

Daniel 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Daniel chapter 1. In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand with some of the vessels of the house of God.

And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his God, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his God. Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, youths without blemish, of good appearance and skilful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans.

The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he drank. They were to be educated for three years, and at the end of that time they were to stand before the king.

Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah. And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names. Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego.

But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself. And God gave Daniel favour and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs.

[1 : 2 6] And the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, I fear my lord the king, who assigned your food and your drink. For why should he see that you were in worse condition than the youths who are of your own age?

So you would endanger my head with the king. Then Daniel said to the steward, whom the chief of the eunuchs had assigned over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, Test your servants for ten days.

Let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king's food be observed by you, and deal with your servants according to what you see.

So he listened to them in this matter, and tested them for ten days. At the end of ten days it was seen that they were better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king's food.

So the steward took away their food and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables. As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams.

[2 : 2 6] At the end of the time, when the king had commanded that they should be brought in, the chief of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. And the king spoke with them, and among all of them none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.

Therefore they stood before the king. And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom.

And Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus. The book of the prophet Daniel divides into two natural parts. The first six chapters are historical narrative, and the second six chapters are prophetic visions.

The first chapter of the book begins by setting the historical scene. It's the third year of the reign of Jehoiachin, king of Judah. The northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Neo-Assyrians in 722 BC.

Over a hundred years later, the southern kingdom is still there, but on account of its unfaithfulness, it's ripe for judgment. The prophet Jeremiah, active at this time in Jerusalem, has warned about imminent judgment.

[3 : 32] The actual exile takes place in a number of waves. First of all, Judah is reduced to the status of a puppet kingdom of other nations of the region. Then in 605 BC, there's the first deportation of captives to Babylon.

Another in 597 BC, the great final destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC. And then again in 582 BC, there's a further deportation of captives after the collapse of the governorship of Gedaliah.

If one year were identified as the great turning point, it would be 605 BC. It's at that point that the regional geopolitics decisively turn.

The Neo-Assyrians, the dominant power in the region for quite some time, had been waning. The Neo-Assyrians in Egypt were defeated at Carchemish by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar.

Nebuchadnezzar became king that year, and with his ascent, the entire region came under Babylonian dominance. In the book of Jeremiah, this is the fourth year of the reign of Jehoiakim, king of Judah.

[4 : 34] Here, at the beginning of Daniel, it's spoken of as the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim. Making sense of this seeming discrepancy requires consideration of numbering systems.

First of all, what is the beginning of the year? The northern nation of Israel seems to have begun its year in Nisan, in March or April of the year. And in the southern kingdom, it began in Tishri in September or October.

Consequently, the same event could be dated in different years, depending on whether one was following the dating system of the northern or the southern kingdom. A further thing, which is particularly important when working between Babylon and Judah, is the accession or non-accession year dating of king's reigns.

The accession year is the year that the king comes to the throne. Some dating systems date the reign of the king from that year, whereas other dating systems date the king's reign from the first full year after his ascension year.

Edwin Teeler's work on this subject is particularly important. Accession year dating would inflate the number of years in a kingdom, as years where there was a change in the king would be counted twice, once as the year of the previous king, and once as the year of the king that succeeded him.

[5 : 47] Recognising these quirks of dating systems can help us with some seeming anomalies in the text. For instance, in chapter 2, verse 1, it speaks about the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar.

However, in verse 5 of this chapter, it talks about standing before the king after three years. Yet, if we're working with non-accession year dating, this is not hard to explain.

The second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar would be the third year of the exile of the young men. At this point, the young men, likely of the nobility of Judah, possibly even of the royal house, would probably be around 13 to 15 years of age.

Daniel comes to Babylon in the first year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign, and he is still there, as we see at the end of the chapter, in the first year of Cyrus' reign. His presence in Babylon spans the whole period of the exile.

As Daniel and his friends are deported to Babylon at this early stage in their life, and as part of the first wave of deportation, the Lord will be using them to prepare a place for the later waves of exile that come along.

[6 : 49] Daniel is a contemporary of people like the prophet Ezekiel, who is also in the land of Babylon at this time. Ezekiel speaks of the faithfulness of Daniel within his prophecy. Meanwhile in Jerusalem, Jeremiah the prophet is telling the people to submit to Babylon, not to look to Egypt for assistance, but to put themselves under the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar.

Reading the prophetic message of Jeremiah against the backdrop of what God is accomplishing in Babylon through Daniel and his friends should give us a sense of the way that, if the people submit to his word, the people will find that the Lord has prepared a way for them, and that he will not abandon them as they are within the land of exile.

This is one of many ways in which Daniel can be compared to the character of Joseph. Joseph, who was sent ahead of his brothers to prepare a way for them, protecting them while in Egypt, is similar to Daniel, who through his wisdom and his interpretation of dreams, leads to the captors of Judah being protected in the land of their exile.

Verse 2 quietly introduces some of the background and the elements of the story that follows. First of all, they are brought with some vessels of the house of God. The Russian playwright Anton Chekhov is famous for his principle of Chekhov's gun.

If a writer, in the first chapter of a work, mentions that a gun is hanging on the wall, by the end of that book, that gun had better have gone off. Mentioning the vessels of the house of God here is important.

[8 : 13] Back in the book of 1 Samuel, the Ark of the Covenant had been taken by the Philistines. Brought back into their cities, it had resulted in the humiliation of their god Dagon, and also plagues upon many of their people.

Later in the book of Daniel, the vessels of the house of God will reappear in the feast of Belshazzar. There, the vessels of the house of God, first taken by Nebuchadnezzar, would be part of the means by which the downfall of the empire of Babylon would occur.

A further important detail here is that all of these things are brought to the land of Shinar. The land of Shinar is perhaps best known to us from Genesis chapter 11, where it is the site of the building of the tower and the city of Babel.

This attempt to gather all people together in a universal kingdom, and build a tower between heaven and earth, was frustrated as the Lord descended and confused the people's languages, scattering them abroad throughout the world.

This event also provided the backdrop for the call of Abram. The tower builders had sought to make their name great, but the Lord said that he would make Abram's name great.

[9 : 17] The nations were formed by a curse at the time of Babel. Abram was told that he would be a blessing. This mention of the land of Shinar here is the first of numerous allusions to the story of Babel in the rest of the book of Daniel.

It's a book of the multiplication of languages. From chapter 2, verse 4 to chapter 7, the book will be written in a different language from the usual Hebrew of the Old Testament, in the language of Aramaic.

Much of the book concerns confusion and the need to interpret, and Daniel being given the power to interpret different things for others who cannot. The book has a number of different edifices that rise up and are brought down, whether that's the great image of the dream of Nebuchadnezzar, the image of the statue that he builds, or the great tree that represents him in his second dream.

A further dominant theme in the book of Daniel is the attempt to establish universal empire. The quest for universal sovereignty is similar to the way that the people at Babel sought to gather all humanity together under a single rule.

Perhaps the greatest message of the book of Daniel is that the Lord alone has the kingdom. As we go through the book of Daniel, we'll see this confession on a number of pagan kings' lips.

- [10 : 29] This period in Israel's history is one where they no longer have a kingdom of their own, but they are scattered abroad among other nations. While their own power as a distinct polity is much reduced, we should recognize the ways that they are starting to fulfill the purpose of the Lord declared at the time of the call of Abraham through their blessing of the nations where they are placed.

Figures like Daniel, Esther, Mordecai, and Nehemiah all hold some sort of high office and exercise considerable influence, blessing the Gentile empires in which they are found, and also protecting and advancing the people of God.

The word of God is going out to the whole world. The kingdom of God is established in a more international way. While we may focus upon the humiliation of the nation of Judah and the nation of Israel before it, we should not miss the ways that this is an expansion and intensification of the Lord's active sovereignty among the nations.

He has formerly allowed the nations to walk in their own ways, but now he is starting to rule over them more directly. He will humble proud nations, much as he humbled the builders of Babylon, but he will also lift others up and use them for his purposes.

This period of time is also one in which the people of God would face new temptations and challenges. Exiles of former periods in the house of Israel's history had assimilated the nations in which they were placed, or had disappeared in other ways into their new societies.

- [11 : 56] Without a land and polity of their own, and things such as the temple in Jerusalem, it was very easy for them to lose their identity. For Israel to be a distinct people in exile, it would be faithfulness to the law, perhaps above all else, that would mark them out as distinct.

This distinctiveness through faithfulness is something that is very much in the foreground of the book of Daniel. Daniel and his friends are tested in this chapter and elsewhere concerning their faithfulness.

Will they assimilate to the people around them, or will they stand out in their loyalty to the Lord above all others? Once again, this recalls the experience of such as Joseph in the land of Egypt, and also Moses in Egypt at the beginning of the book of Exodus.

Daniel and his friends receive new names in this book. It's a way in which they have to navigate between two different identities and worlds. They're being taught the wisdom of the Babylonians, and they're being assimilated into Babylonian culture in various ways.

And the challenge of standing out from this pagan society will be a very keen one for them. The first great test is a food test. Will they eat the king's food? Eating such food would be a considerable honour for them.

- [13 : 05] It would be a sign of status and belonging within the kingdom. But Daniel determines to refuse this. It's not made clear why he does this. No mention is made of eating unclean animals, for instance.

It seems most likely to me that the refusal to eat the food came from the fact that the food would have been sacrificed to idols. This, of course, becomes a big issue in the city of Corinth in the New Testament.

But it's also mentioned in the book of Exodus, chapter 34, verses 12 and 15. Take care lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst. lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land.

And when they were after their gods and sacrifice to their gods, and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice. The chief of the eunuchs responsible for Daniel and his friends is prepared to listen to Daniel's request, because God has given Daniel favour in his eyes.

Once again, this might recall the story of Joseph. The chief of the eunuchs himself would be taking a risk in obliging Daniel in this matter. If the plan went awry, he could really get in trouble with the king, whose opinion mattered a great deal more than Daniel's ever would.

[14:14] Indeed, the chief eunuchs' response to Daniel makes clear that he could lose his head if Daniel was seen to be in worse condition, and the king found out what had happened. The chief of the eunuchs, despite his favour towards Daniel, does not oblige Daniel in the matter.

Daniel then goes to the steward who's been set over him, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. He suggests the test, one in which the stakes will be considerably lower, giving them seeds to eat and water to drink for ten days.

Their appearance could be tested at the end of that time. If the test was favourable, they could proceed accordingly. The test is successful. At the end of the ten days, they are better in their appearance than those who were on the king's food.

Daniel and his three companions prosper in their training. The Lord not only gives them favour in the sight of those over them, but also gives them skill and learning, equips them in their studies.

In addition, Daniel is given skill and understanding in the interpretation of visions and dreams, something that would be much valued in the court of the king, and which is clearly important for the story that follows.

[15:17] At the end of the three years, when they are finally brought in before Nebuchadnezzar, they stand out from all of their peers. In their wisdom, their skill and their understanding, they exceed all of the experts of the kingdom.

A question to consider. How do you imagine the example of Daniel and his friends would have been used by Jews during this period?