

Daniel's Timeline: Kings, Empires, and Chapters

The Book of Daniel presents Daniel as a Jewish exile who rises to a position of influence in Babylon and remains in government through the transition from Babylon to the Medo-Persian period.

At a glance

Approx. period	Empire	Ruler	Daniel's role / event	Book of Daniel
c. 605 BC	Babylon	Nebuchadnezzar II	Daniel is taken to Babylon as a young man	Daniel 1
c. 604–562 BC	Babylon	Nebuchadnezzar II	Daniel interprets dreams and becomes a high-ranking official	Daniel 2–4
562–556 BC	Babylon	Several short-lived kings	Daniel's position continues in Babylon	Daniel 5
c. 553–539 BC	Babylon	Belshazzar	Daniel interprets the writing on the wall	Daniel 5
539 BC	Medo-Persia	Darius the Mede	Daniel becomes one of the chief administrators and is thrown into the lions' den	Daniel 6
539–c. 530 BC	Persia	Cyrus the Great	Daniel remains influential; receives his final recorded visions	Daniel 1:21; 6:28; 10–12

1. Nebuchadnezzar II — Babylon

Daniel's story begins when **Nebuchadnezzar**, king of Babylon, conquers Jerusalem and takes some of the young Jewish nobility to Babylon.

Daniel is among those selected.

"Then the king commanded Ashpenaz... that he should bring certain of the children of Israel..." — Daniel 1:3–4

Daniel and his friends—Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah—are trained for service in the Babylonian royal court.

Daniel eventually becomes an important official because of his ability to interpret dreams and because of his wisdom.

Major events:

- Daniel and his friends refuse the king's food and wine — **Daniel 1**

- Daniel interprets Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the great statue — **Daniel 2**
- Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego survive the fiery furnace — **Daniel 3**
- Daniel interprets Nebuchadnezzar's dream about the great tree — **Daniel 4**
- Nebuchadnezzar is humbled and temporarily loses his sanity — **Daniel 4**

Nebuchadnezzar is therefore the king under whom **Daniel's public career begins**.

2. Belshazzar — Babylon

After Nebuchadnezzar's reign, Babylon goes through several rulers. Eventually **Belshazzar** is ruling Babylon.

Daniel apparently isn't at the center of government during all of these intervening years, but he is still known as someone possessing extraordinary wisdom.

During Belshazzar's famous feast, a mysterious hand writes on the wall:

"MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN."

None of Belshazzar's wise men can interpret it.

Daniel is brought in.

Daniel explains that God has judged Belshazzar and that his kingdom will be given to the Medes and Persians.

That very night, **Babylon falls**.

Daniel 5 is therefore the great transition point between the Babylonian Empire and the Medo-Persian Empire.

3. Darius the Mede — Medo-Persian rule

After Babylon falls, Daniel immediately rises into a prominent governmental position.

Daniel 6 says Darius appointed **120 satraps**, with three administrators over them, and Daniel was one of the three.

In fact, Daniel distinguished himself so greatly that Darius planned to put him over the entire kingdom.

This creates jealousy among the other officials.

They trick Darius into signing a decree that nobody may pray to anyone except the king for thirty days.

Daniel refuses to stop praying to God.

As a result, he is thrown into the **lions' den**.

God protects Daniel, and Daniel survives.

Daniel 6 is the primary chapter associated with Darius.

An important historical note

There is some complexity here: the identity of **Darius the Mede** is debated. The Book of Daniel specifically names him, but historians have proposed different explanations for his identity and position relative to Cyrus the Great.

So we should distinguish between:

- **What Daniel says:** Darius the Mede ruled after Babylon fell.
 - **Historical identification:** scholars debate exactly who Darius the Mede was.
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4. Cyrus the Great — Persia

Daniel's story continues into the reign of **Cyrus the Great**, the Persian ruler who established the Persian Empire.

Daniel 6:28 says:

"So this Daniel prospered in the reign of Darius, and in the reign of Cyrus the Persian."

This is particularly important because it tells us Daniel's career **did not end with the fall of Babylon**.

Daniel continued living and serving during the Persian period.

His final major visions occur during the reign of Cyrus.

Daniel 10:1 says:

"In the third year of Cyrus king of Persia..."

Chapters **10–12** contain Daniel's final recorded vision, including prophecy concerning future kingdoms, rulers, conflicts, and the ultimate deliverance of God's people.

So how many leaders did Daniel serve?

If we're counting the **named rulers explicitly associated with Daniel's career**, there are **four major rulers**:

1. **Nebuchadnezzar II**
2. **Belshazzar**
3. **Darius the Mede**

4. **Cyrus the Great**

However, there were **other Babylonian kings between Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar**, and Daniel 5:11 refers to Daniel's reputation going back to Nebuchadnezzar.

So "four leaders" is best understood as **four rulers specifically highlighted in Daniel's narrative**, rather than literally every king who ruled during Daniel's lifetime.

How many empires?

The simplest way to describe Daniel's actual governmental career is:

1. Babylonian Empire

Daniel begins his career under **Nebuchadnezzar** and later serves under **Belshazzar**.

2. Medo-Persian Empire

Daniel survives the fall of Babylon and continues serving under **Darius the Mede** and **Cyrus the Persian**.

So Daniel personally lives through the transition from:

Babylon → Medo-Persia/Persia

But there is another important distinction.

Daniel's visions describe more kingdoms than he personally served

Daniel's book isn't only telling the story of Daniel's career. His visions look forward to a succession of world empires.

In **Daniel 2**, Nebuchadnezzar sees a statue with four major sections:

Gold → Silver → Bronze → Iron

Daniel explains that these represent successive kingdoms.

Similarly, **Daniel 7** presents four beasts representing four kingdoms.

A traditional Christian interpretation identifies them as:

1. **Babylon**
2. **Medo-Persia**
3. **Greece**
4. **Rome**

Daniel therefore personally experiences the **first two**, while his prophecies look beyond his lifetime toward later kingdoms.

There are differences among Jewish, Christian, and academic interpretations concerning the identification of the four kingdoms, particularly the fourth kingdom, so that

identification should be understood as an interpretation rather than something Daniel explicitly labels "Rome."

Daniel's life in one continuous timeline

You can think of Daniel's story like this:

Jerusalem

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c. 605 BC — Babylon conquers Jerusalem

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Daniel taken to Babylon

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Nebuchadnezzar II

Daniel enters royal service

→ interprets the statue dream

→ becomes a high official

→ witnesses God's dealings with Nebuchadnezzar

↓

Nebuchadnezzar dies

↓

Later Babylonian rulers

↓

Belshazzar

Daniel interprets the writing on the wall

↓

539 BC — Babylon falls

↓

Darius the Mede

Daniel becomes one of the kingdom's highest administrators

→ refuses to stop praying

→ lions' den

→ survives

↓

Cyrus the Persian

Daniel continues to prosper

→ receives his final visions

↓

Daniel 10–12

Daniel receives visions concerning future kingdoms and the ultimate fulfillment of God's purposes.

The remarkable part of Daniel's story

Daniel's significance isn't merely that he served several kings.

He **outlived the empire that had conquered his homeland**.

He began as a young Jewish exile under the Babylonian Empire. Yet by the time Babel itself disappeared, Daniel was still alive and serving in government under the new Persian regime.

In other words:

Daniel's life spans the fall of one world empire and the rise of another.

And that's a major theme of the book: **human kingdoms rise and fall, but God remains sovereign over them**.

Daniel 2:21 summarizes that idea particularly well:

"He removeth kings, and setteth up kings."

So if you're studying Daniel from the perspective of **how many governments he actually served**, I'd summarize it as:

4 prominent rulers → 2 imperial powers → 1 lifetime spanning the transition from Babylon to Persia.

And if you're studying **Daniel's prophetic picture of world history**, then the scope expands to **four successive kingdoms**, followed ultimately by **God's everlasting kingdom** in Daniel 2.