

The Book of Daniel

I. Introduction

A. The Author of the Book

Daniel is introduced in his youth, having been deported from Jerusalem to Babylon in 605 (the first of three deportations, the exile of the royal family and the nobility [1:3-4]). Daniel, "God is my judge," was, thus, of the upper social class and was chosen to be educated in Babylonian culture as servants of state under Nebuchadnezzar (605-562). He witnessed the destruction of the empire by the Medo-Persians under Darius I and Cyrus the Great (539-526). He died about the third year of his reign, the year that the Jews were allowed to return to their homeland and begin the construction of the Temple (536). Daniel was in his eighties!

The text reveals that Daniel was devoted to biblical Judaism, faithfully obeying its directives from his youth (1:8), an exception to corrupt upper echelons of Jewish society. His appearance was attractive, and he had high academic potential (1:4). Also, he had the administrative ability, social winsomeness, and tact.

B. The Uniqueness of the Book.

While the book is placed within our English Bible among the prophets, following Ezekiel, it contains no prophetic announcements of doom for dereliction or impending judgement as those in prophetic literature. Further, it is not a historical narrative as in Samuel, Kings, or the Chronicles though there is much about the course of history, the course of the rise and fall of empires. As such, the book contains eschatological (futuristic) material, the unveiling of the future from the divine perspective. Because of this, the Jewish canon places the book in the Writings, while the Christian tradition has placed it in the Prophets.

C. The World of the Book

Daniel experienced a world that was changing rapidly with political power-struggles in the Ancient Near East, empires rising and falling. Three empires emerge: Babylon, Medo-Persia, and Greece (with the rise of Roman hinted).

609: The Battle of Megiddo in the Jezreel Valley was fought between Josiah of Israel and Necho of Egypt as the latter sought to reclaim the Jewish state and align with the Babylonians. Josiah was killed by the Egyptians when he sought to prevent an Assyrians-Egyptian coalition only to be defeated by the Babylonians.

612: The Battle of Carchemish on the Euphrates River brought the rise of Babylon as a world power. Assyria was defeated, as also its ally Egypt under Necho. Historically, it is called one of the great turning points of world history.

605: The loss of the Jewish state under the vassalage of Babylon, the deportation of Israel's elite (including Daniel). Nebuchadnezzar succeeded his father, Nabopolassar, in 605 and reigned for forty-two years (d. 562). He conquered Egypt as well as Israel.

562: Amel-Marduk (Evil-Marduk) became king 562-560, but was assassinated; his brother-in-law, Nabonidus (560-539) became king. Because Nabonidus spent much of his reign campaigning, his son, Belshazzar was a de-facto monarch.

539: Cyrus II, the Great, the Persian in alliance with Darius I, the Mede, ended the Babylonian Empire. The Medo-Persian Empire dominated the world scene from 539-323. The Persians eventually dominated the Medes.

323: The Greek empire emerged under Alexander the Great (356-323), displacing the Persians on the world scene.

146-1453: the Romans extended their empire extended to the Near East. The western portion collapsed in 484, the eastern in 1453 with the Moslem conquest of Constantinople.

D. The Date of the Writing of the Book.

Since Daniel recorded several visions that he received during the reigns of Nebuchadnezzar and his grandson, Belshazzar. The Bible text witnesses to the fact that he lived to the end of Babylonian hegemony and the early reign of the Persian Cyrus II (539-530). Thus, the book was composed around 537-536.

E. The Location of the Writing of the Book.

While we cannot be sure, the leading candidates for the location of writing are either Babylon, the capitol of the Babylon Empire, the site of his deportation, or Susa (a royal city, capitol of Elam in the Persian Empire).

F. The Structure of the Book.

1. Some scholars have divided the book by noting the use of language. 1:1-2:4 is Hebrew, 2:4b-7:28 is Aramaic, and 8:1-12:13 is Hebrew.
2. Others have divided the book into two equal parts. Chapter 1-6 relates instances in the life of Daniel and his friends, chapter 7-12 contains four visions that Daniel had in later life. This seems the most logical approach: Events/stories (1-6) and Prophecies (7-12). The book does not follow a linear structure, though it begins with Daniel as a youth and ends with a notice of his agedness.

G. The Dominant Themes in the Book.

1. The sovereignty of God over the most powerful personages and nations. This would have greatly comforted the ancient people and certainly the Church as it has struggled through the centuries with autocrats, dictatorship, and megalomaniacs. God disposes and appoints rulers to expedite His purposes.

2. The love and protective mercies of God for His people (the fiery furnace, the lion's den). God will not cast off His covenant people though He may chastise them for their derelictions.
3. The book demonstrates that God's people can be strong in their testimony for God, even in difficult circumstances. The book demonstrates that even in harsh circumstances it is possible to maintain a godly walk.

II. Comment and Commentary on the Book.

Part One: The Ministry of Daniel (and his friends) in Babylon (1:1-6:28)

A. The emergence of Daniel in Nebuchadnezzar's court, 1:1-21

This chapter functions as an introduction to the book explaining Daniel's deportation to Babylon and his prominence in Nebuchadnezzar's palace.

Chapter Lesson: Even in unusual circumstances God protects us when we seek to do what is honoring to Him in our walk of faith and trust. Living in obedience requires a knowledgeable commitment to the Holy Scriptures, confident trust, and the divine creation of favorable circumstances.

1. The Context, vv. 1-2

The rise of the Babylonian Empire resulted from the defeat of Assyria at the Battle of Carchemish (612). Subsequently, Nebuchadnezzar conquered Egypt and the Kingdom of Judah (605).

Daniel tells us that the invasion of the Kingdom of Judah took place in Jehoiakim's third year, while Jeremiah (25:1) that it was in the fourth year of his reign. Jeremiah appears to have used the Babylonian calendar which reckoned the first year, the Accession Year, though it may have only several months. Daniel, using the Jewish Calendar, counted each calendar year of his reign though the initial year may have been a few months.

The city fell to Nebuchadnezzar with little resistance; the Lord literally "gave" it to him. He took from the Temple certain articles and put them in the Temple of Marduk in Babylon demonstrating his god's superiority.

2. The selection program of exiles for royal service, vv. 3-7

(a) The criteria, vv. 3-4a

Background: royalty or nobility

Physical appearance: handsome young men,

Mental fitness: intelligent

(b) The purpose, v. 4a

To be thoroughly encultured into the language (Akkadian) and literature of the Babylonians, a course of study consisting of three years.

(c) Privileged Status. vv. 4b-5

They were granted a special diet (enculturation).

(d) Examples, vv. 6-7

“Among these” were Daniel (“God is my help”), Hananiah (“God is gracious”), Mishael (“Who is what god is), and Azariah (“God has or will help”).

Their names were changed to create a new identity: Belteshazzar (“Bel protects life”), Shadrach (“the command of Aku [the moon god]”), Meshach (“Who is like Aku”), and Abednego (“servant of Nebo”).

The contrast is between the true God and the false ones.

3. The determination of Daniel, vv. 8-16

(a) The proposal, v. 8

The suggestion to their guardian, Ashpenaz, was for a special diet with a limited duration. The word “defiled” refers frequently to moral or ceremonial issues. Foods such as horse meat or pork violates Mosaic kosher laws. This would be exacerbated by the fact that blood would not be drained from the meat (Lev. 17:13-14) and it would have been frequently offered to the gods. The aversion to wine was most likely because it was often offered as a libation to the gods.

This was quite a request as Ashpenaz later made clear from his perspective. From Daniel’s perspective, his safety, as well as advancement, was jeopardized. Would it not be perceived as a form of rebellion by the king? Further, they could have justified the diet by suggesting that God had failed in protecting them so it would not be wrong to take things into their own hands to survive. Also, they were clearly outside of parental scrutiny.

Ashpenaz had compassion though he feared greatly for his life.

(b) The providential concession, vv. 9-10

[1] the action of divine compassion, v. 9

“...God caused”

[2] the realism of Ashpenaz, v. 10

From the custodian’s perspective, it would be dangerous to grant a concession if it failed.

(c) The counter proposal, vv. 11-14

[1] a ten-day trial, vv. 11-13

A vegetable and water diet. The word, vegetable, literally means “to grow from a seed so that the diet could include fruit, grains, and bread.

While Ashpenaz was the chief official in charge, a subordinate seems to have carried out the plan. It seems logical that the guardian brought the king’s food, ate it himself, and gave the Hebrews their requested diet.

[2] the agreement, v. 14

(d) The outcome, vv. 15-16

A diet of fruits, vegetables and grains proved to product results.

4. The completion of the program, vv. 17-21

(a) The educational component, v. 17

For the third time in this chapter, we find the providential workings of God behind the scenes. Each of the four found success though Daniel is singled out for his ability to interpret dreams (Babylonians placed an emphasis on the communication of the gods through dreams).

(b) The acceptance into service in the Babylonian Court, vv. 18-20

After three years of instruction, the four passed the test before Nebuchadnezzar with excellence, and so entered the king's service. "Ten times" is an idiom meaning "many times."

The word "magician" literally means engraver or writer (one who scratched or used a stylus). In that sense, they were recorders though they engaged in the occult. "Enchanters" (astrologers, conjurers) receive "divine" instruction through communication with the spirit world, the use of omens, and incantations).

(c) the success of Daniel, v. 21

He lived into the reign of Cyrus" meaning through the entire Babylonian era which ended in 539, dying in the third year of his reign in 536 (10:1), the year the exiles were allowed to return to the land and construct the Temple.

Thoughts:

1. While the nation of Israel walked away from the Lord, enamored by the gods of the nations, reflected in a culture that became increasingly morally and religiously corrupt, there was, and always is, a godly remnant. We have encountered four of them. They must have been nurtured in the Holy Scriptures and raised with parental direction. What a model for all of us living in a rebellious culture, seeking to raise up a godly remnant!
2. The inescapable take-away is that God controls the affairs of men and nations. Though we are often not aware of the divine purpose, we rest assured that He is perfectly executing a master plan that will bring us to the "New Garden of Eden," the eternal kingdom. You and I may not understand how good can come out of all the evil we see, but we find security in His character and promises.
3. It strikes me that the power of secular culture need not dominate our lives or that of our children. The power of the home, the knowledge of the Scripture, and answered prayer is the antidote. Even when these four youths encountered enormous encouragement to forsake their past, they did not. They not only knew to whom they belonged, they were prudent in their conduct and for what they asked.
4. Godly conduct wins the friendship of our enemies. Remember the Joseph story and his rise to influence in Egypt. Now it is Daniel in Babylon and Persia. Instead of abject refusal of the purposes of Nebuchadnezzar in training them for service, they accepted it as their callings, but were unwilling to do so at the loss of their religious mooring.

5. Are there not lessons in this chapter on how to live for God in our “exile” from the “land of blessedness?” Do you remember these words from an old hymn: “This world is not my home, I’m just a passing through. My treasures are laid up, somewhere beyond the blue.” Is this your perspective on life?