

DANIEL and the TWELVE PROPHETS for EVERYONE

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**DANIEL and
the TWELVE
PROPHETS
for EVERYONE**

JOHN GOLDINGAY



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The translation at the beginning of each chapter (and in other biblical quotations) is my own. I have stuck closer to the Hebrew than modern translations often do when they are designed for reading in church so that you can see more precisely what the text says. Thus although I myself prefer to use gender-inclusive language, I have let the translation stay gendered if inclusivizing it would obscure whether the text was using singular or plural—in other words, the translation often uses “he” where in my own writing I would say “they” or “he or she.” Sometimes I have added words to make the meaning clear, and I have put these words in square brackets. When the text uses the name of God, Yahweh, I have kept the name instead of replacing it with “the Lord” as translations usually do. And I’ve transliterated some other names in a way that’s different from the way translations traditionally do, partly to make it easier to work out the pronunciation. At the end of the book is a glossary of some terms that recur in the text, such as geographical, historical, and theological expressions. In each chapter (though not in the introduction) these terms are highlighted in **bold** the first time they occur.

The stories that follow the translation often concern my friends or my family. While none are made up, they are sometimes heavily disguised in order to be fair to people. Sometimes I have disguised them so well that when I came to read the stories again, I was not sure at first whom I was describing. My first wife, Ann, appears in a number of them. A few months after I started writing the Old Testament for Everyone, she died after negotiating with multiple sclerosis for forty-three

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years. Our shared dealings with her illness and disability over these years contribute significantly to what I write in ways that you may be able to see but also in ways that are less obvious.

Then, two years or so before I started writing this particular volume, I fell in love with and married Kathleen Scott, and I'm grateful for my new life with her and for her insightful comments on the manuscript, which have been so careful and illuminating that she practically deserves to be credited as coauthor.

I'm also grateful to Tom Bennett for reading through the manuscript and pointing out things I needed to correct or clarify.

INTRODUCTION

As far as Jesus and the New Testament writers were concerned, the Jewish Scriptures that Christians call the “Old Testament” *were* the Scriptures. In saying that, I cut corners a bit, as the New Testament never gives us a list of these Scriptures, but the body of writings that the Jewish people accept is as near as we can get to identifying the collection that Jesus and the New Testament writers would have worked with. The church also came to accept some extra books such as Maccabees and Ecclesiasticus that were traditionally called the “Apocrypha,” the books that were “hidden away”—a name that came to imply “spurious.” They’re now often known as the “Deuterocanonical Writings,” which is more cumbersome but less pejorative; it simply indicates that these books have less authority than the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. The precise list of them varies among different churches. For the purposes of this series that seeks to expound the “Old Testament for Everyone,” by the “Old Testament” we mean the Scriptures accepted by the Jewish community, though in the Jewish Bible they come in a different order, as the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings.

They were not “old” in the sense of antiquated or out of date; I sometimes like to refer to them as the First Testament rather than the Old Testament to make that point. For Jesus and the New Testament writers, they were a living resource for understanding God, God’s ways in the world, and God’s ways with us. They were “useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that the person who belongs to God can be proficient, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16–17). They were for everyone, in

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fact. So it's strange that Christians don't read them very much. My aim in these volumes is to help you do so.

My hesitation is that you may read me instead of the Scriptures. Don't fall into that trap. I like the fact that this series includes the biblical text. Don't skip over it. In the end, that's the bit that matters.

An Outline of the Old Testament

The Christian Old Testament puts the books in the Jewish Bible in a distinctive order:

Genesis to Kings: A story that runs from the creation of the world to the exile of Judahites to Babylon

Chronicles to Esther: A second version of this story, continuing it into the years after the exile

Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs: Some poetic books

Isaiah to Malachi: The teaching of some prophets

Here is an outline of the history that lies at the books' background. (I give no dates for events in Genesis, which involves too much guesswork.)

- 1200s Moses, the exodus, Joshua
- 1100s The "judges"
- 1000s King Saul, King David
- 900s King Solomon; the nation splits into two, Ephraim and Judah
- 800s Elijah, Elisha
- 700s Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah; Assyria the superpower; the fall of Ephraim
- 600s Jeremiah, King Josiah; Babylon the superpower
- 500s Ezekiel; the fall of Judah; Persia the superpower; Judahites free to return home
- 400s Ezra, Nehemiah

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- 300s Greece the superpower
- 200s Syria and Egypt the regional powers pulling Judah one way or the other
- 100s Judah's rebellion against Syrian power and gain of independence
- 000s Rome the superpower

Daniel

The book of Daniel addresses the questions and pressures of Judahites in two situations. The questions and pressures are similar, but the situations are different. In 587 BC the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and transported its important people to Babylon. The first half of the book tells a series of stories about Judahites there, where they face the temptations and demands of living in this foreign land as immigrants looked down on by the superpower. The question is, can they remain faithful to their faith in this context? The stories tell of their being put under pressure by the foreign culture and its learning and expectations and of God's making it possible for them to keep faith, and indeed to show that their God could enable them to outperform the expertise that issued from Babylonian learning. One of God's acts is to give Daniel a revelation about how political events are to unfold over the next four regimes.

In 539 BC the Babylonians were defeated by Cyrus the Medo-Persian king, and in 333 BC the Persians were defeated by Alexander the Great. In the second century BC Jerusalem was under the control of one of his sub-empires, ruled by the Seleucids and centered in Syria. In 167 BC its king, Antiochus IV (Antiochus Epiphanes), banned the practice of Jewish faith in the temple and introduced his own religion there. So Jews faced questions and pressures that overlapped with the ones that had faced people such as Daniel in Babylon. The second half of the book takes up that earlier vision given to Daniel in Babylon, and relates a series of revelations spelling out its

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implications for people living in the crisis in Jerusalem in the time of Antiochus. The revelations concerned the history of the time from Babylonian supremacy to the time of Antiochus and promised that God would put down the oppressor. God did so, which is likely the reason the community took the book of Daniel into its Scriptures—it had been proved to be a message from God.

The Twelve Prophets

The twelve books that follow Daniel form a collection of a total length comparable to that of one of the long prophetic books, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. For all we know, prophets such as Amos and Zephaniah delivered as many God-given prophecies as Isaiah or Jeremiah or Ezekiel, but the community apparently had reason for seeing a much smaller number of them as so important that they should be held onto for future generations.

The twelve fall roughly into three chronological groups. The first six mostly belong to the eighth century, the time of Isaiah ben Amoz. Hosea, Amos, and Jonah were all prophets in the northern kingdom, Ephraim (though the book of Jonah tells a story about his preaching to Nineveh in Assyria). Obadiah appears as an appendage to Amos because of its focus on Edom, where Amos ends. Micah was a prophet in Jerusalem (at the same time as Isaiah). Joel doesn't give any direct information on its date and it may appear among these first six in the conviction that it belongs here chronologically, and/or because its stress on Yahweh's Day and on Yahweh's capacity to relent of evil also appears in Amos and Jonah.

Whereas the period when Assyria is the superpower is the background to the eighth-century prophets, the next three, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah, belong to the seventh century. By now Ephraim has ceased to exist. Assyria is in decline and Babylon is becoming the great power. These three

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prophets are thus contemporary with Jeremiah, and like him, they all work in Jerusalem. They live and work in the century before Judah will be overcome by a fate similar to the one that overcame Ephraim.

The last three books, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, belong to another century or two later, to the period after the exile in Jerusalem, when they face a different set of issues there. Haggai and Zechariah preach in the context of the project to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem between 520 and 516, and urge on this project. Malachi preaches some decades later, when the temple has been rebuilt and is functioning, but there are yet other issues to confront.

DANIEL 1:1–21

On Drawing the Line

¹In the third year of the reign of Jehoiaqim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and blockaded it. ²The Lord gave into his hand Jehoiaqim, king of Judah, and some of the accoutrements of God's house, and he brought them to the country of Shinar, to his god's house. He brought the accoutrements to his god's treasure house. ³The king said to Ashpenaz, his chief of staff, to bring some of the Israelites, both some of royal descent and some of the important people ⁴(young men in whom there was no defect, of good appearance, skillful in all expertise, proficient in knowledge, insightful in knowledge, and in whom there was capacity to stand in attendance in the king's palace), and to teach them the learning and language of the Kaldeans. ⁵The king assigned to them a daily allocation from the king's supplies and the wine he drank. [Ashpenaz was] to train them for three years, and some of them would stand in attendance before the king. ⁶Among them were some Judahites, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, ⁷but the chief of staff determined on names for them. He determined for Daniel "Belteshazzar," for Hananiah "Shadrach," for Mishael "Meshach," and for Azariah "Abed-nege."

⁸Daniel determined in his mind that he would not defile himself with the king's supplies and the wine he drank, and asked the head of staff that he might not defile himself. ⁹God gave Daniel commitment and compassion before the head of staff, ¹⁰but the head of staff said to Daniel, "I'm afraid of my lord the king, who assigned your food and drink: what if he sees your faces thinner than the [other] young men of your generation and you risk my head with the king?" ¹¹Daniel said to the guard whom the head of staff had assigned over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, ¹²"Could you test your servants for ten days. They could give us some legumes to eat and water to drink, ¹³and our appearance and the appearance of the young men who eat the king's supplies will be visible before you. Act with your servants in accordance with what

you see.”¹⁴He listened to them regarding this matter, and tested them for ten days.¹⁵At the end of ten days their appearance looked better and they were heftier in body than all the young men who were eating the king’s supplies.¹⁶So the guard would carry away their supplies and the wine they were to drink, and give them legumes.

¹⁷These young men, the four of them: God gave them knowledge and skill in all learning and expertise, while Daniel had insight into every vision and dreams.¹⁸At the end of the period that the king had said to bring them, the head of staff brought them before Nebuchadnezzar.¹⁹The king spoke with them, and from all of them there was not found anyone like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. So they stood in attendance before the king.²⁰Every matter of insightful expertise that he asked of them, the king found them ten times superior to all the diviners and chanters that were in his entire realm.²¹Daniel was [there] until the first year of Cyrus the Persian.

Near where I live in the United States, there’s a British store that I like to visit every few weeks. It has an aisle full of British teas, one full of British cookies (biscuits), one full of British candies (sweets), one full of British jams, one full of British cereals, and a refrigerator stocked with British bacon, pies, and cream. I’d like to claim that the fact that they do taste good is the reason why I buy most of these items, but of course part of the reason they taste good is that they remind me of home. On one occasion I got involved in a conversation with other British people in the store, including the owner, and then panicked at the checkout because I realized I didn’t have any British money, which of course I didn’t need; but entering the store had been like going through an Alice in Wonderland door straight into the U.K.

I’m in California voluntarily. I’m not in exile, like Daniel and his three friends. I love it here, and I want to die here. Yet I’ll never be able to feel American. I’ll always know I’m

a resident alien, by choice (I haven't sought citizenship). Maybe subconsciously I want to preserve my Britishness. Daniel and his friends wanted to preserve their Judahite identity. They weren't obliged to avoid eating what the king ate; it was not inherently defiling. But food links with identity. It's odder that they accepted Babylonian names, even though the names make connections with Babylonian gods in the same way that the four young men's Hebrew names make connections with the God of Israel. (But significantly, as the names are reported, at least some of them make fun of the Babylonian gods. For instance, Abed-nebo would mean "servant of Nebo," but Abed-nego doesn't mean anything.) Maybe what's important is that you draw the line somewhere. You have to avoid the defiling effect of a culture that worships different gods. The Babylonians "determined" on names for the young men; but Daniel did some determining of his own in this connection.

It required God's support if it was to work. And it got that support. At the beginning of the story God "gives" Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar, but less oddly, later in the story God "gives" Daniel favor and "gives" all four men wisdom. They didn't attempt to evade education in Babylonian learning, the kind of learning that would fit them for jobs in the administration. Perhaps they were confident that their God could give them superior insight to that possessed by the Kaldeans. It would be quite an expectation, given the breadth and depth of Babylonian learning, in which the diviners and exorcists were experts. The fruits of God's doing so will emerge in the stories that follow. This first story introduces the various issues that will arise in the stories.

Its opening and its conclusion form a chronological bracket around them. At the beginning of Daniel's life, God does something strange in giving Jerusalem over to the Babylonian king. There's no allusion here to the way Judah had deserved this fate. Among its horrifying consequences were not merely

the transportation of some people, but the appropriation of some of the objects used in worship in the temple (objects such as platters, chalices, knives, and other implements). These things that had been dedicated to Yahweh are deposited in a Babylonian god's temple. It would look as if the Babylonian god had defeated Yahweh, as the Babylonian king had defeated the king of Judah. But the chapter closes with a note that would have to refer to Daniel's old age—more than sixty years have gone by. Nebuchadnezzar has passed, and so have his four successors, and so has the Babylonian Empire itself, taken over by Cyrus the Persian. Daniel is still there, having outlasted the Babylonian Empire. Who'd have thought it?

DANIEL 2:1–24

Except the Gods, Whose Home Is Not with Humanity

¹In the second year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams. His spirit was agitated, but his sleep came over him.

²The king said to summon the diviners, chanters, charmers, and Kaldeans to explain his dreams to the king. They came and stood in attendance before the king. ³The king said to them, “I had a dream, and my spirit is agitated to know the dream.”

⁴The Kaldeans spoke to the king (in Aramaic): “Long live the king! Tell your servants the dream and we'll explain its meaning.”

⁵The king replied to the Kaldeans: “A firm decision has issued from me: If you don't make known to me the dream and its meaning, you'll be torn limb from limb and your houses turned into rubble.

⁶But if you explain the dream and its meaning, you'll receive a reward and gift and great honor from me. Now. Explain to me the dream and its meaning.”

⁷They replied a second time, “May Your Majesty relate the dream to his servants, and we'll explain its meaning.”

⁸The king replied, “I know for sure that you're buying time, because you see that a firm decision has issued from me ⁹that if you don't make the dream known to me, there's a specific decree for you. You've arranged with each other to tell me something

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years. Our shared dealings with her illness and disability over these years contribute significantly to what I write in ways that you may be able to see but also in ways that are less obvious.

Then, two years or so before I started writing this particular volume, I fell in love with and married Kathleen Scott, and I'm grateful for my new life with her and for her insightful comments on the manuscript, which have been so careful and illuminating that she practically deserves to be credited as coauthor.

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