refers to as “the abomination of desolation.” The people of Israel divided: some resisted Antiochus and remained faithful to

God's Word and others abandoned the God of Israel to begin worshipping the idols that Antiochus set up.

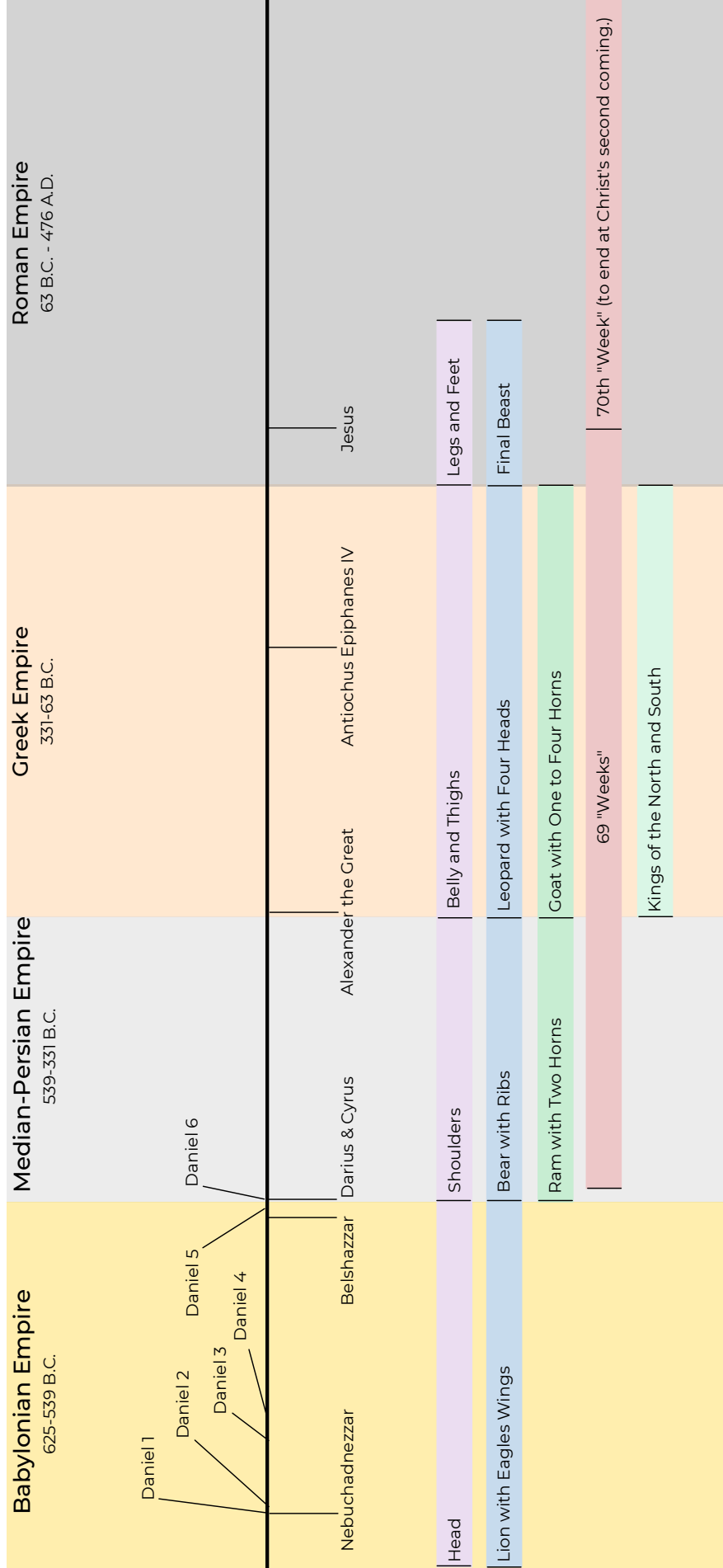
The prophecy ends at Daniel 12:4.

Daniel 12:5–13

The final section of Daniel 12 takes us back to the riverbank with Daniel and the angel.

The first angel is joined by two others, called “men” here. Upon being asked when the above persecution will end, the angel responds: “A time, times, and half a time,” “1,290 days,” and “1,335 days.”

These figures are supposed to be vague and mysterious. They communicate that God has appointed a specific time that he knows, but neither Daniel nor we are given the exact date or even an approximate guess. May we be filled with wonder and awe in response.



Daniel 1-6 are narratives that happened at these points in time.

The bars for chapters 2 and 7-12 show when the prophesied visions will be fulfilled.

Chapter 2

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapters 10-12

Symbols Used for Empires

	Daniel 2	Daniel 7	Daniel 8	Daniel 10-12
Babylon	Golden Head	Lion with Eagles Wings		
Media-Persia	Silver Shoulders	Bear with Ribs in Mouth	Ram with Two Horns	
Greece	Bronze Belly and Thighs	Leopard with Four Heads	Goat with One Horn that Splits into Four	Kings of the North and South
Rome	Iron and Clay Legs and Feet	Final Beast with Iron Teeth		



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