

Reading notes for Daniel 1

Daniel is a young man from one of Israel's leading families when the assertive Babylonians, under their commander Nebuchadnezzar, besiege Jerusalem. They are the rising power and Judah falls victim to the power plays between the Babylonians, the weakening Assyrians and the ineffective Egyptians. Judah is allied with Egypt and Babylon must humble them.

But more is going on. Our reading says '*the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand...*' (v. 2). Prophets had warned that Judah would suffer defeat, not because the Babylonians were too strong but because Israel had given way to idolatry (e.g. Jer. 7:13-15).

In fact, at this stage, only the cream of royalty, nobility and intelligentsia are taken captive to Babylon, among them, Daniel. He sees his king subdued (though still remaining as king), but also, the temple of his God plundered and some of its vessels added to the treasury of Babylon's god.

This cohort of well endowed young men are brought to 'the land of Shinar', an ancient name for Babylon, recalling that this is the place where men sought to build a tower to challenge God (Gen. 11). God intervened on that occasion but what will God do now, given that his temple has been pillaged?

The astute Nebuchadnezzar (now king in place of his deceased father) has his young captives trained in all that Babylon can teach them so that their powers may be employed for the benefit of his kingdom. They are well endowed naturally, but now must spend three years studying the religion, magic, astrology, philosophy, crafts and mathematics of this ungodly nation. In a further challenge to their identity, their names are changed from those that reflect their faith in God (e.g. Daniel = God is my judge) to names that reflect Babylon's religion and culture. Giving new names to captives was common and reinforced the fact of their new ownership and destiny.

Daniel has grown up under God's covenant with Israel. He knows David's throne is eternal and 'the law for mankind' (II Sam. 7:19). What then of the failure of his people and his incarceration as a captive of a deeply idolatrous nation? He is now immersed in all the learning of Babylon (we could compare Joseph, and later, Moses in Egypt), but he is not inundated.

In fact, shortly after this, Jeremiah says it will be good for a man to bear a yoke in his youth (Lam. 3:21-36), meaning that the bitterness of captivity would not negate the loving kindness of the Lord and that they should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. Jeremiah's word proves right in the case of Daniel and his friends.

Daniel's humiliation and re-education does not compromise him. He can study material that has no acknowledgement of God, and he can serve a foreign ruler and still remain faithful to God. All the earth and its peoples belong to him (Psa. 24:1). However, he finds a problem with sharing the king's cuisine. Being fed sumptuously may sound harmless but, as the quip goes, 'there is no such thing as a free lunch'. Daniel senses this. We get the meaning of 'rich food' when the phrase is repeated later in the book—in the sense of being in an alliance with a superior (11:26). The king is astute in this—securing the loyalty of these young men by treating them royally. But Daniel is already loyal to his God and may not be able to oblige him. He chooses not to be beholden to the king by feasting indiscriminately at his table.

Daniel's new name, Belteshazzar, is never used on its own by Daniel or Nebuchadnezzar. See 1:7; 2:26; 4:8-9, 18-19; 5:12; 10:1. This suggests that Daniel never saw himself as other than the person his parents hoped him to be—'God is my judge', and that Nebuchadnezzar recognised that Daniel's identity endured through the new identity he had sought to impose on him.

In contrast with Daniel, King Jehoiachin who is taken captive when Jerusalem is invaded in 596 BC is, some 34 years later, released from prison by a new king of Babylon and treated to fine fare from the royal table (2 Kin. 25:27-30). He doesn't see the same compromise in this that Daniel sees.

For a second time, we are told that God acts: he gives Daniel favour with his chief minder, enabling Daniel to negotiate a change of diet. There is no embattled stridency in Daniel; he acts considerately to those who don't share his faith and suggests a practical plan for keeping the matter out of the notice of the king. God will need to vindicate Daniel in this situation, and so it transpires.

After three years, Daniel and his friends top the class and are added to the king's counselors. He finds them ten times better in knowledge than the retinue of consultants he already has. Daniel fulfills the proverb: 'Do you see a man skillful in his work? He will stand before kings' (Prov. 22:29).

Now, a third act of God is hidden in the closing remark. Daniel remains until the first year of Cyrus, that is, until Babylon falls to the invading armies of Cyrus. Daniel has been captured, lost the outward signs of his Jewish identity and worship, had his name changed, been obliged to study pagan wisdom and to serve the interests of their kingdom. This is his whole adult life. But he remains faithful to Yahweh, and is still standing when the kingdom he serves has fallen.