

Chapter 1 - Arrival at Babylon

Daniel and His Friends Obey God

1 In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. 2 And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the articles of the house of God, which he carried into the land of Shinar to the house of his god; and he brought the articles into the treasure house of his god.

Daniel opens his book with an introduction highly recognisable to ancient texts. He gives context by naming the ruling monarch and introduces the foreign power that would be much more recognisable to outside readers.

The United Kingdom of Israel lasted from around 1047 BC to 930 AD. After Saul's death, his son, Ishbosheth, also known as 'Esh-Baal' (son of Baal), briefly ruled as King in the North before David became king overall. Saul, David and Solomon, remarkably, ruled for 40 years each before Solomon's son; Rehoboam, faced a rebellion from the ten Northern tribes. These separated from Judah to become an independent kingdom, keeping the name Israel. Benjamin, the tribe on the border, soon joined Judah. Both Israel and Judah turned away from, and back to, the worship of God throughout their histories but moves to reunite the states failed repeatedly.

In Judah, the last king to make a sincere attempt to restore YHWH worship was Josiah, who ruled roughly between 640 and 609 BC. Josiah was eight years old when he became king and turned his attention quickly to outlawing Baal worship and restoring respect in the True God. According to scripture, the nation had fallen so far that the Law of Moses was 'rediscovered' during a renovation of the temple, having obviously not been used or remembered for some time.

For some unknown reason, when Pharaoh Necho II moved through the nearby lands to support his Assyrian allies who were under great pressure from the Medes and Babylonians, Josiah took an opportunity to attack spring of 609 BC. The Assyrians,

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who had harassed Israel for decades, were in sharp decline and the Egyptians were recovering from Assyrian rule that they had just put aside. Necho II had, apparently, no intention of attacking Israel at that time, and it is highly likely that Josiah's actions were a mistaken pre-emptive attack or an attempt to show that he would no longer sit under the thumb of foreign powers and Gods. The Bible reports, however, that Necho II was acting on God's behalf, sending Josiah a letter that said:

“What have I to do with you, king of Judah? I have not come against you this day, but against the house with which I have war; for God commanded me to make haste. Refrain from meddling with God, who is with me, lest He destroy you.” 2 Chronicles 35:21

Josiah was not persuaded that Necho II was working for God and blocked his path at Megiddo, where he was killed in the resulting battle.

After Josiah's death his son, Jehoahaz, held the throne for 3 months before Necho II; who's army was occupying the area, deposed him and put his brother, Eliakim into his place, renaming him Jehoiakim. This brings us up to the current verse in Daniel.

Nebuchadnezzar II, also known as Nebuchadnezzar the Great, was born around 642 BC in Uruk, one of the oldest cities in the world that now lies on a long dried-up channel of the Euphrates River. Although still a prominent city in Nebuchadnezzar's time, it had been superseded by the city of Babylon farther up the Euphrates but remained inhabited through to the Islamic conquests almost a millennium later.

Probably named after his grandfather, Nebuchadnezzar means “Nabu, watch over my heir”. Nabu was the god of literacy and wisdom whose name translated means “to announce, prophesize” and comes from the same root word which, translated into Hebrew becomes נָבִיא (naví) that means “prophet”. Importantly for the book of Daniel, the first king's name can be interpreted to mean “may the god of prophecies and wisdom watch over my heirs and successors.”

The Nebuchadnezzar of Daniel is the second king to bear that name, the eldest son of Nabopolassar who ruled between 626 and 605 BC. It was Nabopolassar who forged the Babylonian Empire from the failing Assyrian Empire. This was the second time

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Babylon arose to an empire, the first rising around 1894 BC and lasting until 1595 BC the Hittites invaded and sacked the city. The Kassites then controlled Babylon until 1155 BC when the Assyrian and Elamite forces invaded, and native Babylonians were able to again exert some control. During this Kassite dominance, Babylon had become flooded with a variety of tribesmen from the Levant; mostly Suteans, Arameans and Chaldeans. These groups had lost their uniqueness and had instead melded into a unified “Babylonian” culture, although the Chaldeans had retained much of their original way of life and became an important political part of Babylon owing to their connection to their homeland. Babylon’s independence after the overthrow of the Kassites was a deep struggle; being assaulted on all sides from rivals, internal squabbles from disparate cultures complicated by a string of poor kings.

The Assyrians, fed up with trouble on their southern border, finally intervened militarily in 745BC and incorporated Babylonia into its empire in 729BC. Another century of striving for independence followed until Nabopolassar led a revolt in 626BC and successfully freed the cities of Babylon and Nippur. The Assyrian leader, Sinsharishkun, tried to siege Uruk but faced internal political problems and had to return home to defend his position as Assyrian King. Nabopolassar’s revolt led to a war of conquest and, with Sinsharishkun’s death in 612BC during the Siege of Nineveh, the Assyrian Empire’s decline was certain. Nebuchadnezzar held a strong leadership position at the siege of Harran, 610 - 609 BC which saw the final defeat of the Assyrian empire. He then led the war against Assyria’s ally, Egypt, in his father’s name.

The final remnants of the Assyrian army were based in the Egyptian City of Carchemish, north of Aleppo in 605 BC, when Nebuchadnezzar moved to attack it. Pharaoh Necho II was moving to reinforce his army there when Josiah attacked and was killed at Meggido. Nebuchadnezzar then attacked the combined Assyrian and Egyptian force at Carchemish and Assyria ceased to exist as an independent power. Egypt retreated South. Shortly after the battle, Nabopolassar died, and Nebuchadnezzar II took his father’s throne. After burying his father and organising affairs, Nebuchadnezzar returned to the Levant, intent on conquering Egypt, where came up against the kingdom of Judah. The northern tribes under the kingdom of Israel had been incorporated into the Assyrian Empire in 720BC, and were now under Babylonian control. Arriving at the capital, Jerusalem, king Jehoiakim, who had again

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apostatized and was paying tribute to the Egyptians, switched allegiances to Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar. 2 Kings 23 stipulates that Nebuchadnezzar 'besieged' Jerusalem in 605 or 604 BC, but this was more likely a demonstration of strength, surrounding the city and displaying power to the inhabitants and not a formal 'siege' intent on capturing it.

As Jehoiakim was now a pagan again, the vessels from the temple would have meant much less to him than to his father, but as culturally significant items, Nebuchadnezzar would have happily accepted them as surety against Judah going to war with him. While Nebuchadnezzar would certainly have not worshiped these items, they would have been respected highly as belonging to foreign gods, and therefore it was appropriate that they be placed in his own temple storehouses. This was a relatively common practise in the ancient world, so that foreign gods would be appeased and not threaten the conquerors even in defeat.

One other thing to notice from this opening passage is an acknowledgement from Daniel that God chose to 'give' Jehoiakim over to Nebuchadnezzar. This is remarkable inasmuch as, in ancient times, a failure like a defeat of this nature would normally be described as a failure of the human and the defeat being a divine retribution, but here we see the deity making an affirmative movement to hand Jehoiakim to the Babylonians along with sacred vessels. This is a rather unusual way of describing the events and one that helps us understand if the authorship of the book is from Daniel or another writer: especially one from the Greek period, would have presented Jehoiakim's apostasy as being the source of defeat and demonstrating a judgement from God for it, while here, God is displayed as rewarding Nebuchadnezzar for his conquest and dismissing Jehoiakim. This is a very Israelitish attitude keeping their God in the centre of events while still laying judgement on their own people. Other authors would have championed Nebuchadnezzar's gods over the Jewish God.

3 Then the king instructed Ashpenaz, the master of his eunuchs, to bring some of the children of Israel and some of the king's descendants and some of the nobles, 4 young men in whom there was no blemish, but good-looking, gifted in all wisdom, possessing knowledge and quick to understand, who had ability to serve in the king's

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palace, and whom they might teach the language and literature of the Chaldeans. 5 And the king appointed for them a daily provision of the king's delicacies and of the wine which he drank, and three years of training for them, so that at the end of that time they might serve before the king.

Ashpenaz served Nebuchadnezzar's court as one of the senior court officials. His role was most likely that of a 'Rabsaris', the organiser or coordinator of the eunuchs and other officials who were not nobles but served the court. These were advisors and assistants to the court and held high influence although limited power.

Nebuchadnezzar, as a part of the peace deal and supplication of Israel, took a selection of the senior officials of Judah to Babylon as hostages, as well as influential leaders that he can train in his own way. This is what is described here, a common ancient measure of hostage taking, and the text is clear that he wants strong, healthy men who are able to support the King and his kingdom in governance and rulership.

As stated before, he wishes them to become highly learned in the "*literature of the Chaldeans*", a shorthand for the ancient wisdom of the Babylonians and their mysticism. Their "*three years of training*" had two primary purposes; firstly so that "*they might serve before the king*" as his advisors and interpreters when foreign nationals come to visit the kingdom. Secondly, they would be able to return to their own homeland learned in the Babylonian ways, as peaceful vassals of the king and his culture. This cultural indoctrination was commonplace, and it permitted those that the king had a responsibility to clothe and feed to be useful to both him his new conquest.

The inclusion of the "*literature of the Chaldeans*" in this context is also shorthand for the worship of Chaldean gods and inclusion in the Babylonian Mysteries which will be discussed in Chapter 8. The men of Judah will be expected to learn the Babylonian religious services and practise their prophetic ways. Daniel's inclusion of this here is casual; he knows his readers will know what this means and its implications.

The fact that they are served from the King's table demonstrates clearly that this predates the Babylonian Captivity under King Zedekiah. These are, instead, welcomed guests that are fed from the table of the king; hostages intended to support and serve the King in all his dealings.

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6 Now from among those of the sons of Judah were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. 7 To them the chief of the eunuchs gave names: he gave Daniel the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abed-Nego.

Daniel and his 3 friends are among the group taken to Babylon as hostages. Nothing here is recorded of their families, nor is there any concrete evidence recorded as to who they are. What is clearly recorded is their names and that those names are changed when they arrive in Babylon.

This is extremely important as a name reflected both the individual and their position in the ancient world. The book of the Dead in Egypt contains a collection of names that work like passwords to get through the various stages of the judgement to let the ka into Aaru. In Rome, names were added like titles upon victories; Publius Cornelius Scipio was given the additional name, a cognomen, Africanus after he conquered Carthage. Even today, popes and kings take regnal names when they take positions of ultimate power.

For these Israelites, their names would have been important to them and a link to their heritage, and their Babylonian names were intended to separate them from their past and give them a new allegiance. Daniel's name translates to “El is my judge”, arguably the strongest of the four names. Hananiah translates to “Yah is gracious”, Mishael to “Who is what El is?” and Azariah “Yah has helped”. Their names reflect the experience of their fathers and their expectation of working with God for their futures as both ‘Yah’ and ‘El’ are names of God.

The Chaldean names given to them relate to the Hebrew ones, with the names El and Yah replaced by Babylonian theonyms. Daniel was given the name Bēl-šar-uṣur (Belteshazzar) meaning “Bel, protect the king”, a deviation from his original name that probably indicates he was a higher rank than the other Israelites. This is also reflected in his god-name. Bel Markduk was the sun god and senior in the Babylonian pantheon, and giving Daniel a name with this God’s name in it most likely put him in a superior class. Hananiah was renamed Šadrak (Shadrach) which is very close to Šudur Aku “Command of Aku”, Aku being the moon god, also named ‘Sin’. Mishael was given the name Mēšaḳ (Meshach), probably a variation of Mi-ša-aku, meaning “Who is as Aku

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is?”. Azariah became Abednego broadly translated to “Slave of the god Nebo/Nabu”. Nabu was the god of literacy, the rational arts, scribes, and wisdom, which is fitting for a hostage in Abednego’s position. An alternative interpretation of Abednego is that his name is a variation of Abednergal, “Slave of the god Nergal.” Nergal was the God of war, disease, and inflicted death and may indicate that he was intended to be trained as a general or military leader. It is highly unlikely that Abednego was intended to be a soldier as this would put a lot of power in the hands of one with questionable loyalties, but also not unheard of.

It is highly likely that there were other Israelites taken as hostages in this batch, but little is recorded of them. Daniel is writing a personal experience and his companions were known to him.

To change the names of these men is a clear demonstration of Babylon’s authority over them and cultural dominance of the world they come from. It is not clearly intended to erase their culture altogether, but by reminding them of foreign Gods is an insult, especially to Israelites, and is probably to support breeding the culture out of Israel within a few generations.

8 But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king’s delicacies, nor with the wine which he drank; therefore he requested of the chief of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself. 9 Now God had brought Daniel into the favor and goodwill of the chief of the eunuchs.

This is the point at which Daniel makes his first, recorded, decision, and one that could lead to his death. He chooses not to ‘defile’ himself with the king’s meat or wine. Why is not, explicitly, recorded but there are two probable reasons for Daniel’s hesitancy.

Firstly, the Jewish nation had a very strict dietary policy as outlined in the Mosaic Law, known today as Kashrut, and considering the reference to vegetables later in the text, it can be deduced that the King’s food violated these rules.

Secondly, as this food was also given to the King, it had probably been presented to and blessed by the Babylonian priests. Although Daniel and his friends had little choice in the name they were called by, they could choose what they consumed. Eating with

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someone was not only a form of hospitality but also of accord and peaceful relations in this time, and the Israelites here intended to demonstrate their acceptance of hospitality but without entirely supplicating themselves to their Babylonian masters.

Notably here, Daniel “*requested of the chief of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself*” displaying their intention not to sacrifice their culture but also their intention not to rebel. Rather than cause a ruckus, a “*request...*” was made because “*God had brought Daniel into the favor and goodwill of the chief of the eunuchs*”. Although these men were young, they obviously were well trained in Israel to approach the situation with dignity and wisdom rather than defiantly attempt to fight.

10 And the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, “I fear my lord the king, who has appointed your food and drink. For why should he see your faces looking worse than the young men who are your age? Then you would endanger my head before the king.”

It is a common misconception that the Chief of the Eunuchs acquiesces to Daniel and his friends request for a test, but clearly the statements here is that he does not. Ashpenaz’ response here is clear that he wishes to serve his master, the king, appropriately, ensuring the health and wellbeing of the hostages from Israel to be trained for the king’s court. He states clearly that, were he to let Daniel and his friends eat lesser food than that which the king had appointed, he would be risking his life. As we will read, it was, in fact, the steward that the Chief of the Eunuchs assigned to these men who was more willing to be tolerant.

Some will make a point of saying that the interaction here is too polite and is clearly a later exaggeration of the respect paid by the Babylonians to God. A plain-text reading of this story demonstrates that this is not true. The approach to the Chief of the Eunuchs would not have been unusual either in Babylon or in this position by this time; a request for the respect of the cultural traditions of those held hostage. Neither would the reply be inappropriate; a diplomatic “I’m sorry, but we can’t do that” and when pressed, a simple “look, mate, I just work here and really like my head where it is”. Power and authority are common themes in the book of Daniel, and we have such a commentary here; with the Chief of the Eunuchs stipulating that he is supplicant to

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the King and the risk is worth more than his life to let the Israelites practise their culture.

11 So Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had set over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, 12 “Please test your servants for ten days, and let them give us vegetables to eat and water to drink. 13 Then let our appearance be examined before you, and the appearance of the young men who eat the portion of the king’s delicacies; and as you see fit, so deal with your servants.” 14 So he consented with them in this matter, and tested them ten days.

While the use of diplomatic requests obviously did not work on the Chief of the Eunuchs, evidently it did on his servant. Why Daniel was the one to make the arrangement with the steward is not recorded but as stated, it is likely that he was the most senior of the quad.

The arrangement here is made with a very junior official who has much more to lose. This is the person who actually brings them the food, and Daniel’s presentation is simple; let us eat vegetables in our own way for 10 days, and if we don’t shape up to your standards, “*deal with your servants.*” Daniel is giving the steward a way out here, permitting him to make the claim that it was not his doing. They could be punished for not eating the King’s food, protecting the steward himself from the wrath of his masters.

At the time this request came, the entire company had probably just arrived in Babylon. The journey most likely when through Northern Syria, a gruelling journey of about 1,200 miles or 2,000 kilometres. During that journey, food and water would have been traveling rations that would not have been of the same quality as that either at home or in Babylon; although, considering their position, it would not have been meagre bread and water either. Nevertheless, the rigours of the journey would have taken their toll on the travellers.

Daniel is, therefore, taking a calculated risk. He knows what the regular food of his homeland was and how it would have affected their bodies. He also would know what effect the ‘junk’ food that the King ate would have. Daniel, being a noble, would have travelled widely around Israel and it is not unreasonable to consider that he had

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travelled to places like Assyria and Egypt with his parents on diplomatic missions. How to effectively recover from such a journey would absolutely have been known to a noble like Daniel.

Science tells us that it can take between 3 weeks and 3 months for positive dietary changes to take full effect, but when those changes are negative they have a quick reaction on the body. Being an already fit individual, used to a high-vegetable and low-fat protein diet consisting mostly of sheep and goat meat, to move to a rich, high-fat protein diet of beef and pork that the Babylonians were used to, Daniel was calculating that the other captives would be lethargic and possibly even sickly as their bodies had not adjusted to the new diet. He and his friends, on the other hand, would be fit and healthy, a credit to the steward.

15 And at the end of ten days their features appeared better and fatter in flesh than all the young men who ate the portion of the king's delicacies. 16 Thus the steward took away their portion of delicacies and the wine that they were to drink, and gave them vegetables.

Clearly, the deal paid off. They were “*better and fatter in flesh*”, a large stomach, at this time, being a sign of wealth and vitality rather than the obesity crisis we have today. The steward was so content with the results that they stopped serving these men from the King's table. No real discussion would have been taking place over their welfare; not eating the king's meat, as the results of their decisions were clear.

17 As for these four young men, God gave them knowledge and skill in all literature and wisdom; and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams.

It was because of their faith in their God that He blessed them in knowledge and understanding. The Chaldean ways would have been foreign to these men, but clearly God gave them the skills to learn and understand what they needed to.

Some commentators try to interpret this as Daniel accepting the culture of the Babylonians, but no such thing is true. Scientists the world over accept the truth of Biblical creation while also accepting that mathematics and physics are working structures that can be understood. Computer programmers, generally, do not know

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fully how hard drives and registers store information on the molecular level but are able to work within their bounds. The Babylonian Mysteries which will be discussed in Chapter 8 can be viewed in this light as they are heavily tied up with the mathematics that they shared with the Egyptians. To read the stars was, for these men, as much an intellectual exercise as a schoolboy working on his times tables. Their faith was, for them, easily separated from their work.

18 Now at the end of the days, when the king had said that they should be brought in, the chief of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. 19 Then the king interviewed them, and among them all none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah; therefore they served before the king. 20 And in all matters of wisdom and understanding about which the king examined them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers who were in all his realm. 21 Thus Daniel continued until the first year of King Cyrus.

The book concludes with the four men being examined by Nebuchadnezzar himself, and in all matters found much more expert than everyone else, and much better (“*ten times better*”) “*than all the magicians and astrologers who were in all his realm.*” The learning, blessings from God and the correct dietary choices obviously paid off for Daniel and his friends.

An interview like this is, really, unremarkable. The King had brought these to his court to serve him, invested time and resources in their training and was rewarded for the efforts. They were still hostages, although by the time they had completed their training, Jerusalem had most likely been captured and their position as hostages had now become much more like court officials representing a conquered land rather than those that could act as diplomats to a foreign court.

The final line should give us an important piece of data toward dating this text. It is noteworthy that it concludes by saying that “*Daniel continued until the first year of King Cyrus*”, the king of Media between 549–530 BC and Persia between 559–530 BC. This connects Daniel to his future experiences as a prophet when he continued in his senior position when Cyrus took over the Kingdom in Chapter 5 and does not dictate the date of his death. Nevertheless, more than 43 years of service to Babylonian Kings is a remarkable achievement.