

## Judaism and the Bible: Prophecy and the Apocalypse, c. 600–165 B.C.E.

The golden days of Jewish kings were not to last. Powerful empires rose up to challenge and dominate the Jews: the Assyrians in 800 B.C.E., the Babylonians around 600 B.C.E., then the Medes, the Persians, the armies of Alexander the Great, his successor states—ruled by his generals and their descendants—and then the Romans after 64 B.C.E. The Babylonians were among the worst of the invaders. They conquered Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, and brought Jews as hostages to Babylon. In 538 B.C.E. Cyrus, king of the Persians, allowed Jews to return to Jerusalem and even rebuild the temple. But the Jews never regained their kingdom or independence (except for brief periods), and the Greek Seleucid\* rulers after Alexander proved to be intolerant of non-Greek forms of worship.

Ironically, it was during this period of conquest and dispersal that Judaism began to develop the elements of a universal religion. The Babylonian destruction of the temple and population transfer made the religion of Yahweh less dependent on place. Virtually all religions of the ancient world were bound to a particular place, usually the sacred temple where the god was thought to reside. Judaism remained a religion of the descendants of Abraham and his son Israel, and the period after 600 B.C.E. was one of intense cultivation of that identity. But much of the Hebrew Bible was composed in exile, as a way of recalling a common history, reaffirming a common identity, and predicting a common destiny. The prophets foresaw a brighter future or explained how the violation of the covenant had brought God's wrath on the people.

One of the great prophets of the exile and the postexile period was Daniel, described as one of the young men who was brought to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar,<sup>1</sup> conqueror of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. The Book of Daniel begins by recounting that conquest. In Babylon Nebuchadnezzar asked Daniel to reveal the meaning of a dream. You will read his response below.

Daniel is the first to foretell of an apocalyptic end to history and the first to envision personal immortality. Previous prophets had predicted a new independent kingdom of Judah or God's punishment of his people, but Daniel prophesied that God would come down to reign on Earth forever, judging the living and the dead for all eternity. These ideas—an end to history, the Last Judgment, the Kingdom of

\*sel OO sihd

<sup>1</sup>neh boo kuhd NEH zur

Source: Dan. 2:31–45, 11:28–45, 12:1–13. New International Version.

God, eternal life or damnation—became more important later in Christianity than in Judaism, where these notions never entered the mainstream. But their appearance in Daniel shows the way in which Judaic ideas became more universal over the course of the first millennium B.C.E. Why would Daniel's ideas open the Judaic tradition to non-Jews or people not descended from Abraham? How would Daniel's prophecy affect his contemporaries? How would it affect you?

### THINKING HISTORICALLY

When did the idea of an afterlife enter Judaism? To answer this question we have to date the Book of Daniel, which is a bit more complex than it would seem. As mentioned, the book is presented as the prophecy of a Daniel who was taken from Jerusalem to Babylon around 586 B.C.E. But the author of the book knows considerably more about the period toward the end of his prophecy (180–165 B.C.E.) than about the third to sixth century B.C.E. This discrepancy and the use of second-century Hebrew and Aramaic have led biblical scholars to conclude that the Book of Daniel is prophecy after the fact, or a book of history presented as prophecy. Detailed footnotes have been added to this selection to show that the author's references to very specific events of the second century, especially the time of Antiochus IV (r. 175–163 B.C.E.), would have been easily recognized by a contemporary audience. So the author lived sometime in this period. He recounts the unhappy story of the conquests of the Jews by successive empires: from the Babylonian (627–550 B.C.E.) and Median (612–550 B.C.E.) to the Persian (550–330 B.C.E.) to the Greek under Alexander (330–323 B.C.E.) to the Seleucids (Alexander's successors), including Antiochus (312–63 B.C.E.). This is the meaning of the gold, silver, bronze, iron, and clay ages. When the author then speaks of the signs of the last days, he distinctly sees the acts of Antiochus IV as the turning point that will bring about God's eternal kingdom. Antiochus pressured the Jews to accept Greek gods. In 168 B.C.E. he polluted the temple in Jerusalem by slaughtering pigs on the altar and then erecting a statue of the Greek god Zeus. This is the event that the author predicts will bring on God's last judgment. Many Jews must have felt that the desecration of the holy temple was such a world-changing event. In fact, the acts of Antiochus also sparked a Jewish revolt under the Maccabees, who eventually defeated Antiochus in 163 B.C.E. and restored an independent Jewish state.

What would be the purpose of presenting this prophecy? What would be the advantage of presenting it as the writing of someone who had lived hundreds of years earlier? How can we know that the Book of Daniel was written after 168 but before 163 B.C.E.? When and why would the author of the Book of Daniel have predicted that

the end of the world would occur 1,290 days (about 3½ years) after an event in 168 B.C.E.? When and why would the author have written, “Blessed is the one who waits . . . 1,335 days”?

## Daniel 2 [Daniel Interprets the Dream of Nebuchadnezzar]

31 “You looked, O king, and there before you stood a large statue—an enormous, dazzling statue, awesome in appearance. 32 The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, 33 its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay. 34 While you were watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them. 35 Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were broken to pieces at the same time and became like chaff on a threshing floor in the summer. The wind swept them away without leaving a trace. But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth.

36 “This was the dream, and now we will interpret it to the king. 37 You, O king, are the king of kings. The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory; 38 in your hands he has placed mankind and the beasts of the field and the birds of the air. Wherever they live, he has made you ruler over them all. You are that head of gold.

39 “After you, another kingdom<sup>1</sup> will rise, inferior to yours. Next, a third kingdom, one of bronze,<sup>2</sup> will rule over the whole earth. 40 Finally, there will be a fourth kingdom,<sup>3</sup> strong as iron—for iron breaks and smashes everything—and as iron breaks things to pieces, so it will crush and break all the others. 41 Just as you saw that the feet and toes were partly of baked clay and partly of iron, so this will be a divided kingdom;<sup>4</sup> yet it will have some of the strength of iron in it, even as you saw iron mixed with clay. 42 As the toes were partly iron and partly clay, so this kingdom will be partly strong and partly brittle. 43 And just as you saw the iron mixed with baked clay, so the people will be a mixture<sup>5</sup> and will not remain united, any more than iron mixes with clay.

<sup>1</sup> Media, or the Mede Empire; Iranians who shared rule with Neo-Babylonians (Chaldeans) and were seen as successors in the Middle East to 550 B.C.E. [Ed.]

<sup>2</sup> Persia, 550–330 B.C.E. [Ed.]

<sup>3</sup> Greek empire of Alexander the Great, 330–323 B.C.E. [Ed.]

<sup>4</sup> The Middle Eastern portion of Alexander’s empire was divided after his death in 323 B.C.E. by his generals: Seleucus in Palestine and Syria and Ptolemy in Egypt. The kingdom of the Seleucids (iron) was stronger than that of the Ptolemies (clay). These two dynasties lasted until conquered by Rome and Persian Parthia. [Ed.]

<sup>5</sup> Probably refers to mixing of peoples and cultures in Alexander’s and his successors’ empire. [Ed.]

44 "In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever. 45 This is the meaning of the vision of the rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands—a rock that broke the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold to pieces.

"The great God has shown the king what will take place in the future. The dream is true and the interpretation is trustworthy."

### Daniel 11 [Daniel Sees the End of the Age of Iron and Clay]

28 "The king<sup>6</sup> of the North will return to his own country<sup>7</sup> with great wealth, but his heart will be set against the holy covenant.<sup>8</sup> He will take action against it and then return to his own country.

29 "At the appointed time he will invade the South again,<sup>9</sup> but this time the outcome will be different from what it was before. 30 Ships of the western coastlands<sup>10</sup> will oppose him, and he will lose heart. Then he will turn back and vent his fury against the holy covenant. He will return and show favor to those who forsake<sup>11</sup> the holy covenant.

31 "His armed forces will rise up to desecrate the temple fortress and will abolish the daily sacrifice. Then they will set up the abomination that causes desolation.<sup>12</sup> 32 With flattery he will corrupt those who have violated the covenant, but the people who know their God will firmly resist him.

33 "Those who are wise will instruct many, though for a time they will fall by the sword or be burned or captured or plundered. 34 When they fall, they will receive a little help,<sup>13</sup> and many who are not sincere will join them.<sup>14</sup> 35 Some of the wise will stumble, so that they may be refined, purified and made spotless until the time of the end, for it will still come at the appointed time.

<sup>6</sup> Antiochus IV, the Seleucid emperor from 175 to 164 B.C.E., ruled Palestine, Syria, and Alexander's eastern empire, which included Jerusalem. [Ed.]

<sup>7</sup> Antiochus IV returned to Jerusalem after his first war with Egypt, 170 B.C.E. [Ed.]

<sup>8</sup> Antiochus stole temple treasures and massacred many Jews, 169 B.C.E. [Ed.]

<sup>9</sup> The second war of Antiochus IV with Egypt in 168 B.C.E. was not successful. [Ed.]

<sup>10</sup> Cyprus. Here it means ships of Romans, generally, who blocked him. [Ed.]

<sup>11</sup> Jews like Jason the high priest, who favored Greek customs. [Ed.]

<sup>12</sup> The army of Antiochus broke down the temple walls, desecrated the interior, and installed Greek statues. [Ed.]

<sup>13</sup> While many Jews chose martyrdom, some received the help of Judas Maccabeus, leader of the opposition to Antiochus. [Ed.]

<sup>14</sup> Some of the followers of Judas Maccabeus were insincere. [Ed.]

*The King Who Exalts Himself*

36 "The king will do as he pleases. He will exalt and magnify himself above every god<sup>15</sup> and will say unheard-of things against the God of gods. He will be successful until the time of wrath is completed, for what has been determined must take place. 37 He will show no regard for the gods of his fathers or for the one desired by women, nor will he regard any god, but will exalt himself above them all. 38 Instead of them, he will honor a god of fortresses; a god unknown to his fathers he will honor with gold and silver, with precious stones and costly gifts. 39 He will attack the mightiest fortresses with the help of a foreign god and will greatly honor those who acknowledge him. He will make them rulers over many people and will distribute the land at a price.

40 "At the time of the end the king of the South<sup>16</sup> will engage him in battle, and the king of the North will storm out against him with chariots and cavalry and a great fleet of ships. He will invade many countries and sweep through them like a flood. 41 He will also invade the Beautiful Land. Many countries will fall, but Edom, Moab and the leaders of Ammon will be delivered from his hand. 42 He will extend his power over many countries; Egypt will not escape. 43 He will gain control of the treasures of gold and silver and all the riches of Egypt, with the Libyans and Nubians in submission. 44 But reports from the east and the north<sup>17</sup> will alarm him, and he will set out in a great rage to destroy and annihilate many. 45 He will pitch his royal tents between the seas at the beautiful holy mountain.<sup>18</sup> Yet he will come to his end,<sup>19</sup> and no one will help him."

**Daniel 12***The End Times*

1 "At that time Michael,<sup>20</sup> the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. 2 Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. 3 Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and

<sup>15</sup> Antiochus had himself declared "Epiphanes," or God Manifest. [Ed.]

<sup>16</sup> Ptolemy VI Philometor (Egypt) initiated the third Egyptian war, against Antiochus. [Ed.]

<sup>17</sup> Antiochus spent his last year in war with Armenia and Parthia (Persia). [Ed.]

<sup>18</sup> In Palestine. [Ed.]

<sup>19</sup> Antiochus IV died at Tabae in Persia in 163 B.C.E. [Ed.]

<sup>20</sup> Protective angel of Israel. [Ed.]

those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.  
4 But you, Daniel, close up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end. Many will go here and there to increase knowledge.”

5 Then I, Daniel, looked, and there before me stood two others, one on this bank of the river and one on the opposite bank. 6 One of them said to the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, “How long will it be before these astonishing things are fulfilled?”

7 The man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, lifted his right hand and his left hand toward heaven, and I heard him swear by him who lives forever, saying, “It will be for a time, times and half a time. When the power of the holy people has been finally broken, all these things will be completed.”

8 I heard, but I did not understand. So I asked, “My lord, what will the outcome of all this be?”

9 He replied, “Go your way, Daniel, because the words are closed up and sealed until the time of the end. 10 Many will be purified, made spotless and refined, but the wicked will continue to be wicked. None of the wicked will understand, but those who are wise will understand.

11 “From the time that the daily sacrifice is abolished and the abomination that causes desolation is set up, there will be 1,290 days. 12 Blessed is the one who waits for and reaches the end of the 1,335 days.

13 “As for you, go your way till the end. You will rest, and then at the end of the days you will rise to receive your allotted inheritance.”

7