Background of Daniel: The book of Daniel contains some of the most beloved stories as well as some of the most hotly contested, disputed prophecies in all of Scripture. In many ways, Daniel is a book of paradox, offering very straightforward narratives revealing God’s greatness and power while also revealing startling visions and opaque prophetic imagery. In considering the book’s beauty and complexity, several important areas of background study assist in clarifying the overall direction of this book.

Daniel and Historical Setting
Traditionally, the prophet Daniel is seen as the author of this book (Daniel 9:2; 10:2). His name means “God is my judge” and, indeed, much of Daniel’s life focuses on the final authority God has over all things in spite of human kingdoms, rulers, or nations. As an exile taken to Babylon from Jerusalem in 605 B.C., Daniel lived through Babylonian rule and into the early days of Persian power. His life and ministry spanned approximately 70 years.

Any dispute on the authorship of this work typically centers on the way Daniel’s prophecies and visions look forward to a succession of four ancient empires (Daniel 2; 7; 11) and a textual switch in language part way through the book. Beginning with the Babylonian Empire and continuing through the Seleucid and Ptolemaic kingdoms until the rule of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the prophet possesses detailed knowledge of events occurring as late as 170 B.C., far after his own lifetime in the 6th century B.C.1

As well, Daniel uses a form of Aramaic, Persian, and Greek words typically associated with later periods of history. Understanding the prophetic character of Daniel as well as affirming the strong likelihood for an earlier adoption of particular languages offers a reliable response to any dispute regarding Daniel’s role as author. We do well to respect the divine qualities of Scripture, embracing the inspiration of God’s Word in original authorship and Spirit’s illumination of divine revelation in the Christian reader.

Daniel writes during a colorful period of ancient Near East empires, detailing some of the greatest kings and kingdoms in world history. As kingdoms rose and fell, Daniel penned a divine perspective of such ebbs and flows. Even when facing the great wealth and power of men such as Nebuchadnezzar and Darius, Daniel’s confidence remained fixed upon God rather than any worldly power.

Style and Structure
Daniel may be easily divided in half, based on style and content. The first six chapters (1–6) act as largely historical narratives along with some prophecy as these chapters detail Daniel’s life as well as other court records. The final six chapters (7–12) are apocalyptic and prophetic. Prophetic-apocalyptic may be the best designation, for Daniel takes on the character of both

prophecy and apocalyptic literature.² Chapters 7–12 reveal a heavenly revelation of the end of the present age of conflict and its replacement with the final, eschatological age of peace, a transformation that is depicted in strange and mysterious imagery.³

Even though there is a dramatic contrast in genre between the two halves of the book, the overall message of the book is uniform: In spite of present appearances, God is in control.⁴ Both sections of Daniel speak to all those undergoing trials and persecution. Daniel’s writing seeks to give hope to the Christian, offering comforting assurance that present sufferings, however terrible, will not be in vain. After all, God is the powerful sovereign ruler of all things, and He is able to rescue His children from trials and carry His children through trials as human faithfulness to God offers a peace in this life and the life to come.⁵

Themes
The book of Daniel offers compelling narratives, hopeful prophecy, and startling eschatology. Organizing the content around a few themes assists in reading all genres of the text with unity and harmony, appreciating the interwoven emphases found within this book. Daniel challenges us to walk in faith, seek the Messiah, and await the coming consummation of all things.

“The Sovereignty of God”
The primary theme of Daniel is undoubtedly the sovereignty of God. Every narrative of Daniel 1–6 screams out for us to see a God who is never surprised or overpowered by any human king or kingdom. Daniel 7–12 sets forth God’s sovereignty over the nations and empires of the world. The Lord of history raises all kings and kingdoms up, and brings them all to an end according to His will.⁶

“God’s Love for His People”
As a direct result of God’s sovereign power over all things, the book of Daniel reveals a special intimacy between God and His people. Whether it is the preservation of Daniel’s life in the lion’s den or the personal presence of the angel of the Lord with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace, God reveals His immense, everlasting love for His children. God delivers His people, rules over history, and consummates all things in love and mercy toward His own.

“The Person and Work of the Messiah”
While Daniel represents a key player in this prophetic work, we cannot help but see the foreshadowed glory of an even greater player in God’s plan for history. Daniel may represent

⁴ Tremper Longman III, Daniel (The NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 19 (emphasis his).
⁶ Miller, Daniel, 50.
something of a symbolic biblical “hero,” but his entire life actually serves to point our eyes forward to the true and better Daniel, Jesus Christ, who stands as the supreme example for faithfulness, prayer, courage, and humility. Even more, the apocalyptic visions of chapters 7–12 present a future Messiah who consummates history with glory, strength, and power.

“God as Lord of All History”
We have often heard the line, “All history is His story.” In many ways, the book of Daniel confirms this catchphrase. God orchestrates the individual stories of history (Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego) as well as the final consummation of all of human history (Daniel 7–12). Standing as Lord over all things, God rules and reigns with total power and will bring all things to a final consummation in His time and in His way.