

DANIEL

Short Version

In Catholic Bibles, the Book of Daniel is regarded as one of the Major Prophets, the reason being that the book contains dreams and visions that reveal coming events. But most scholars today do *not* consider Daniel to be a prophetic book. Many view Daniel as somewhat like Esther, Judith, and Tobit, an edifying book of stories to help the reader place his/her trust in God during a difficult time.

Historical context. Even though the book presents itself as the composition of a wise Israelite, during the fifth century B.C. (Babylonian Exile), scholars believe the book was actually written much later during the reign of Antiochus IV, a wicked Persian king who persecuted the Jews in the second century B.C. *“The author was sensitive to the national despair brought on by this persecution, and so told six legend-like tales...stories as inspirational narratives to hearten the faithful of his time. Then he used the four visions of Daniel as ways of interpreting the meaning of the present crisis and establishing hope in the ultimate victory of the saints of God”* (Fr. McBride’s Guide to the Bible, p.139). Because this was written at a time similar to the historical context of 1-2 Maccabees, I have placed Daniel right after Maccabees in my table of contents.

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

PART ONE: Six Stories (Chs 1-6). The first section of Daniel consists of six romantic stories, sometimes called “court tales,” intended to edify and teach proper religious attitudes. These chapters tell stories of a young hero and a ‘wise man’ and a great interpreter of dreams who lived under great danger in the courts of the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar II, and the king of the Persians. These stories tell how Jews could live in a Gentile environment and remain faithful to their religious traditions. Our modern situation of religious people seeking to live in a secular world is not so far removed from ancient Jews living in the pagan world of Babylon, or Christians living in a hostile environment in the Arab world today.

PART TWO: Daniel’s visions (Chs 7-12). This is the apocalyptic section of Daniel. These chapters “take the form of a kind of resistance literature that encouraged those experiencing persecution under Antiochus IV to persevere because the end of the

time of tribulation was at hand” (Collegeville Commentary p.534). More specifically, this section tells of four visions in which Daniel learns about coming occurrences either in a dream or through an angel. These all contain an explanation of past and future events that will culminate in the destruction of Israel’s enemies and their wicked allies in a battle conducted from heaven itself.

PART THREE: Appendix (Chs 13-14). These chapters consist of three further stories about the hero Daniel, his wisdom and his refusal to worship the false gods of the Babylonians. This section of Daniel is only found in the Septuagint or Greek version of the Old Testament and is not a part of the Hebrew or Protestant canon of scripture.

Since Daniel is not regarded as a prophetic book like Isaiah and the other books in the Prophetic Writings of the Bible, and since the book was written during the same period as 1-2 Maccabees, I am placing Daniel after the books of Maccabees. Daniel was addressed to the youth who were persecuted during the reign of Antiochus IV and his hellenization policies. The Jewish youth might suffer like Daniel and his three companions, but God was all-powerful and would save them, if not in this world, then in the next life.

Suggested passages to read

Chapter 1: The food test, a story about how God looks after those who place their trust in him.

Chapter 3: The fiery furnace, another story of God caring for his people in a ‘fiery’ situation.

Chapter 6: Daniel in the lion’s den. The purpose of this story is to encourage Jews seeking to remain faithful to God in a hostile environment.