

# COMMENTARY

## I. STORIES FROM A FOREIGN LAND (1:1—6:28)

### Overview

The first major portion of Daniel relates stories of Jewish captives in a foreign land. All six stories tell of life within an environment that is unfriendly toward God's faithful. These stories might be called court tales since their primary characters are kings and their attendants. Daniel plays a lead role in all of these stories except for one. In ch 3 three friends with whom Daniel is closely connected take center stage.

Each story in chs 1 to 6 has to do with a test. The three narratives in chs 1, 3, and 6 are tests of faithfulness, while chs 2, 4, and 5 relate tests of wisdom. Reading them from one perspective, they could emphasize Daniel's exceptional wisdom and faithful endurance. If the stories are about God more than Daniel, however, the emphasis shifts. These stories become tests of God's wisdom and faithfulness. The end result in each of these stories is the same. God proves trustworthy and knowledgeable, his servants are vindicated, and the world's most powerful monarchs acknowledge the sovereignty of Judah's God.

These stories prepare the reader for the visions that come in the second part of the book. They not only establish Daniel's credibility as a visionary but also present a model for faithful living in the midst of unfavorable circumstances. The visions, which portend unparalleled suffering for God's people under tyrannical oppressors, challenge readers to emulate the wisdom found in Daniel and his friends in such conditions. Both stories and visions combine to proclaim the same message: Regardless of how things might appear, God's people can trust that God remains absolutely sovereign over this world and live as if he is.

## **A. Food Defilement: The First Test of Faithfulness (1:1-21)**

1:1-21

### **Overview**

The first chapter of Daniel serves as a fitting introduction to the book. It presents the main characters of both the stories and the visions along with their Babylonian setting. The profile of the primary protagonist, Daniel, is drawn along with an initial sketch of a key antagonist, Nebuchadnezzar. The central theme of the book is also given preliminary form: God is always at work willing and doing his good pleasure. The dynamics of these characters, their setting, and the key theme create connections with ancient as well as modern audiences. Readers are drawn into the story because it is in some sense their story too.

### **BEHIND THE TEXT**

The story that unfolds in ch 1 contains characteristics familiar to ancient audiences. Like each of the stories in the first six chapters of Daniel, it is a heroic narrative. Such stories focus on an individual or select group who embody the social and moral struggles of the community and overcome them. Episodes in the stories of Gideon, Samson, and David, for example, reflect this type of literature. Among extrabiblical material a popular Assyrian story of a righteous man named Ahikar provides several parallels in thought and expression (Pritchard 1969, 427-30).

## Story of Ahikar and Daniel

The story of Ahikar has survived in several languages and versions. A Jewish version was discovered at Elephantine in Egypt where a community of Jews existed during the fifth century B.C. Ahikar was a high official in the court of an Assyrian king named Sennacherib (705-681 B.C.). Like Daniel, he was legendary for his wisdom. Because he was childless, Ahikar adopted his nephew and put him through a rigorous training in the wisdom literature of court officials. As a result of Ahikar's influence, the nephew secured a high position in the empire. The nephew, however, turned treacherous and devised a plot against his uncle that condemned him for treason. Ahikar miraculously avoided the king's death sentence like Daniel and his friends, was eventually vindicated and restored to his position. In the end the nephew dies a horrible death. The point of the story is made in the final lines: "he who digs a pit for his brother shall fall into it; and he who sets up traps shall be caught in them."

The Daniel stories also include features typical of dispersion and court tales. Dispersion tales give accounts of people, like those in the apocryphal books of Tobit and Susanna, who struggle to live faithfully outside the land of Israel. Court tales relate adventures of persons within the palace whose entertaining experiences edify audiences. The biblical stories of Joseph and Esther are this kind and bear a number of similarities with the stories in Daniel. Both are accounts of people who courageously survive the odds like Daniel. They face severe tests and emerge triumphant. There is poetic justice in each case as godly character is rewarded.

The romantic elements of these stories along with their archetypal plot motifs, patterns of repetition, and focus upon dramatic narration make them examples of great literature in the ancient and modern world. Like most biblical narrative there is a mix of realism with the mystery of the supernatural. High adventure with God is set within earthly existence. The point of each story is difficult to miss and yet deeper meanings emerge after extended reflection.

The tests of faithfulness in chs 1, 3, and 6 unfold in a similar pattern. They focus upon courage to maintain religious conviction in the midst of a hostile environment. In these stories Daniel and his friends are confronted with a threat of severe consequences for holding on to their beliefs. If they do not compromise, they risk rejection from the royal court (ch 1), facing a fiery furnace (ch 3), or being thrown into a den of lions (ch 6). In each case they choose the more difficult route and remain faithful to their convictions. They refuse to defile themselves by eating meat from the king's table, by bowing to an idol, and by ceasing to pray to God. The outcome of the test is the manifestation of God's faithfulness. The tests provide opportunity for God to prove

his sovereignty, and he does not disappoint. He intervenes and rescues his faithful servants, revealing his power among the pagans.

The ancient audience of Daniel held a store of memories associated with the characters and setting sketched in ch 1. Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon, and Babylonia, in particular, were symbols of hostility, oppression, and godlessness for people of Judah (vv 1-2).

The emergence of the Babylonian Empire during the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. profoundly affected the biblical story of Abraham's descendants. Judah, along with nearly every other political entity in the Middle East, was brought under its iron grip for approximately seventy years. The early days of this empire are the immediate milieu for the opening chapter of Daniel.

In 627 B.C. the death of Ashurbanipal brought to an end Assyria's dominance over the Fertile Crescent. Rebellion broke out across the empire, and a Chaldean prince named Nabopolassar led the resistance in Babylon. His military expertise and astute alliance with the Medes enabled him to dismantle the Assyrian Empire over the next twenty years. Assyria fell in 614 B.C. and Nineveh in 612 B.C. The final remnants of the Assyrian army were defeated in the summer of 605 B.C. at Carchemish.

At Nabopolassar's death in August of 605 B.C. the newly created empire passed into the very capable hands of his son Nebuchadnezzar (v 1). Babylonian influence rose to its greatest heights under the aggressive leadership of this master strategist. Further conquest and extravagant building marked his reign, which lasted from 605 to 562 B.C.

Nebuchadnezzar's status in biblical and rabbinic literature is almost legendary. He stands as a key antagonist to God's people throughout the OT. His name is mentioned more than any other foreign despot in Scripture, nearly ninety times. Throughout the book of Daniel Nebuchadnezzar's name is spelled with an *n* following the *d*. The Babylonian spelling of the name was Nebuchadrezzar with an *r* in place of the *n*. This spelling is preserved in several passages in Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Most of the time, however, the OT books prefer spelling the name Nebuchadnezzar. Whether or not this is a case of deliberate corruption of his name in order to mock the ruler is uncertain. The original Nebuchadrezzar probably means "Nabu protects the eldest son" while Nebuchadnezzar could be translated "Nabu protects the mule." Most scholars do not think it is intentional mockery. They suggest that the exchange of *n* for *r* was simply a normal kind of development as phonemes moved from one language to another (Wiseman 1985, 2-3).

Nebuchadnezzar was responsible for the ultimate humiliation of Abraham's descendants. After gaining control of Judah in 605 B.C., he systematically depleted its resources and squelched two major rebellions in 598 and 587 B.C. The latter event ended in the demolition of Jerusalem and the exile of a

major portion of its population. This left the Jews without a king, temple, and homeland. It was a watershed event in OT history.

Supplied with the spoils of war and the annual tribute of subdued nations, **Babylon** became a spectacular city of beauty and wealth (v 2). Located along the banks of the mighty Euphrates River, its intimidating walls extended over seventeen miles around the city. Entrance was allowed only through imposing gates adorned with lions, bears, and dragons in colorful relief. A massive palace complex, the legendary hanging gardens, and more than fifty temples created the skyline for this remarkable city. The most impressive of the temples was dedicated to Marduk, the patron god of Babylon. It sat atop a ziggurat that measured approximately 300 x 300 feet at its base and rose to the same extent in height.

Babylon dominated the southeast portion of Mesopotamia during the first millennia B.C. Thus the region became known as **Babylonia** (v 2). The Hebrew behind this translation in Dan 1:2 is “land of Shinar” (*‘ereš šinar*). This is a relatively rare phrase occurring only four times in the Hebrew Bible (Gen 10:10; 11:2; Zech 5:11; and here). Reference to Shinar occurs only four other times. The more common designation for the region of Babylonia, found mostly in Jeremiah and Ezekiel, is “land of the Chaldeans” (*‘ereš kasdim*). The reference to Shinar evokes Gen 11, where humans displayed their misdirected aspirations by building the Tower of Babel. It was there that God rejected humanity’s efforts to become like God. The author’s use of the term further underscores the godless environment in which the events and visions of the book take place.

The book begins with a reference to **the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim in which Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it** (v 1). It refers to a time when the fortunes of Judah fell under the control of Babylon, around 605 B.C., and establishes the essential setting for this chapter as well as the book. This verse has been the subject of considerable debate among commentators over its historical reliability. In the third year of Jehoiakim Nebuchadnezzar was not yet king of Babylon, and the evidence of a siege of Jerusalem at this time is scant. After examining the evidence, many scholars believe it is not reliable history and assume the author of the book was simply not interested in historical accuracy (Hartman and Di Lella 1978, 128-29; Collins 1993, 130-33). Perhaps, some suggest, the author is merging the events of 605, 598, and 587 B.C. into one general statement (Goldingay 1989, 14; Seow 2003, 21). Other scholars, however, find reasonable basis to accept the reliability of the data (Baldwin 1978, 19-23; Archer 1985, 31-32; Miller 1994, 56-57; Longman 1999, 43-45). Still others withhold judgment because the evidence is not fully compelling in either direction (Lucas 2002, 50-52).

The reference to Nebuchadnezzar as **king of Babylon** is often explained as prolepsis. Thus it may be that Nebuchadnezzar is designated by the title for which he was best known later in life. Since the text seems to refer to events during the summer of 605 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar was not officially king as yet. His inauguration took place in September of 605 B.C. following his father's death in August.

Other data related to Dan 1:1-2 raises more difficult questions for the historian. When passages in Kings, Chronicles, and Jeremiah describe Babylon's initial takeover of Judah, they do not speak of **Jerusalem** being **besieged**. The record of 2 Kgs 24:1 is that "Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon invaded the land, and Jehoiakim became his vassal for three years." In 2 Chr 36:6 the king of Babylon "bound him [Jehoiakim] with bronze shackles to take him to Babylon" and "took to Babylon articles from the temple." The reliability of these statements, especially the one in Chronicles, is also a matter of debate.

Jeremiah 25:1 and 46:2 complicate matters by connecting the event to the fourth rather than the third year of Jehoiakim. This is often accounted for, however, by assuming the use of different dating systems for reckoning the reign of a monarch. In Judah the typical approach was to begin counting years once the king took the throne. When the New Year was celebrated, records indicate that his second year began. In Babylon, the first year of ruling commenced only after the New Year. If Jeremiah reckoned according to Judah's system and Daniel followed the Babylonian system, then the discrepancy is explained. Historians are not sure this was the case however.

Nonbiblical evidence fails to mention a siege of Jerusalem as well. According to *The Babylonian Chronicles* the first siege of Jerusalem occurred in Nebuchadnezzar's seventh year, or 598 B.C., when Judah's revolt was squelched and Jehoiachin taken prisoner. *The Babylonian Chronicles*, however, do speak of Nebuchadnezzar subduing the region of Syria and Palestine following his victory at Carchemish in 605 B.C. Josephus may corroborate this by citing the fourth century B.C. Greek historian Berosus. According to this source, Nebuchadnezzar appears to have solidified his rule of the region before returning to Babylon to claim the throne. He "set the affairs of Egypt and the other countries in order, and committed the captives he had taken from the Jews, and Phoenicians, and Syrians, and of the nations belonging to Egypt, to some of his friends" (*Ag. Ap.* 1.19). Some scholars doubt the reliability of Berosus, however, or suggest he is referring only to mercenaries in the defeated Egyptian army.

## The Babylonian Chronicles

*The Babylonian Chronicles* are a collection of clay tablets from ancient Mesopotamia that record key events connected to the Babylonian region. They

begin with the earliest times down to the first century A.D. The material particularly focuses upon the first millennium B.C. and includes records of several events in Nebuchadnezzar's reign. Babylonian astronomers wrote these texts over a number of centuries. Modern translations in English are available in Grayson 2000.

Some scholars believe that the term translated **besieged** in Dan 1:2 does not demand an extended military action, although it is regularly used in this way. The basic meaning of the term is "to bind" or "secure" something. On the basis of 2 Chr 36:6 they suggest that Jehoiakim may have been rounded up with other despots in the region and brought before Nebuchadnezzar at Riblah in Syria. He likely swore allegiance to the Babylonians and presented enough booty from the temple treasury to convince them of his loyalty. In this proposal Dan 1:1-2 merely tells how Jehoiakim submitted to the overpowering forces of Babylon out of political expediency following the defeat of his Egyptian overlord at Carchemish.

Regardless of how the historical data of Dan 1:1-2 is understood, the subjugation of Judah to Babylon in the time of Jehoiakim provides the context for reading the story. Jehoiakim was the son of one of Judah's most devout kings, Josiah (640-609 B.C.). He did not follow his father's example, however, and steered a path toward the final demise of Judah. His blatant disregard for Israel's God earned him repeated warning and rebuke from Jeremiah the prophet (see Jer 22:13-23; 25:1-14; 26:1-6; 36:1-31).

The reign of Jehoiakim began after his father's death in 609 B.C. The Egyptian pharaoh Neco placed him in this position. Having defeated Judah's armies and killed Josiah at Megiddo, Neco first selected a younger son of Josiah, Jehoahaz, as king of Judah. Three months later he returned to Jerusalem, took Jehoahaz to Egypt, and authorized Jehoiakim to administer the kingdom. The victory of Babylonians and Medes over Egyptians and Assyrians at Carchemish in the summer of 605 B.C. changed the fortunes of Jehoiakim. The Babylonians laid claim to all of Judah and the surrounding states. At that point Jehoiakim came under the authority of the Babylonian Empire.

The narrative divides almost seamlessly into three sections: the setting (vv 1-7), the test (vv 8-14), and the outcome (vv 15-21). Each section is punctuated by reference to God's activity behind the scenes. God gives success to Nebuchadnezzar (v 2), then to Daniel (v 9), and finally to the young men (v 17).

The chapter unfolds in a chiasm. The focus upon training the young Israelites in vv 1-7 is balanced by an account of their successful training in vv 17-20. Then the desire to avoid defilement and take a test in vv 8-14 is balanced by the successful outcome of the test and avoiding defilement reported in vv 15-16. Temporal notations create an inclusion for the unit. **The first year of King Cyrus** in v 21 echoes back to **the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim**

in v 1. These dates mark the extent of Judah's exile (605 to 539 B.C.), the primary setting for most events recorded in the book.

The hero of the narrative, Daniel, is gradually introduced. His name does not appear until v 6. By then, though, the reader has come to know something of his exceptional character and challenging circumstances.

## IN THE TEXT

### 1. The Setting (1:1-7)

■ **1-2** Verses 1-7 establish the setting for the entire book as well as for the first story. These verses highlight three key features of the situation: God's people are (1) dominated by foreign powers, (2) forced to live in a foreign land, and (3) tempted to assimilate to the foreign culture. These three elements create the backdrop for the message of the book and each story or vision within it. The focus of these verses is on the fundamental tension over the clash of cultures, and they raise the central question of the book: "How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?" (Ps 137:4). In the context of Ps 137, this rhetorical question expresses the frustrating impossibility of living prosperously in exile. The answer to the question is, "We cannot sing." In the book of Daniel, however, the question is direct and the answers are positive. The "songs of the LORD" can be sung in a foreign land with passion.

This story is specifically dated to **the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim**, which refers to the critical year of 605 B.C. (Dan 1:1). One other story and each of the visions are introduced in reference to a particular year in the reign of a king (see 2:1; 7:1; 8:1; 9:1; 10:1). This shows a marked concern throughout the book for reading the material within a particular historical context.

**Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon** is the subject of four verbs of aggression in these verses. He **came** (*bôʾ*), **besieged** (*šûr*), **carried** (causative of *bôʾ*), and **put** (causative of *bôʾ*) (vv 1-2). It would seem that he is the one in control. Undoubtedly a powerful military force was deployed in order to subject Jerusalem. The author of Daniel, however, does not mention the strength of Babylonian armies as the key factor. These actions took place by the will of Judah's God. **The Lord delivered** (*nātan* also means "gave") them **into his hand** (v 2). This same language was used by Jeremiah when he predicted the downfall of Jerusalem (Jer 12:7; 21:10, etc.). Daniel agrees with Jeremiah. The circumstances behind the story of Dan 1 did not take place by accident. They were a fulfillment of prophecy. God had orchestrated these events. Jerusalem was given into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar as an act of divine judgment.

In Daniel God is designated by various names. The term used in Dan 1:2, **the Lord** (*ʾādōnāy*), is frequently employed throughout the OT to high-



light God's sovereign rule. It occurs eight other times in the book. These are found in the prayer of ch 9 as his favorite mode of addressing God (9:4, 7, 15, 16, 17, 19 [3 times]). Its appearance at this point subtly introduces a key theme of God's sovereign control over his people and their circumstances. This thought will be emphasized much more dramatically in subsequent passages.

According to the book of Kings, **Jehoiakim** represents the group of Judean rulers who "did evil in the eyes of the LORD" (2 Kgs 23:37). His political and spiritual incompetence appears to have hastened the end of Judah. In Daniel his role is limited to being the king who was subdued by Nebuchadnezzar. The mention of Jehoiakim in the opening verses is the only reference to a Jewish king in the book (Dan 1:1-2). Babylonian and Persian kings receive attention hereafter. This contrasts with most prophetic books where the activities of kings in Israel and Judah are prominent. The scope of Daniel is more international.

Babylonian policy included complete humiliation of their enemies. In order to reduce the prospects of rebellion, Nebuchadnezzar weakened those he conquered by depleting their resources. He accomplished this with Judah by: (1) taking **the articles from the temple of God . . . to the temple of his god** (v 2) and (2) seizing **some of the Israelites . . . to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians** (vv 3-4). These two actions assured Babylonian control over Judah.

On the basis of 2 Chr 4 **the articles from the temple** might have included a variety of items used in its daily operations. These could be: sprinkling bowls, pots, shovels, meat fork, tongs, wick trimmers, dishes, and censers. According to Dan 5:2 goblets could be added to the list, though these might have been taken at a later time. These articles were all made of precious metals, such as gold or silver, and carried considerable value. They served as partial payment made to the overlord Babylon by the subdued vassal Judah.

The temple articles were national as well as religious treasures. They were symbols of Judah's strength and of her God's prestige. From the Babylonian perspective these articles functioned as idols representing the deity of Judah. By taking them **to the temple of his god** Nebuchadnezzar was making a statement of supremacy (v 2). This temple was likely one dedicated to Marduk, the patron god of Babylon. It was this god who enabled Nebuchadnezzar to prosper and for whom he fought his battles. The author of Daniel does not miss the point. The alignment of phrases and belabored wording of v 2 emphasize the stark reality for God's people. The power base had shifted **from the temple of God . . . to the temple of his god in Babylonia** (v 2). The initial tension in the story is more than political or cultural. It is religious. Babylon's god has seemingly subdued Judah's God. Marduk has overpowered Yahweh.

■ **3** The second element in Babylon's humiliation of Judah involved taking young men **from the royal family and the nobility** (v 3). This was part of the booty of war as well. These youths provided security for continued alliance with Babylon and could be trained to help administer the ever-expanding empire. They were, in a sense, hostages. Removing them from their homeland reduced any designs they might have had to restore Judah's freedom from Babylon. They would be trained and courted to be friends of the state.

The young men are identified as **Israelites**, literally "sons of Israel" (v 3). The author might have just as accurately spoken of "sons of Judah" since the northern kingdom no longer existed. By calling them sons of Israel the author ties this story to the bigger history of Abraham's descendents and heightens the tension between the cultural heritages of Israel and Babylon. This is the tension that underlies the drama being set up in these opening verses.

The king directed the **chief of his court officials** to oversee the training (v 3). His name is given as **Ashpenaz**, a name of Persian origin. His exact place in the hierarchy of palace personnel is difficult to determine. Some have suggested that **Ashpenaz** may be a title rather than a personal name. If so, it could mean "innkeeper." This would be fitting for the context since he seems to be in charge of accommodations for palace residents. The Hebrew term for **court officials** covers a broad range of roles in the palace. Later it came to designate eunuchs. At this point in history, though, there is no reason to assume he was a eunuch or that those under his charge became such. Whatever his precise position, the reference to his title as **chief** indicates the high level of training involved and serves to raise the stakes of the experience related in this chapter.

■ **4-5** The young men selected for training were exceptional in every way. They possessed above average physical and intellectual qualities that made them **qualified to serve in the king's palace** (v 4). The description **without any physical defect** is reminiscent of the attributes of priests and sacrifices that made them acceptable for Israel's God (Lev 21:16-23; 22:19-25). It subtly underscores further the point previously made with the temple vessels. That which should be dedicated to Yahweh is now dedicated to Marduk.

The young men's **aptitude for every kind of learning** recalls the qualities of the wise highlighted in Israel's wisdom literature (v 4). In Proverbs such persons possess both **aptitude** ("prudence," *śākal*) and **learning** ("wisdom," *hokmā*) and are **well informed** ("know," *da'at*) and **quick to understand** ("discerning," *bîn*). These qualities recall the description of Joseph's character in Gen 41:33 and 39. They connect Daniel and his friends with biblical wisdom tradition. Daniel in particular will display extraordinary ability within the tradition of Israelite wisdom beyond that which is found in Babylon. Daniel will be well trained in Babylonian ways. Yet the text clearly suggests that his most important preparation derives from his connections to Israel and her God.

The curriculum for training these outstanding young men was **the language and literature of the Babylonians** (v 4). The older English versions rendered **Babylonians** (*kaśdīm*) as “Chaldeans.” The Chaldeans were a tribe from southern Mesopotamia that gained control over Babylon under the leadership of Nabopolassar in 626 B.C. The OT, however, refers to all people around the area of Babylon as *kaśdīm*. This was commonly done in Assyrian documents as well. Thus the translation **Babylonians** is appropriate.

In the book of Daniel *kaśdīm* refers to Babylonians three times (1:4; 5:30; 9:1). More often, though, the term is used to identify a class of learned wise men or priests (2:2, 4, 5, 10; 3:8; 4:7; 5:7, 11). The later usage is also found in the fifth century B.C. historian Herodotus (*Herodotus* 1:181-83).

The native **language** of the Chaldeans was Aramaic, the international language of the Middle East during this time. It is a close cognate to Hebrew, written with a similar alphabetic script. The official, literary language of the people of Babylon, however, was Akkadian. This required mastery of the ancient complicated system of writing known as cuneiform. The **literature of the Babylonians** also included ancient Sumerian texts copied from prior centuries and written in the same script as Akkadian. Archaeologists have unearthed a rich store of historical, economic, and religious texts in these languages. Among the religious texts are those that deal with the art of divination, a highly sophisticated profession in Babylonia. People were specially trained to decode the meaning of omens, which they believed were messages from the gods. Unusual natural phenomena, the movement of stars and even sheep livers provided insight into divine communications. The extent of this literature and intensity of instruction needed to master it is suggested by the fact that it took **three years** to become adequately trained (v 5).

Those selected for this specialized training enjoyed the benefits of eating **food and wine from the king's table** (v 5). This does not necessarily mean that they literally ate at the same table with the king. Only a select few enjoyed this privilege. The phrase simply indicates that the Israelites received the same kind of high-quality food as the king. Numerous persons in the large palace complex were provided **a daily amount** of food at state expense.

The outcome of the intense Babylonian education was to prepare these bright young men to **enter the king's service** (v 5). This could mean a variety of things. Based on the role fulfilled by Daniel in later chapters, it seems that this training prepared them to function as court sages, of which there were several categories (see comments on 2:2). The role of such persons was to act as advisers to the king. Their preparation fit them to access knowledge from the past in order to interpret and give advice for life in the present.

■ **6-7** With v 6 the hero of the book is finally introduced by name, along with three others who star in the story of ch 3. The technique of delayed introduc-

tion for the main character creates an initial suspense for the reader. A setting of conflicting cultures has already been dramatically sketched. Israelites in a foreign land are wined and dined and instructed in all the ways of the dominant culture. The threat of complete assimilation looms large. The arena is created for a hero to step forth from the oppressed community and defend the values of the group.

Four young men **from Judah** take the challenge (v 6). They are among the captives being enculturated into Babylonian society. The attention of the original audience would be drawn to the four, for they also were **among** those **from Judah** who lived under foreign domination. Could they champion the sacred beliefs of the Jewish community? How would they handle life in this hostile environment?

A final description of the process toward cultural compromise is given in v 7 and increases the drama considerably. The four Israelites are assigned **new names**. A person's name carried great significance in ancient Middle Eastern cultures. It reflected character, family relationships, and even religion. A change of name signified a significant reorientation of life. Abraham and Jacob in the OT and Peter and Paul in the NT may be the best examples of this in the Bible.

The four Israelites bore strikingly meaningful Hebrew names. **Daniel** means "my judge is God," **Hananiah** "Yahweh has shown grace," **Mishael** "who is what God is?" and **Azariah** "Yahweh has helped." Such names symbolize deep connections to the Jewish community and its God.

The **chief official** in charge of their training is presumably the same Ashpenaz from v 3. He **gave them new names** that reflect Babylonian associations (v 7). **Belteshazzar** means "protect his life" and seems to be a shortened form of either Bel-belteshazzar or Nebo-belteshazzar. Both Bel and Nebo are names of gods. Bel is another name for Marduk and Nebo (also Nabu) was his son. **Shadrach** most likely means "command of Aku." Aku was the moon god. **Meshach** appears to be the Babylonian equivalent to Mishael. It can be translated "who is like Aku?" **Abednego** may be a corruption of Abednebo, which means "servant of Nebo." Although modern knowledge of the exact meaning of each name contains some uncertainty, enough is known to reveal a pattern. The Israelites were given names that sought to identify them with the world of the Babylonians.

These Babylonian names were calculated to signify significant change in allegiance and direction for life. The import of this would not be lost on the original audience. A total loss of cultural identity, and thus religious convictions, was at stake.

Both the Hebrew and Babylonian names for the lead character of this book are appropriate. Daniel shows himself to be a man who lives as if he tru-

ly believes that God is his judge (**Daniel**). While demonstrating submission to the king and the state, he clearly holds himself ultimately accountable to God. As a result of this commitment, he becomes one whose life is divinely protected (**Belteshazzar**). His God, however, not Bel, rescues him time and again.

Throughout this section Babylonians are the primary subjects of the verbs. Nebuchadnezzar and his chief official call the shots. They **came** (v 1), **besieged** (v 1), **carried off** (v 2), **put** (v 2), **ordered** (v 3), **assigned** (v 5), and **gave . . . names** (v 7). On the other hand the Israelites are passive. The action is happening to them. The effect of this in the narrative is to underscore the subjection of Israel. This was the atmosphere of exile. On the surface, Babylon seemingly controlled the world of human events.

## 2. The Test (1:8-14)

■ **8** The stage is set in the opening verses for the test of vv 8-14. A gradual process of assimilation to foreign culture is described. The young men are taught the ways of Babylon and given Babylonian names. All of this is sketched in the context of absolute Babylonian domination.

In a dramatic move Daniel emerges from the midst of the Israelite trainees to take a stand for the values of the community he represents. No longer a passive pawn in the hands of an earthly tyrant, Daniel decisively takes the initiative. He lives up to his name and becomes accountable to God by resolving **not to defile himself** (v 8). The term **defile** (*gā'al*) is used in the Hebrew Scriptures to indicate something or someone that is unfit for God. This may be the result of ceremonial pollution such as when a sacrifice is defective (Mal 1:7). The defilement also may be due to a breach of a moral law such as murder (Isa 59:3). In either case it is an action or condition that renders one unacceptable for fellowship with God.

The reason why Daniel determined that **the royal food and wine** would pollute his relationship to God is unclear (Dan 1:8). Some suggest that it is because of the food's association with Babylonian religion. Food at the king's table was regularly offered to Babylonian gods first. If this was Daniel's concern, though, it is difficult to explain why he accepted the vegetables. There is no evidence that these were excluded from the ritual offerings to idols.

Another suggestion is that refusing the food was Daniel's way of making a political statement. He would not cooperate fully with the Babylonian program. This position has problems as well. Throughout the book Daniel never displays anti-Babylonian views. He, in fact, seems fully loyal to his Babylonian hosts.

Several scholars conjecture that Mosaic dietary laws outlined in Lev 11 and other places may be at stake. Perhaps unclean animals were involved, preparation was inadequate, or blood was not drained. Unclean animals such

as pigs and horses were certainly a regular part of Babylonian fare. Daniel's refusal of the king's food then could symbolize identification with Israel's heritage. This might explain Daniel's problem with the meat, but it does not indicate why wine is rejected. Israelite law does not forbid drinking wine unless it leads to drunkenness.

The refusal of **wine**, however, might be explained in light of Jer 51:7. In that text the prophet projects the image of Babylon as a cup of wine that "made the whole earth drunk." He warns, "The nations drank her wine; therefore they have now gone mad." Daniel displays a keen interest in Jeremiah, especially in ch 9. Perhaps refusing wine was symbolic of Daniel's desire to avoid drinking too deeply of Babylonian culture and becoming intoxicated with it.

A final proposal is that Daniel's refusal of the king's food was a way of identifying with the Judean exiles at large and mourning with them. Meat and wine were the food of the wealthy and those who celebrate. The vegetables and water requested by Daniel in v 12 is more in line with the daily fare of those at a lesser station of life. Perhaps Daniel's intent was to identify with the poverty and loss of his people in exile. Refusing the king's choice food was a sign of mourning with them.

At some later point the royal food apparently became part of Daniel's regular diet again. "In the third year of Cyrus," according to 10:3, Daniel indicates he was eating such food. He reports that he refrained from eating this food during a period of mourning, "I ate no choice food; no meat or wine touched my lips." This text suggests that the king's food was not necessarily inherently evil or contrary to Mosaic law. Abstaining from it was simply a part of the ritual of mourning.

Whatever the specific reason might have been for refusing the food, the text implies that it was an important symbol of his religious convictions. It was a determined move to avoid assimilation with the pagan culture. Daniel the Israelite chose to distinguish himself from Babylonian values and beliefs. Yahweh's hero stood against Marduk's world.

Refusing the king's fare was clearly a significant departure from the norm. Whatever Daniel's intentions might have been, it was likely interpreted as a political statement. As such his stance carried considerable risk. To highlight the severity of the situation, the narrator slows the action by relating dialogue between characters. In this way readers can feel the full implications of these events and experience the suspense as it builds. The text notes that Daniel needed to ask **for permission not to defile himself this way** (v 8). Certain things were expected of those in the training program, and the official diet was clearly one of them. To even question the food appears to be a perilous position for a trainee.

■ **9** Opportunity is provided for Daniel to take a stand because **God had**

caused the official to show favor and sympathy to Daniel (v 9). This is the second time in the chapter that God's activity behind the scenes is mentioned (see v 2). **God** is credited with enabling the feelings of genuine care that Ashpenaz displayed. The official showed unusual kindness (**favor**, *hesed*) and a certain level of emotional attachment (**sympathy**, *rāham*) for Daniel. Through God's intervention a context was created that made faithful living possible for Daniel and his friends.

■ **10** Ashpenaz's efforts to dissuade Daniel give further indication of just how high the stakes were. He appealed to Daniel's logic as well as his emotions. They should rightly fear his **lord the king**, Nebuchadnezzar, who as absolute potentate might do anything at any time (v 10). The ruthless whims of Nebuchadnezzar are well documented in Babylonian history. He did not tolerate any appearance of disloyalty to the state. If Daniel and his friends ended up **looking worse than the other young men**, Ashpenaz could literally lose his **head**. The implication, of course, is that Daniel and his friends would fair no better.

Ashpenaz does not give Daniel a flat refusal. Instead he provides the criteria for possibly avoiding defilement. If Daniel could keep from **looking worse than the other young men**, then he would be able to have his way. Eating or not eating the king's food is not the issue. The concern is with health of the trainees. Thus a door is opened for a test that could prove that faithfulness to God will be rewarded.

■ **11** At this point Daniel turned to a lesser official, **the guard whom the chief official had appointed** over him and his friends (v 11). This **guard** (*mešar*) apparently had direct supervision over the four Israelites, functioning as their guardian or overseer. Daniel picks up on the desire of Ashpenaz not to be involved and pursues a plan with a subordinate. This shows respect for Ashpenaz and distances him from the events should Daniel's plan fail.

■ **12-14** Daniel proposes a **test . . . for ten days** (v 12). This is a reasonable amount of time. It provides a duration long enough for the test to become valid. Over this period Daniel and his friends would eat **vegetables** and drink **water** instead of the regular provisions. The term for **vegetables** is literally "seeds" (*zērō'im*) and could refer to anything grown from plants. This includes fruits and grains as well as vegetables. **Water** in the ancient world carried certain health risks since purification systems were not extensive. At the conclusion of the test period, the official was to make a judgment. He would compare the physical **appearance** of Daniel and his friends with that of the other trainees (v 13).

Daniel appears to submit his fate to the official. He humbly invites, **Treat your servants in accordance with what you see**. What might happen to them is suggested in Ashpenaz's words in v 10. Yet by this point in the story the reader has already come to expect the hand of God to overrule the hand of man. God has been at work in the actions of Nebuchadnezzar (v 2) and

Ashpenaz (v 9). One might anticipate the same divine activity for this circumstance. The official **agreed to this** (v 14), but he is only a pawn in the hands of a sovereign God.

### 3. The Outcome (1:15-21)

■ **15** The tension in the story has come to a climax and awaits resolution. Daniel has risked the favor of the Babylonian authorities and his place among them in order to avoid defilement. Ill health and even death could result as well. The outcomes of this test are encouraging for those who attempt the same: (1) Daniel and his friends maintain good health, (2) they avoid defilement, (3) they are given gifts of wisdom, and (4) they are brought into the king's service.

These outcomes bring resolution to the central question in the narrative: Can God's people remain faithful to their convictions in the midst of a hostile environment? The answer to that question is that it is possible not only to survive but to thrive. The outcomes are far better than expected. Daniel and his friends do not simply meet standards. They are superior to all others both physically and spiritually. Their reward is not just vindication but exaltation.

The diet of vegetables and water left the Israelites amazingly **healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food** (v 15). Literally they were ***better and fatter of flesh*** than the others. There is no indication in the text that such an outcome was based upon healthy eating habits. The point is not that vegetarians fair better than carnivores. In the context of this chapter, divine intervention is assumed. The health of the Israelites is miraculous. Their diet was inferior to the choice food of the empire. They should not have been healthier, but they were. The only explanation for this fact is God.

■ **16** As a result of the positive outcome of the test, the guard granted the request of Daniel and his friends. They avoided defilement by not eating the royal food. **The guard took away their choice food and the wine** (v 16). Thus they remain free from the corrupting influences of Babylonian culture. They continue to depend on God for their strength through the diet of **vegetables**. Those who seek to distinguish themselves as God's people can indeed remain free from the corrupting influences of the surrounding culture. It requires risk. But that is the nature of faith.

■ **17** At this point the test of food has been resolved. Daniel and his friends are vindicated for their faithfulness. But the narrator draws the story to a close by resolving another issue raised in vv 3-5. That is the concern of how the Israelites fared with their training. Just as they triumphed physically, they excel intellectually. By tying these two issues together in the narrative, the author accentuates the hand of God in both aspects.



The key to the intellectual superiority of the four Israelites is that **God gave knowledge and understanding** (v 17). The biblical tradition is unanimous that wisdom derives ultimately from the God of Israel (Dan 2:21; Ps 119:34; Prov 1:7; Jas 1:5). This is the third time God's initiative is highlighted in this chapter (see Dan 1:2 and 9). Each time the verb of which God is the subject is the same, **gave** (*nātan*). God gave Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar (v 2). He gave sympathy for Daniel to Ashpenaz (v 9). Now he gives wisdom (v 17). These three references to God's actions lift the story to a level beyond mere moral instruction. Good behavior works in concert with and under the dominion of God's gracious sovereign activity. Events unfold by divine will and not by human determination. As Prov 16:9 says, "In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps."

The four Israelites are divinely gifted in classic didactic wisdom, that is, in **knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning** (Dan 1:17). This included familiarity with collections of proverbs, wisdom stories, and lists of flora and fauna. Daniel, however, distinguishes himself among the four because of his gifts in mantic wisdom. That is to say, he has the ability to **understand visions and dreams**. This specialized area of wisdom involved skills in interpreting communications from the divine world. The stories in chs 2, 4, and 5 along with the visions in chs 7 to 12 demonstrate his abilities in this area.

■ **18-20** God's wisdom proved to be far more valuable than anything Babylon could offer. **At the end of the time set**, Ashpenaz **presented** his trainees to the king for an intense time of question and answer (v 18). According to v 5 "three years" was **the time set** for the training. During the interview Nebuchadnezzar uncovered something remarkable. There was **none equal** to the four Israelites (v 19). In fact he found them **ten times better than** anyone else in his kingdom (v 20). Their level of achievement is accentuated by the words **all** and **whole**, the same word in Hebrew (*kol*). The faithful Israelites showed themselves to be better than everyone else in the entire kingdom as a result of God's favor.

■ **21** The concluding verse of the narrative recalls the opening verse by referencing the reign of a king. The **first year of Cyrus** was 539 B.C. and marked the end of Babylonian power (v 21). This notation emphasizes two points: (1) Daniel had a lengthy tenure in Babylonian service and (2) he outlasted the empire. The first point suggests that one might expect further stories from the many years in the royal court. Thus the reader is prepared for additional stories in the following chapters. The second point reminds the reader that the faithful can outlive oppressive human institutions.

## FROM THE TEXT

Chapter 1 explores several issues of theological and practical interest. The experience of life in exile, the conflict between convictions and culture,

the risk of righteous living, and the God who overrules are some of the more prominent themes that emerge from the text.

*The life of faith must be lived out in the context of exile.* The book of Daniel describes a setting familiar to the people of God. It is the setting of exile, a foreign land of displaced peoples. Life in this environment must be lived among those who are hostile toward God. It is a world in which believers feel alienated from the mainstream of the surrounding culture. They do not quite fit. According to Jesus this is the lot of all who would be his disciples. They must live in a world that is not their home, a world at odds with the kingdom of God (John 17:14).

The first chapter of Daniel describes the nature of the exilic experience. Daniel and the other Israelite youth are swept into a world over which they have no control. Babylonians orchestrate the events of the day, and their hostility toward the faith is obvious. Sometimes it is overt, at other times more subtle. They attack and subdue the holy city, bringing humiliation upon God's people. Sacred vessels of God's temple are desecrated. These become treasures proudly displayed in the temples of false gods symbolizing the triumph of evil over good. The future hope of God's kingdom appears to be held hostage by unfriendly hosts. Israel's most promising youth are indoctrinated into the ways of the alien culture. They learn the vocabulary and worldview of its people. They are wined and dined on Babylon's best. Finally, those who hold the future of the kingdom in their hands are given names that strip them of any connections to their God.

Jesus warned his disciples that the world was a hostile environment. It would hate them as it had hated him (John 15:18-20). The world is at war with the ways of God, whether or not God's people recognize it. The prince of this world, represented by Nebuchadnezzar in our text, wages a constant battle against God's elect (Eph 6:10-11). All Christians, then, are in some sense persons who live life as aliens in a foreign country. They are far from home, in exile for the moment, facing hostile forces. Their true "citizenship is in heaven" (Phil 3:20).

*Convictions of the faithful will often conflict with their culture.* Living in an alien environment creates major challenges for those who would remain faithful to their convictions. Daniel found that his personal values brought him into direct conflict with the dominant Babylonian culture. This conflict did not remain only in the realm of ideas. It eventually found expression in the ordinary exercises of life, as all true convictions will. For Daniel eating certain food became the point of practical application of his beliefs.

Sociologists have documented the powerful influence of social knowledge upon personal knowledge. Some theorists even suggest that all individual beliefs and understandings are derived ultimately from our environment. The biblical concept of social freedom, however, suggests that people can choose

ideas and courses of action that run contrary to the dominant culture. The heart of prophetic ministry in ancient Israel rested heavily upon this maxim. With this the book of Daniel clearly agrees.

How persons should interact with their surrounding culture presents believers with one of the most demanding questions of life. Jesus provided a basic principle for his followers in the directive to be in the world but not of it (John 17:15-16). He illustrated this teaching in his own life when asked about paying taxes to Caesar. "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's," he said (Matt 22:21). Paul and Peter also recognized the tension Christians face as citizens of two worlds. Each apostle admonished believers to practice good citizenship in this world (Rom 13:1-7; 1 Pet 2:12-16) while keeping their focus upon the other (Col 3:1-2; 1 Pet 2:9-11). Christians are to live fully engaged with their culture and yet avoid being squeezed into its mold (Rom 12:2).

Various strategies for applying the teachings of Jesus have been proposed by Christians over the centuries. One might interface with the surrounding culture by (1) rejecting and withdrawing from it, (2) identifying and embracing its best values, (3) living alongside it, and (4) working to transform it. Each might be a legitimate approach in the right circumstances.

Within the book of Daniel we can see several of these strategies employed. Daniel embraces some of the highest values of Babylonian culture by receiving training in its literature and languages. At the same time he lives with the paradox brought on by a new name. He continues to go by his Hebrew name Daniel most of the time, though he apparently answers to the Babylonian Belteshazzar as well. The text records no protest on this point and thus acknowledges the value of keeping a foot in both worlds.

At one point, though, Daniel draws the line and rejects the values of the dominant culture. The royal food represents a level of compromise he is not willing to make. Prudently the biblical text does not reveal the reason that the food was unacceptable. The ambiguity of the text communicates a principle rather than a particular. The point was not to establish an absolute standard with regard to certain foods that defile and others that do not. Such things are more often relative to the setting in which they occur. But the message of Daniel is clear: believers must distinguish an identity that is separate from the dominant culture at some point. They belong to another kingdom. Their values inevitably come into conflict with the cultures of this world.

In the end Daniel's rejection of particular values held by Babylonian culture provides a means for transforming it. The king takes note of the four Israelites and puts them in positions of influence within his realm. This point is more profoundly emphasized in later chapters when kings offer honor to the God of Daniel and bestow additional favors upon the Israelites (2:47-48; 3:28-30; 4:37; 5:29; 6:26-28).

*Righteous living requires risk.* As the story indicates, taking a stance against the dominant culture involves risk. For Daniel it meant misunderstanding, disfavor, and demotion at the least. At the most it could have resulted in ill health and his death. It also meant bringing other people into potential peril. Those in authority over Daniel were placed in jeopardy if he failed the test.

Daniel determined that holding to his convictions was worth the consequences, whatever they may be. The exchanges one must make to remain faithful can often carry a considerable price tag. Jesus taught that the cost of discipleship was high. His followers should count the cost and be ready to risk (Luke 14:26-32). Loss of a hand, foot, or eye is better than caving in to the world (Mark 9:43-46). In fact everything must become negotiable. In the end nothing can be held back (Luke 14:33). Subsequent stories in Dan 3 and 6 will make this point even more clearly.

*In spite of outward appearances God rules.* The book of Daniel examines the sovereignty of God from every angle and the implications of that truth for the life of the believer. Chapter 1 explores the realities of living faithfully on the underside of power. Daniel is subject to human forces beyond his control. Yet those forces do not ultimately determine the outcome. In reality God overrules Daniel's life. Being under the hand of Nebuchadnezzar does not mean being out of the hand of God.

At three significant junctures in the text God intervenes in Daniel's life. God allows the judgment of Jerusalem at the hand of Nebuchadnezzar (v 2), prompts the favor of Ashpenaz toward Daniel (v 9), and enables the learning of the four Israelite youths (v 17). Thus God proves to be faithful in the first test of faithfulness.

The implications of these three divine activities are profound. The first suggests that the circumstances of Daniel's life are no accident. God has placed him and his friends in the land of exile on purpose. They participate in a much larger story than simply their own. That which seems disruptive and overwhelming fits into the flow of the divine drama. Providence overrules. What people intended for evil, God intended for good (Gen 50:20).

The second intervention of God in Daniel's life reminds us that "God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it" (1 Cor 10:13). The potential for right living is divinely arranged for Daniel. Human determination is not enough to deal with a hostile world. God must provide opportunity for Daniel to take his stand. He causes Ashpenaz to feel favorable toward the young Israelite, which leads to Daniel's opportunity to do the right thing. Human effort combines with divine grace to keep Daniel from defilement. His righteousness is by grace not by works (Eph 2:8-9).

This truth makes the text something more than a simple moral teaching.

Daniel must choose well. But his choices alone do not determine the outcome. If God does nothing, then nothing is done. Those who would dare to be like Daniel need to be aware that they are working in concert with God. Apart from God there is no righteous person. Righteous living comes from God (Phil 3:9).

The third activity of God mentioned in this chapter suggests that the amenities of Babylonia do not serve as the key to success for Daniel and his friends. God is the true source for all that is good in life. Just as royal food from the Babylonian court proved unnecessary to nourish Daniel's health, so also Babylonian training was not essential to nourish his mind. Daniel "does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD" (Deut 8:3; Matt 4:4).

The provision of God is not just equal to that given by men, but it is far better. God's plan for nourishing the body produced youths much healthier than their counterparts. Likewise God's gift of wisdom made the Israelites ten times better. There is no comparison between human and divine provisions. "For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength" (1 Cor 1:25).

All that Daniel and his friends accomplish in subsequent chapters is solidly placed in context by the opening chapter. Their achievements and promotion all come from God. They live "not by might nor by power, but by [God's] Spirit" (Zech 4:6). They are divinely resourced for their role among the exiles of Israel as are all believers in every age and every setting.

## **B. Dream of a Statue: The First Test of Wisdom (2:1-49)**

### **Overview**

The story of ch 2 narrates another test for the hero of the book and his God. This time it is a test of wisdom. Like chs 4 and 5 in the book, Daniel's gifts as an interpreter of divine signs are put on the line. Daniel is pitted against the other wise men of Babylon in a life-and-death contest devised by Nebuchadnezzar. The marked contrast between the wise men and Daniel provides the means to prove the wisdom of Daniel and, more importantly, his God.

### **BEHIND THE TEXT**

Chapter 2 introduces the Aramaic section of the book. Beginning in v 4 the original language of the text shifts from Hebrew, the language of Jews, to Aramaic, the international language of the empire. This continues through ch 7, after which Hebrew is employed to finish relating the rest of the book. Precisely why this happens is difficult to determine, and scholars are divided