

Dr. Wendy L. Widder, Daniel, Session 2

Interpretive Questions and Issues

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This is Dr. Wendy Whitter and her teaching on the book of Daniel. This is session 2, Interpretive Questions and Issues.

This is the second lecture in the book of Daniel and today we're going to be looking at some interpretive questions and issues that we have to struggle through before we do an in-depth study of the book.

So, we want to look at several basic interpretive questions, and I introduced them in the last lecture, but they're questions that we should ask of any book, any passage in the Bible. Sometimes, there will be good answers, and sometimes, we won't be able to find the answers, but it's an important exercise to go through the questions. So, we're asking questions of genre.

By that, we mean, what kind of writing is this book? How do I interpret this kind of writing? We're looking at questions of human authorship, date, and audience. So, who wrote it? When did they write it? Who were they writing to? We look at questions of historical setting or historical context. What were the historical circumstances behind the events in this book? What might the author be specifically addressing? And we sometimes ask questions of purpose.

Why is this author writing this particular book? These questions are all interrelated, so if you can find an answer to one, sometimes you can find answers to the others, sometimes you can't, but your answer to one very often determines your answers to others. So, it gets a little messy, but those are the basic questions we're looking at. We're going to start with the genre.

So, when we think about genre, we really start big. So, genre is a kind of writing, a kind of literature. When we ask this question of a passage in the Bible, let's say you pick the New Testament passage of Matthew 5, and you say, well, Matthew 5 is in the Gospel of Matthew.

Right there, you've made a genre distinction. It's in a gospel. Well, if you're reading, say, Paul's teachings on deacons and elders, you're in 1 Timothy.

That's an epistle. It's a letter. If you read, the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

Well, you're in Psalms. That's poetry. So, you can make a pretty decent observation about genre just from that information alone.

The Sermon on the Mount is part of Matthew, which is a gospel. And the gospels generally, well, they're accounts of Jesus' life, narratives that recount Jesus' life. If you're reading Paul on elders and deacons, you're in 1 Timothy.

It's an epistle of Paul. Specifically, it's one of his pastoral epistles. If you read, the Lord is my shepherd, you're in Psalms, you're in poetry.

So, we've just said gospels, we said epistles, and we said poetry. Well, where do these categories come from? Where do we get this category of gospels? Where do we get this category of epistles? Poetry? Where does that come from? Well, for the most part, these genres come out of the organization of the Bible or the canon. The organization of the canon.

So, if you look at the New Testament, it breaks down into four gospels. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Then there's Acts, which is history.

And then you get into all these epistles or letters. And then you've got that delightful apocalyptic at the very end. You go out with a bang.

This is how the New Testament canon is organized. If you look at the Old Testament, we have Torah or Pentateuch. We have a chunk of history books.

We have a bunch of prophetic books. So, the canons are organized, for the most part, according to books that are similar. They're grouped together, and those are genres.

Well, where does Daniel fall in our Old Testament grouping? It's a trick question. If you just say, well, it's a prophet. Yes, if you're looking at a particular canon, it's a prophet.

So, when we come to the book of Daniel, we have a problem. Because Daniel, in the Jewish, or specifically Hebrew, canon, Daniel is not one of the prophets. He's one of what we call the writings.

If you're looking at an English Bible, Daniel is one of the prophets. Why are they different? If you look at a table of contents in your Bible, you'll see fairly clear groupings of genres. And Daniel will fall into different ones in the respective canons.

So, let's look at this a little more closely because it's actually a very important question. Let's look at... Let's do the Hebrew canon first. So, the Hebrew canon breaks into three groups.

There's Torah. There are prophets. And there are writings.

Those are the three categories in the Hebrew canon. In the Torah, we have Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. I'm not going to write all those.

The prophets, in the Hebrew canon, start with Joshua. Judges. Not Ruth, Samuel. Kings, not Chronicles, not Ezra. not Nehemiah. Isaiah, Jeremiah, not Lamentations, Ezekiel, and then we've got the twelve minor prophets. So, Hosea through Malachi. Those are the prophets.

Then we've got this third category called the writings. The writings are everything else. It's just the easiest way to remember it.

But we skipped several books. So, Ruth. Esther. We skipped Nehemiah and Ezra. We skipped Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Lamentations, and Chronicles. Did I get all of them? And Daniel. Job. Thank you, Job. And Daniel.

Where are we going to put Daniel? Torah. Prophets. Writings. Daniel's among the writings. If we were to talk about what these books are besides everything else, we can be a little more specific than that.

We've got poetry and wisdom here. Here, we have Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther, recounting life in the land either after the exile or still in the diaspora period.

So, setting in Persia. So, narratives, stories, and accounts that happened on the other side of the actual exile. Chronicles is an interesting one.

Chronicles is a retelling of a whole lot of Kings and Samuel. But it's told from a different perspective. It's told from the other side of exile.

So, you'll find a lot of the same stories as up here but told with a different perspective and different purpose. Ruth. Well, Ruth is set back here in the time of the judges.

But it's included in the writings. Daniel. Why is Daniel here? Well, you could say, and I think what the Hebrew canon is focusing on, at least with respect to the book of Daniel, is that this is set in exile.

It is recounting events that happened in exile and looking ahead to things after exile. So, that could be one explanation for why it's included in the writings. There are other reasons it might be included in the writings.

Some people would say it's based on the dates of the book. So, the Torah is the oldest collection. The Prophets, that's the second oldest collection.

So, in the New Testament, we talk about the Law and the Prophets. That's these two. The Law and the Prophets.

And the writings is everything that happened when these Prophets were done. These books were closed, perhaps. This is everything that came after. Maybe. So, some people will say, well, that supports Daniel having a later date. We'll get to that. It has a later date. Maybe. Maybe not.

Other people will say Daniel falls here instead of up here with Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Minor Prophets because he's not really a prophet like they are. So, these Prophets were sent by God to the people of Israel to call them back from their sin. Call them back to the covenant.

Turn from your wicked ways. Come back to the covenant. That was the job of these Prophets.

I had a professor who liked to call them covenant policemen. They were the ones who were out policing the covenant. Come back.

Obey the covenant. Daniel does not do that. There is one chapter in the book that even suggests the covenant.

That's it. So, he's not an ordinary prophet in that sense. So, that's a theory for why Daniel in the Hebrew canon is not included with the Prophets, and it's one of the writings.

A third theory is that Daniel and his three friends, whom we know most commonly by the names of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, have Hebrew names, but for right now, we'll just stick with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They are portrayed in the book of Daniel kind of like wise people or sages. They have these wisdom qualities, and in their writings are wisdom books.

So, maybe that's why the book of Daniel is grouped here because it has this wisdom flavor to it. That's possible. Another theory is that the book of Daniel shares a number of things with the book of Esther.

So, they are both stories about Israelites or Jewish people who are living in and serving in, for all practical purposes, foreign courts. So, sometimes, they're classified as court tales. There are some similarities between Daniel and Esther, so they put those two books together.

A final suggestion, which is the one I kind of favor, but again, we don't know. We're just exploring the question and possible answers, is that the Hebrew canon focuses more heavily on the first six chapters than it does on the second six. So, remember,

the book of Daniel has two genres, very distinct genres. We've got narrative stories, and we've got this apocalyptic prophecy, but we're not quite sure what to do with it.

They're very distinct. So, the Hebrew canon made the choice, okay, we're going to categorize it according to the narrative. And specifically, it's exilic and post-exilic narratives, so that's why it goes here.

Now, this part of the canon, or this part of the book of Daniel, is what the English canon will focus on. This is prophetic, apocalyptic. So, Daniel gets grouped with the prophets.

Let me tease that out just a little bit. Okay, so, one second. The Christian canon, or the English canon, which, by the way, could be a whole study in itself, the table of contents is based on the order of the books in the Septuagint.

Now, the Septuagint crash course. The Old Testament's original language is Hebrew. The very first translation of the Old Testament was into Greek.

Remember our world empires here. We moved from Persia to Greece, and Greek became the commercial language of the Hellenistic world. So, suddenly, in this time period, there are Jews who are losing Hebrew, so they can't read their sacred scripture.

So, the Hebrew canon is translated into Greek. This is the Septuagint. Sometimes, it's just simply LXX.

There's a whole legendary story behind that that we're not going to get into. All you need to know for our purposes here is that the Christian bible, we're just going to call it the English canon to keep it simple, is based on the table of contents, or the order, of these books. Not the order of these books.

Why? I don't know. It's the way it is, though. So, what's the interesting question is, why does this table of contents organize the books differently? Why is Daniel, not a prophet? Where's my list? So, in this canon, the English canon, we have what is commonly just called law, that actually matches up with the Pentateuch, the Torah, it's the same.

Same five books. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. The same books are in the English canon as the Hebrew canon. Then the English canon has what we typically just call history books. And that starts with Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuels, Kings, the Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther.

That all falls under what we would categorize as history books. So, notice in this grouping that Ruth, in the Hebrew canon, was part of the writings. Chronicles are part of the writings.

Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther are all part of that third category, the writings. English canon, those are history. Then we have what people call the major prophets.

I'll come back to poetry in a second. Major prophets, so you have your big ones. Isaiah, major really is just referring to the size, Isaiah, Jeremiah. People usually throw Lamentations in here just because it's the next book. So, technically not a major prophet. Ezekiel, Daniel, those are the major prophets.

Minor prophets, only minor because the books are smaller. There's 12 of them. They're also called "the 12." Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, all the way to Malachi.

I ran out of room. It's 12. So, those are the prophets.

So, if you were to compare this category to the Hebrew one that I erased, Daniel's an oddity, right? He's over there in the writings. And they would include in their prophets these guys, which is an interesting discussion for another day. The last category of the English canon is what we would call poetry and wisdom.

Sometimes, it is just called poetry, but it includes wisdom, too. So, we have Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and technically Lamentations ought to go here. I think I got them all.

So, difference. Why is Daniel among the prophets? Again, we can't really say. I think the easiest answer for me is that this canon, for whatever reason, was focusing on the second half, the genre of the second half, which is apocalyptic slash prophecy.

So, it categorized it with the prophets. I know if you wanted answers, you're not going to get them. We're just exploring the questions, giving you the options.

But the reason it's fair to ask this question is because it helps us recognize that it's a bigger question than we may have thought. If you say Daniel's a prophet, well, the New Testament does affirm that, but in the Hebrew canon, he's kind of a different animal. So, it's worth asking why there's a different order, what they're focusing on.

And honestly, in my experience, a lot of the focus of my background was on this second half, almost to the exclusion of the first half, such that they're good stories with morals. You know, be like Daniel.

Dare to be a Daniel. Stand firm for God. Those are the morals that come out of those six chapters.

This is really where a lot of interest lies. So, maybe that reflects the English canon, I don't know. So, what is Daniel's genre? This takes us back to the original question.

Is it narrative? Yep. Is it prophecy? Sure. Is it apocalyptic? Yes.

It's not an easy answer. It's all of those things which make interpreting it a little more difficult. Because the way you interpret narrative differs a little bit from how you come at prophecy.

So, bigger question, bigger answer, but it's worth asking. That's the genre question. If you thought that was fun, we're going to talk about the date.

Author and date. So, who wrote the book of Daniel and when? Author, date. Who wrote it? When did they write it? Well, you could be sitting there thinking, that's really not a hard question.

Daniel wrote it when he was in exile. So, he wrote it in the 6th century BC. Right? Daniel did it.

He wrote it in the 6th century. Easy enough. Move on.

Well, I wish it were that simple. First of all, let me say that the book of Daniel has no claim at the beginning of the book for who wrote it. It has no, what we call a superscription.

So, when you read Psalms, they often start with a Psalm of David. It's ascribing that writing to David. When you read some of the prophets, you get the prophets' name.

These are the visions that this prophet saw. In the New Testament, it's a little more prevalent. So, I, Paul, to the church at

A lot of the biblical books, especially in the Old Testament, do not have those superscriptions. Those statements of who wrote them. And in the book of Daniel, the first half, those are the stories.

They are stories about Daniel. But there's no claim that Daniel wrote them. Daniel, in fact, appears as a character in the stories.

So, in the third person. So, if Daniel did write them, he wrote them as if he were the omniscient narrator outside the story. He's looking in and talking about himself as a character.

Which is entirely possible. But just be aware, the book makes no claim, the first half, for authorship in those stories. In the second half, those visions.

They are set, and they are told as first-person reports. I, Daniel, was along the river, etc., etc. So, we have I, Daniel.

He then reports his vision. Interestingly enough, though. These reports, at least some of them, are set in a framework of a third-person narrative.

So, the chapter will begin, for example, chapter 7 begins. In the first year of Belshazzar, king of Babylon, Daniel was in his bed in Babylon, and he dreamed a dream. Well, that's a narrative and it's third person.

Daniel's not saying, hey, in the first year of Belshazzar, I was in bed dreaming. Here's what I saw. So, in these visions, we have these reports embedded in a third-person narrative.

So, again, Daniel could have done it all. It's possible. Or somebody else could have taken this collection and put it together and added the framework.

So, all that to say, this is the first answer many people give. Daniel wrote it when he was in exile in Babylon in the 6th century. And that is largely based on this use of first person in the second half of the book and the fact that the stories are about Daniel.

So, the assumption is that he must have written it. Although, the book of Jonah is a story about Jonah. There's no claim that Jonah wrote it.

The book of Joshua recounts the events of Joshua, but there's no claim that Joshua wrote it. So, again, it's difficult. It's complicated.

The second view of authorship, I'm going to call this one. This is really the traditional view. This has been around for a long time.

Sometimes, it's also referred to as the conservative view. Sometimes, it's also called the early date. Well, if it's early, you can guess that there's going to be a contrast with the late.

And by early, we're referring to the 6th century period when Daniel was in exile. This is the traditional view, conservative view, and early date view. Then we have what's often called the critical view.

And by that, I don't mean it's a view that's critical of this one. Although, it is. When we talk about critical scholarship, we are talking about commentaries more like this

one that are very interested in how the text was put together, the nitty-gritty of who, where the manuscripts were found, and all those sorts of critical issues that aren't necessarily important for teaching and preaching the book.

It takes a very historical ... What's the word I want? Can't think of the word. Historical critical view. It's also called the late date.

And that'll probably do us. So, this view says that the book of Daniel was written by an anonymous Jew who was living in Palestine. So, different.

Here, Daniel's in exile. This is an anonymous Jew living in Palestine, when? During the 2nd century BC. If that sounds kind of random to you, let me sort of take you back to the first lecture where we had this massive timeline here.

The 2nd century BC was what we focused on down here. These events surround the defiling and the desecration of the temple under Antiochus Epiphanes. So, it's often referred to as the Antiochan persecution.

This was a really horrible time in Jewish history during the reign of Antiochus IV, Epiphanes the Seleucid King. So, this is the critical view. This is the traditional view.

What is this based on? Did someone just sit down one day and pull this out of a hat? I am an anonymous Jew in Palestine in the 2nd century. Why? Well, a couple of things. So, remember I told you this view kind of bases itself on, well, Daniel claims to have seen these visions. I, Daniel, is written in the first person.

This view is a little more interesting in, well, there's a whole lot of third person, too. So, you can't say Daniel wrote the whole book. Maybe someone else wrote it.

Let me collect my thoughts here for a second. So, they say it would be very strange for this book to start in the third person and then switch. Why didn't Daniel just do it all in first person if he was writing it? That's one argument.

The biggest argument, though, has to do with, well, we'll just call some historical difficulties. There are a number of places in the book of Daniel where, regardless of what kind of scholar you are, it's very hard to answer some historical questions. So, there's a character in the book of Daniel called Darius the Mede.

And he's pretty important in the book of Daniel. In Daniel and the Lion's Den, he's the one who has Daniel thrown into the Lion's Den. He appears at least four times by name in the book.

Darius the Mede, Darius the Mede, Darius the Mede. We have pretty extensive historical records from Babylon and Persia, and there's no mention of this Darius the

Mede. So, the question arises, well, who is this guy? Who is this historical character? Another issue that isn't necessarily historical, this is more of a genre issue.

If you're going to call Daniel a prophetic book, which I'm happy to call it a prophetic book, it's looking at the future. But the Old Testament prophets may have been telling about the future, but they spoke to their present audience in a way that was understandable and relevant to them. When you get to some of the things in the latter part of Daniel, chapter 11 especially, you have this very detailed, unlike any prophecy anywhere in the Bible, and you have to hang on about 10 more lectures until we get to that. It's just strange.

It's really like a history lesson, recounting this particular time in their history. Now, the question then is, if you're living back here in exile, and Daniel the prophet is telling you this history or foretelling this history, you have to ask yourself, what was the purpose for this audience? What would it have meant to them, this history that's coming up? The relevance question. The original author would have spoken a message that was relevant to their audience.

So, when you get to this apocalyptic material, it's difficult for Daniel to see what the relevance would have been. Another thing associated with the genre is that apocalyptic really comes into being during the Second Temple period. So, apocalyptic literature is literature of oppressed people.

In large part. They are looking for divine intervention to fix the world. And the only way the world is going to be fixed is if God invades our space and does it.

This chaotic, cataclysmic remake the world. That's how bad things are. Well, this comes into being during the Second Temple period.

And it really flourishes, and we see it in the Book of Revelation. It really doesn't exist much over here. And so, it's kind of a strange, well, what would this apocalyptic literature be doing back here? What's the message of comfort about this future thing to these people back here? It's just a question related to the genre.

It's a lot like a lot of Second Temple literature that follows this apocalyptic genre. So, here's one of the ways that this late date gets explained. Rather than saying it's prophecy that's foretelling a future from... Let me try this another way.

In apocalyptic literature, aside from the Book of Daniel, we know of a specific kind of genre called ex-eventu prophecy. After the event. I'll let that sink in.

Prophecy after the event. Well, that's not really prophecy. That's history, isn't it? Well, here's how it works.

Let's pretend that we are going to have... Let's pretend that George Washington... We have the character George Washington, and we want him to be telling us prophecy about the United States' history. So, George Washington is the character that we're adopting. This isn't actually George Washington.

This is me here. Let's say I did this in 1990. I want to take on the persona of George Washington to tell the history of the USA. So, I have George Washington as the prophet telling history.

Or foretelling what's to come. So, George Washington accurately tells the story of the Revolutionary War. We won! He accurately recounts the Civil War.

He recounts the Industrial Revolution. He goes through U.S. history perfectly. And then he gets to a certain spot here where it's a little bit off.

Not quite right. We're going to put this at about 1990. He suddenly starts predicting things that aren't accurate.

So, maybe he says... Boy, I've got to remember my history. Maybe he says that George H.W. Bush was president for two terms. Well, that's not historically accurate, right? But you might give him a little bit of license since it's an actual future event for him.

When he's telling this, he's spot on. When he's actually telling the future, he's a little off. So, if we put this in the Book of Daniel, the Late Day Theory says... So, somebody in the 2nd century B.C. was recounting history as if it were a prophecy.

And when it gets to a certain point, he's a little bit off. It's not quite right. And the reason he's a little bit off is because he's actually prophesying.

He's actually trying to foretell, and he gets it wrong. It's a very complicated sort of thing, and you're saying that doesn't make any sense. Why would you dream that up? Well, I didn't dream it up.

It is actually a known genre. That they would adopt the name of a respected, venerable character from history, so in this case, Daniel, take on Daniel's name and have him recount this prophecy that's actually history up to a certain point, and then it goes forward, and he gets things a little bit off because it's actually this anonymous author who's now foretelling real future. It's a known genre.

The question is, is that the genre that's being used in the Bible? And that's a question that people will answer differently. So some people will say that's deceptive. You can't.

That's just wrong. You can't do that. God wouldn't use that genre.

Other people will say, what do you mean God wouldn't use that genre? A genre is not a moral category. Who's to say that if that's a known genre, God couldn't have used it? Well, you say, well, what's the point? Why bother? Well, this kind of genre, where you foretell things that are historical as if they're coming, was meant to encourage people. You say, well, how did that happen? Because you see how everything happened exactly as the prophets said it would happen.

So, God is making history move just exactly as it was prophesied to move. And the theory then is that that would have offered encouragement about God's sovereignty to the audience that was hearing it. Okay, that's a quick look at a pretty complex issue.

We'll come back to this when we get to the second half of the book. What I do want to say is that this question of the author date is often used as a litmus test of people's orthodoxy. So, are you really, do you really affirm the sovereignty or the truth of scripture? If you do, well, certainly, then Daniel must have been written in the 6th century by a real Daniel.

And I think that's a little simplistic. It's a little reductionistic of a pretty complex genre issue. I would just encourage you to have your eyes open and to be willing to hear both sides because there really are faithful interpreters with a high view of scripture who take different views on this.

So, it's not the kind of test you want to use on someone to see whether they really believe the Bible. That's the author-date question. We have two other questions that are actually related to this one.

So, the audience and setting. Well, that comes down to who you think the author was. If it was Daniel in the 6th century, who was his audience? Well, it was exilic or diaspora Jews.

Jews who were living in scattered from the land. So, diaspora Jews. And what was his purpose? Probably to encourage them that God was going to be faithful.

God would restore them. God had a plan and a purpose for them in spite of the fact that they'd been taken from their land. They lost their temple and their king.

So, encouragement, comfort even. If you say that the author of Daniel is this anonymous Jew in the 2nd century BC, well, then who's his audience? Well, specifically, his audience would be the Jews in Palestine who are living under this Antiochian persecution. So, 2nd-century Jews under persecution.

What would be his purpose in writing it? Some similar. So, they should be assured of God's sovereignty and that God is in charge of history.

In the apocalyptic chapters, the purpose is to comfort the reader that someday, hang on, the righteous will be rewarded, and the wicked will be punished. So that's the encouragement that comes out of this author-date view. So those are our major issues.

You can see that the Book of Daniel does not readily fall into simple categories when it comes to genre, author-date, audience, and purpose. When we come back, we're going to take a look at different ways to approach the book. There are several different ways to structure the book.

And we'll talk through that. Thanks.

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