

August 2, 2009

Purpose: To strengthen our resolve to be faithful

Key Bible reference: Daniel 1

Key Verse: Daniel 1.8

Biblical Interpretation

Daniel 1:1-2. These verses establish the literary setting of the stories that follow—in the time of the Babylonian exile. Daniel and his friends are said to be among this first group taken away into exile (Daniel 1:6). We know from Babylonian sources as well as from biblical texts, however, that the first exile did not take place in the third year of King Jehoiakim (606 B.C.) but some ten years later in 597 B.C., following Jehoiakim's [ji-HOI-uh-kim's] death. Second Chronicles 36:5-6 does state that Jehoiakim was taken into exile; however, this was likely a temporary imprisonment, like that which the Chronicler claims Manasseh suffered under the Assyrians (2 Chronicles 33:10-13). Note, too, that nothing is said in Second Chronicles of anyone accompanying Jehoiakim in his exile. Second Kings 24:1-6 records that Jehoiakim died in Jerusalem during the siege by the Babylonian army. He was succeeded by his son Jehoiachin [ji-HOI-uh-kin], who surrendered Jerusalem to the Babylonians in order to save the city from destruction and went, together with ten thousand other captives, into the first exile (2 Kings 24:8-17; see also Ezekiel 1:1-3).

A probable reason for Daniel's early dating of the beginning of the Exile can be found in the prophecies of Jeremiah, who had said that the Exile would last seventy years (Jeremiah 25:11-12; 29:10). Likely, Jeremiah's intent was to say that those going away into exile would never come home again. A generation would pass

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away before anyone returned to Jerusalem (See Jeremiah's advice to the exiles in Jeremiah 29:1-14.). However, the writers of Daniel were intrigued by Jeremiah's seventy years, taking the prediction literally (See Daniel 9, where Jeremiah's seventy years become a code for understanding all future history.). Since the Exile actually ended in 538/37 B.C., dating the beginning of the Exile to 606 B.C. resulted in Jeremiah's seventy-year prediction being literally fulfilled.

The mention in Daniel 1:2 of "some of the vessels of the house of God" being taken to Shinar [SHI-nahr] prepares the reader for the scene in Daniel 5, where Belshazzar [bel-SHAZ-uhr] uses these holy vessels at a drunken feast (see Lesson 7). "Shinar" (1:2) is an old name for Babylonia (Genesis 10:10; 14:1, 9) that is often used in the Hebrew Bible in a negative context (See, for example, the story of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11:1-9 or Zechariah 5:5-11, where Shinar is said to be a place where wickedness is worshiped.).

Verses 3-5. We know from Babylonian records that exiles from Judah did become part of the palace bureaucracy. Evidently, Daniel and his friends had been singled out for special training as palace officials. However, they appear destined for something more than clerical work. The requirement that they be "without physical defect and handsome" (1:4) sounds like one of the requirements in Babylonia for the diviner, who was charged with the interpretation of

omens. Of course, since diviners also had to be from Babylonian priestly families, the exiles would not have been considered for such a post. However, the high level of education described does suggest that Daniel and his friends were being groomed for high positions as court sages and advisors to the king.

The provision of "a daily portion of the royal rations of food and wine" (1:5) is reminiscent of 2 Kings 25:27-30, where Jehoiachin, after thirty-seven years as a prisoner, was released and permitted to live in the palace, receiving "a regular allowance" from the king, "a portion every day" (2 Kings 25:30).

Verses 6-7. We are introduced to Daniel and his friends Hananiah [han-uh-NI-uh], Mishael [MISH-ee-uhl], and Azariah [az-uh-RI-uh]. All four Hebrew names contain a name of the God of Israel, either 'El (in Daniel and Mishael) or YHWH (shortened as "Yah" in Hananiah and Azariah). However, these names expressing their faith in God were taken from them in the Babylonian royal palace. They were given new, Babylonian names—Belteshazzar [bel-ti-SHAZ-uhr], Shadrach [SHAD-rak], Meshach [MEE-shak], and Abednego [uh-BED-ni-goh]. At least two of these new names apparently contain the names of Babylonian gods, Bel and Nebo (garbled in the Book of Daniel's Hebrew rendering as "Nego").

This theft of their names is an old tactic for robbing slaves of their identity. In the Book of Philemon in the New Testament, Paul expresses concern over the treatment meted out to an escaped slave called Onesimus. Very likely, this was not the slave's real name. Rather, Onesimus (which means useful in Greek) was a slave name, given to this man when he became a slave. Just so, in the days when slavery existed

in the United States, African slaves were given the names of their white masters.

The loss of identity reflected in the loss of one's name was a serious threat to the exiles. In Babylonia, they could very easily cease to be Jews at all and simply surrender to the larger, foreign culture that surrounded them. It is sobering to realize that Sheshbazzar [shesh-BAZ-uhr] and Zerubbabel [zuh-RUHB-uh-buhl], the first two governors after the return from the Exile, had Babylonian rather than Hebrew names.

Verses 8-10. Daniel, however, was determined not to lose his identity. He had no choice in the name by which the Babylonians called him, but he could control what he ate and drank. Accepting the king's ration would have meant violating the Jewish dietary laws; since, naturally, no attempt would have been made to slaughter animals or to select and prepare dishes in accordance with these strict requirements (Leviticus 11; 17; compare Deuteronomy 12:20-27; 14:3-21).

The palace master, though quite fond of Daniel and his friends (Daniel 1:9), was unwilling to let them eat anything other than what the king had provided. Apparently, not only the education but also the health and well-being of his charges was his responsibility. Therefore, the palace master refused Daniel's request, out of fear of the king (1:10).

Verses 11-16. Daniel did not give up, however. He persuaded the guard, who was Daniel's immediate supervisor under the palace master, to agree to a contest of sorts. For ten days, Daniel and his friends would eat only fruits and vegetables and drink only water—a diet that involves no violation of Jewish dietary laws. At the end of that time, Daniel invited the guard to

"deal with your servants according to what you observe" (1:13). In other words, if the young Hebrew exiles were not as healthy as or healthier than their fellow pupils, Daniel would do what the guard required—probably meaning that he and his friends would submit to eating the king's ration.

After ten days, Daniel and his friends "appeared better and fatter than all the young men who had been eating the royal rations" (1:15). The guard, therefore, was pleased to continue giving them vegetables and water. Without any violence, indeed with scarcely a disturbance, Daniel had won his first victory over his captors, contriving to live for his faith rather than to die for it.

Verses 17-21. Not only were Daniel and his friends superior in physical health to their fellow captives, they were also superior in the mastery of their studies; for "God gave [them] knowledge and skill in every aspect of literature and wisdom" (1:17). In addition, Daniel (like Joseph; Genesis 40-41) had the ability to interpret dreams—which prefigures Daniel's interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's [neb-uh-kuhd-NEZ-uhr's] dream in Daniel 2 as well as the dream visions that make up the second half of the book (Daniel 7-12). Little wonder that Nebuchadnezzar found no one to compare with Daniel and his friends and installed them in his palace as advisors. Nor did Nebuchadnezzar regret his decision; for "in every matter of wisdom and understanding concerning which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom" (1:20).